

## **DEPICTING THE MOROCCAN MUSLIM WOMAN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST THE PATRIARCHAL AFRICAN- MUSLIM CONTEXT IN THE POSTCOLONIAL MOROCCO**

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**Abstract:** *This essay aims to show how much Leila Abouzeid, the author of the novel Year of Elephant, has developed her own discursive space in order to express the unspoken and depict the abrupt trauma of postcolonial Morocco from a postcolonial feminist perspective. The concept of "the Future" or "l'Avenir" of Jacques Derrida should unquestionably be implied in the aftermath of postcolonial Morocco. In this setting, Morocco's post-colonial fallout is obvious and predictable. The marriage, education, and administrative institutions have all been severely corrupted. Women who gave their lives in the armed resistance are now abruptly subject to patriarchy, mistreated by customs, and shunned by the law. Through qualitative description, this paper claims that the experiences of women in colonialism are celebrated. Using feminist research, experiences of women from postcolonial Morocco have been voiced and the novel portrays a woman's spiritual journey, and it is an event of cross-cultural literary history. Published in 1989, Year of the Elephant has had a great impact on promoting Moroccan women's legal situation in contemporary Morocco. The new millennium has signaled a new phase for women's legal triumph.*

**Keywords:** *Aftermath; Leila Abouzeid; Morocco; Post-colonialism; Post-independence; Year of the Elephant;*

### **Introduction**

Morocco, commonly known as the Kingdom of Morocco, is a country in North Africa that borders Algeria to the east, the Moroccan Sahara to the south, the Mediterranean Sea to the north, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. It is situated at the meeting point of Europe and Africa. The rich and varied history of the nation has been impacted by Berber, Arab, and European cultures. Shia Muslims make up fewer than 0.1 percent of the population, whereas Sunnis make up more than 99 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> Morocco has always been an important hub for trade and intercultural exchange. The Almoravid and Almohad dynasties are one of the Arab and Berber dynasties that ruled the country after it was once part of the Roman Empire. Centuries of conflict and territorial disputes followed the establishment of coastal bases by Portugal and Spain in the 15th century. Morocco's history is characterized by a mixture of indigenous Amazigh (Berber), Arabic, Islamic, and European colonial influences. The country has experienced numerous dynasties, conquests, and cultural exchanges that have shaped its diverse heritage and identity, as well as its quest for self-determination and independence. Morocco's history is rich and complex spanning thousands of years.

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<sup>1</sup> Howe, M, *Morocco: The Islamist awakening and other challenges*. (Oxford University Press: 2005)

According to Salah Moukhlis<sup>2</sup>, women in colonial Morocco had to deal with a complex and multidimensional history shaped by different dimensions. The social, political, and cultural roles of Moroccan women changed significantly under colonial rule. Thanks to the French Protectorate, a small segment of society has access to modern education for women, challenging existing gender stereotypes and giving them access to new opportunities. However, these advances were modest and primarily benefited elite women in big cities, leaving the vast majority of women marginalized and disenfranchised. Women made significant contributions to nationalist movements and anti-colonial conflicts and supported the war for independence. However, women's rights were sometimes neglected throughout the post-colonial era as the focus shifted to building new nations despite their best efforts.<sup>3</sup> The book shines a light on the subjectivity of Moroccan women and the challenges they faced in a culture that is undergoing profound change, while also focusing on their struggles, perseverance, and aspirations during this period.

In the late 19th century, European nations fought for control of the African region, known as the Battle of Africa. Morocco became a target for colonial expansion because of its favorable location. As French and Spanish colonial operations increased, they changed Moroccan society, especially the lives of women. Moroccan women faced many hardships during colonial rule and their traditional roles were often ignored. The existing patriarchy was strengthened, severely limiting women's opportunities and rights. As the colonists sought to maintain control over the natives, women were primarily subject to domination and oppression.

During colonial times, education was very important in empowering Moroccan women. Although few had the opportunity, some women were able to attend mission schools and organizations for further training. Education empowered women to question society's expectations, broaden their horizons, and participate actively in the liberation struggle.

The nationalist movement that emerged during the colonial period included significant contributions from Moroccan women. They actively participated in politics and promoted freedom and social justice. Women's organizations and associations have grown as forums for women to voice their concerns, fight for their rights and oppose oppressive colonial structures.

Following the colonial period, traditional gender roles in Moroccan society were reassessed. As women encountered new opportunities and obstacles, they began to rebel against social conventions. Some women used the opportunity to rethink their positions, rebel against social norms, and pursue unconventional paths in entrepreneurship, politics, and education.

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<sup>2</sup>Moukhlis, "A History of Hopes Postponed": Women's Identity and the Postcolonial State in "Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey toward Independence." *Research in African Literatures*, 34(3), 2003, 66-83.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Baker, *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*. (New York: State University of New York: 1998) , 38.

The colonial period had a lasting impact on Moroccan society and also influenced the way women were treated. It has increased gender inequality, but it has also caused change. Women's involvement in the nationalist movement served as a springboard for continued engagement in post-colonial politics, which subsequently contributed to the promotion of women's rights and gender equality. Moroccan women's lives changed drastically under colonial rule. The colonial powers sought to marginalize and enslave women, but their actions inadvertently challenged society's expectations and contributed to the emergence of strong and determined women's groups fighting for their rights. The struggle for women's liberation during this period laid the foundation for further development and opened the door for later generations of Moroccan women to strive for equality and emancipation. The lessons of this period are reminders of women's strength and adaptability, their ability to effect lasting change in society.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the aftermath of Moroccan postcolonialism, Derrida's l'avenir is used. One of the ideas that deserve to be considered regarding future predictions is the deconstructive thought of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In general, Derrida tries and distinguishes between the so-called Future and "l'avenir" (which is to come). Derrida reveals that the Future is what – tomorrow, later, the next century – will happen.<sup>5</sup> The future is predicable, planned, scheduled, and foreseeable. However, there is a future, l'avenir (to come), which designates a person who is coming but whose appearance is totally unanticipated. L'avenir, for Derrida, is the actual future, which was totally unanticipated. The Others who arrived without us might have known when they would show up. Since we cannot predict the arrival of the Other, if there is a real future that exists beyond all other known futures, it is l'avenir. Connecting with Spivak's Subaltern is appropriate when investigating Derrida's Future. "Other" is a topic appropriate for women in colonization and has their shared interest.<sup>6</sup>

Women's issues in literary works cannot be separated in their narrative, because the description of the story presented in it must require opposing characters to make the story more interesting.<sup>7</sup> Women are always attractive to discuss, not only concerning women who exist in real life but also their presence in literary works. Authors write the exposure of women in literary work often in the form of prose fiction or novels. There are injustices against women in life, starting from sex,

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<sup>4</sup>Alaoui, F. Z. C, Morocco from a Colonial to a Postcolonial Era: The Sociopolitical Environment through a Grandmother's Autoethnography. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 13(3), 2020, 276-29.

<sup>5</sup> White, E, A Passage toward the Other: The Legacy of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). *The European Legacy*, 12(4), 2007, 407-408.

<sup>6</sup>Fernando Coronil, "Listening to the Subaltern: Postcolonial Studies and the Neocolonial Poetics of Subaltern States". in: *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*, (Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (eds.) Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, and Cambridge, 2000)

<sup>7</sup> Abdullah, *Seks, Gender, dan Reproduksi Kekuasaan*. (Yogyakarta: 2001)

education, and socio-culture to lead to their role in society or the public. Their strong characters lead to women's advancement.<sup>8</sup> The novel is one of the literary works which can explore women's issues. Through literary works, the author conveys their views about the life around her, in this case, women's issues. Lots of the values of life are found in the work. Literature as a product of human culture contains values that live and apply in society.

Moroccan author Leila Abuzeid has published a book titled *Year of the Elephant: Moroccan Women's Journey Toward Independence*. This book depicts Zahra, a Muslim Moroccan woman who lived during the French colonial period. The story tells of Zahra's struggle for independence and freedom in the midst of a difficult political and social environment. However, from the title we can infer that the story could revolve around the journey of a Moroccan woman during a key period in Morocco's history. References to the "Year of the Elephant" may relate to events in Islamic history associated with the birth of the Prophet Muhammad when Abyssinian forces attempted to invade Mecca in AD 570. Perhaps the title draws parallels between this historical event and the struggles the protagonist faced on the road to Moroccan independence. The novel may deal with issues such as individual and national identity, the challenges of life under colonial rule, and the role of women in social and political change.

This paper discusses the topic of how a Muslim Moroccan woman deals with social and political life in the postcolonial era from a Muslim feminist perspective.

## Method

We use feminist methodology, to present *Year of Elephant*, a novel by Leila Abuzeid. The lack of ability of traditional methodology to fully capture the experiences of women and other persons who have been underrepresented in academic research led feminist scholars to develop feminist methodologies. Feminist methodology incorporates a wide range of approaches, strategies, and research procedures. Academics attacked feminist scientists for oversimplifying social complexity by reducing lived experiences to a group of unconnected elements. Women of color are disproportionately underrepresented in academic research, and feminists were among the first academics to point this out and suggest research techniques to solve it. Additionally, intersectional analysis—which stresses how race, class, and gender overlap—is valued by feminist researchers.<sup>9</sup> This novel depicts the participation of the protagonist character, Zahra, who participates in the independence of Morocco with all her strength and struggle. Therefore, the focus of the article is the development of the one main female character in the feminist literary work. The feminist novel serves as a vehicle for qualitative research, increasing

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<sup>8</sup>Muflichah, Pramoedy's Reflection on Strong Female Characters. *Palastren*, 3(1), 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Naples, *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, (Feminist methodology: 2016) 1-7.

feminist awareness, accessing difficult-to-reach aspects of social life, widening the scope of meanings, utilizing empathy and resonance as modes of knowing, and communicating feminist social research knowledge to a variety of audiences. This paper employs qualitative descriptive. To analyze data, we use Miles and Huberman's model.<sup>10</sup> of qualitative data analysis that will allow us to describe, explain, interpret and draw pertinent research results

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Year of Elephant* Synopsis**

Leila Abouzeid wrote the groundbreaking autobiographical book *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence*. The Moroccan woman Zahra is examined in the 1989 book as she experiences a pivotal period in the history of her nation. It offers a compelling illustration of the gender, political, and cultural concerns facing a nation that is undergoing a major transition. It is the first Moroccan work translated from Arabic into many languages including English<sup>11</sup>.

The story is told through the viewpoint of the main character Zahra. Zahra's husband, who is currently moving up the government's organizational ladder, decided he did not want to be married to his conservative wife, who cannot understand French, use a spoon or knife to eat, or sit with men when the nation achieved its independence.

Zahra is exiled from her husband's home and left without any real relatives to turn to, leaving her struggling to care for herself with only the one chamber that is hers as a legacy and "whatever the law provides" from her husband. She finds solace and comfort in Islamic precepts and the company of an experienced, senior sheikh when she returned to her hometown. In the end, she is successful in creating a self-sufficient existence for herself. In the course of discussing her divorce, Zahra shares tales from her adolescence, her marriage, and the struggle for independence in which she participated as an activist.

Abouzeid explores a range of topics through Zahra's tale of ancient traditions and modernisation at odds. In this autobiographical book, there are significant details. For instance, in the introduction, the novel starts with a practical delineation of the protagonist's early childhood, giving perusers an understanding of Moroccan society's conventions and traditions. It portrays her foundation and the troubles she experienced as a youthful child in a predominately patriarchal nation where alternatives for ladies to advance their instruction were restricted.

The "Year of the Elephant" occurrence marks a key turning point within the story. The year that the protagonist's life is totally changed happens by this authentic

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<sup>10</sup>Miles & Huberman, *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*, 1994.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with Leila Abouzeid for the Revised Edition published in Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey towards Independence*, trans.BarbaraParmenter (Austin:University of Texas,2009), 124.

occasion, which is based on a real-life event in Islamic history. Her individual challenges are interwoven with the bigger political and social developments that impacted Morocco's battle for autonomy.

In terms of independence, the book looks at the protagonist's inclusion in the battle for Moroccan autonomy over the ages. Her way is associated with that of national activists and pioneers, and she plays a significant portion in the exhibits and developments that point to freeing the country from subjugation.

For cultural character<sup>12</sup>, the book moreover looks at the protagonist's battle in figuring out her claim social character, particularly against the the landscape of the political distress. Her individual development and improvement are altogether affected by the strife between convention and innovation as well as the battle between religious and common impacts.

This novel also contains Women's Empowerment topic. The most character, a woman who wishes to create a distinction in her country's interest for independence, encounters numerous deterrents and inclinations throughout the course of the novel. She is an uplifting individual in the battle for sex uniformity since of her assurance to resist social expectations and talk out for women's rights.

As the plot creates, the novel delineates the penances made by the most important characters and others around her for the bigger cause of autonomy and opportunity. The enthusiastic fetches of these penances are gently portrayed, giving the story profundity and passionate effect.

The novel closes with comments on the protagonist's colossal changes for ladies in Moroccan culture as well as her long-lasting influence on the autonomy cause. It draws consideration to her persevering bequest and the inspiration she gives for future eras. This women's activist novel could be a cutting-edge realist scholarly explanation. Numerous deciphered Center Eastern women's fiction works are impacted by Western thought, morals, and instruction. Year of the Elephant, on the other hand, is solely Moroccan and infers from North African Islam. The heroine's internal battle between custom and cutting-edge desires is reflected within the unobtrusively differentiated past and display, the moment thought or invigorated memory. The title implies a celebrated struggle that's said within the Quran.

### Postcolonial Morocco

Indeed, national independence<sup>13</sup> and nation-building were precious dreams and decipherable futures for every man and woman who struggled for the sake of

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<sup>12</sup> Saifuddin Ahmad Husin. "The Importance and Roles of Linguistics? In Islamic Studies (Integration of Linguistics With Religious Studies)," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Humaniora* 12, no. 1 (2014): 35, <https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v12i1.299>

<sup>13</sup> Nurul Huda, Arqom Kuswanjono, and Agus Himmawan Utomo. "Redefining the Meaning of Freedom in Liberal Theology and Liberation Theology, and Its Implementation in Religious Life," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Humaniora* 21, no. 1 (2023): 15, <https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v21i1.8759>

liberation and freedom from the wanton brutality of colonial rule. However, if colonialism was severe and austere to the colonized people both in Africa and Asia, decolonization was not an aspirational experience either. The aftermath of independence in the Moroccan context sheds more light on the question of this unexpected condition. The nationalists and the natives, who harbor ed grievance against the colonizer once, are now engaging in a bloody war against each other and squabbling over political and economic power. As Frantz Fanon claims:

*Whatever the labels used or the new terms proposed, decolonization is always a violent event. Examples of such terms include national liberation, national renaissance, the return of nationhood to the people, and commonwealth.<sup>14</sup>*

Unfortunately, the fight against the colonizer has not ended with the demise of colonialism and the dawn of independence. Rather, it has been substituted with another more dangerous struggle that manifests itself in an internal fight between indigenous people themselves.<sup>15</sup> The premises of independence and the prosperity that colonized people aspired to in the aftermath of independence failed and did not at all live up to their hopeful expectations. The nation, instead of struggling to rebuild what the colonizer distracted, was stifled by the nationalists' bleeding and violent fight over power and authority. Human rights and social justice we reputed and the nation was shattered. Ranajit Guha evocatively called this unfortunate aftermath of colonialism as "a failure of the nation to come to its own."<sup>16</sup> The aftermath of colonial occupation has, thus, engendered a complex experience for both men and women who were engaged once hand in hand in the armed resistance against the colonizer and for the sake of one goal: the independence of their nation and the achievement of nationalism. However, these nationalist ideals fall apart and nationalism was emptied of its noble principles as Frantz Fan on reflects:

*National consciousness will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been, rather than the all-encompassing crystallization of the deepest hopes of the entire people, instead of the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon, *the Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Dedy Wahyudin Sanusi, "The Genealogy Of Moderate Islam In The Sasak People's Religious Experience," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Humaniora* 20, no. 2 (2023): 250, <https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v20i2.6524>.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Fernando Coronil, "Listening to the Subaltern: Postcolonial Studies and the Neocolonial Poetics of Subaltern States", *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*, ed, Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry for the English Association, (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, and Cambridge), 2000, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Frantz Fanon, "National Culture", *the Post Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London and New York: Routledge), 2006, 121.

Accordingly, true independence was far from being achieved; these dements of colonization were dominating the national scene and producing a selfish middle class that replicates dangerously the ideology of the colonizer not only in politics and economy but in culture and gender as well.

The Moroccan context elucidates such unpredictable postcolonial conditions of the post-colonial era. In 1956, Morocco gain edits independence from the French and Spanish colonial rules after years of nationalist armed struggle that brought women and men together to liberate their nation. However, the post-independence period heralded a new phase of confusion and disillusionment. As Alison Baker explains, “For many Moroccans, the decade after independence was a murky, ambiguous period,”<sup>18</sup> especially for many Moroccan women who had found themselves excluded from the new projects of the nationalist parties, though they fought side by side with men against colonialism. Like Baker, Margaret Rausch also views the aftermath of this period as disappointing for women:

*The nationalist movement saw a considerable contribution from women. Weapons were secreted among everyday items like loaves of bread and fish in shopping baskets by the sisters, wives, and other female family members of the men fighting for freedom. Women from both urban and rural environments were sought out to assist. [. . .] Many of the campaigners were deeply disappointed by the period immediately following independence, when women were kept out of politics.<sup>19</sup>*

These women were not recognized or rewarded for the sacrifices they had made for the national cause. Thus, the right to education and suffrage that they gained in the colonial period was not that sufficient to make a real change in the newly liberated Moroccan society and the Moroccan family laws. The nationalists’ concern for Moroccan women’s emancipation would evaporate after independence. In this regard, nationalism has lost its main principles of uniting the natives and achieving justice and equality between them. As Deniz Kandiyoti points out,

*On the one hand, nationalist movements compel women to behave as 'national' actors, including mothers, teachers, workers, and even soldiers, in order to engage them more fully in common life. However, they also put pressure on women to express their gender desires within the parameters of nationalist rhetoric and underline the limits of culturally acceptable feminine behavior.<sup>20</sup>*

Such a claim manifests itself evidently in the Moroccan context where the rise of nationalism created a space for Moroccan women to join the anti-colonial

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<sup>18</sup> Alison Baker, *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998),35.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Rausch, *Bodies, Boundaries, and Spirit Possession: Moroccan Women and the Revision of Tradition*(Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2000),65.

<sup>20</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation,” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf,1993),35.



struggle and to articulate their demands for some rights. However, the nationalists were careful to limit and restrain women's demands of their rights, by invoking religious principles that could not be transgressed. On the one hand, the Moroccan nationalists encouraged their women to engage in the anti-colonial struggle "by interpellating them as 'national' actors: mothers, educators, workers, and even freedom fighters." Sometimes, they secluded them within repressive boundaries, defined by traditional, religious, and archaic norms. Once the declaration of independence took place in 1956 they went back to their domestic roles. For instance, some husbands proclaimed the end of their wives' role in the armed resistance by saying to them, "you've proved yourself capable of doing all that, now it's time for you to stay home".<sup>21</sup> Hence, the role of Moroccan women in contributing to bringing in independence did not at all signal a radical change either in men's attitudes towards women, or women's self-awareness of their legitimate right to continue their struggle against patriarchy and social injustice. The rise of nationalism and the development of national consciousness among Moroccan nationalists could not be a motive for the development of feminist consciousness in the country. In other words, the dawn of the independence period did not bring any essential change for Moroccan women; it rather put the question of their emancipation aside. The political parties and the male elite were focusing their struggle on political and governmental positions as Fanon advances "the party becomes a tool for individual advancement",<sup>22</sup> not a means for realizing justice, development, and the welfare of the entire nation.

### **A Moroccan Muslim Woman's Articulation**

Indeed, Leila Abouzeid's novel *Year of the Elephant* has addressed these unpredictable aftermaths of post-independence Morocco. A writer, novelist, and journalist, Abouzeid has written this novel in her mother tongue Arabic which came to be translated into English by Barbara Parmenter. It was reviewed in American universities and even taught in Moroccan high schools.<sup>23</sup> Abouzeid is credited as being the first Moroccan woman whose works were translated into English. She has always had boundless energy and enthusiasm to write in her mother tongue rather than French. Her novels fit the feminist context perfectly as she interrogates Moroccan women's plight both during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Hence, *Year of the Elephant* is a radical postcolonial critique of the post-colonial Moroccan era and a damning indictment of the social, economic, and political vicissitudes from a Moroccan woman's perspective. Like many postcolonial novels, *Year of the Elephant* attempts to elucidate the extent to which women's marginalization

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<sup>21</sup> Alison Baker, *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women*. (New York: State University of New York: 1998), 78.

<sup>22</sup> Fanon, 116.

<sup>23</sup> Leila Abouzeid, *The Last Chapter*, (Cairo Press: American University, 2010), 158.

in the colonial period did not end with the coming of independence, but, rather, was exacerbated. Gayatri Spivak claims: "Clearly if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways."<sup>24</sup> And "it seems that if being a woman was a drawback, being a Moroccan woman was doubly so."<sup>25</sup> Hence, Abouzeid sheds light on this situation by giving voice to her protagonist and letting her express her plight in her own words. As Spivak points out: "In attempting to speak for the historically silent subject of the subaltern (rather than listen to or speak for them).

The postcolonial scholar deliberately "unlearns" gender privilege as a woman."<sup>26</sup> Thus she has gone beyond the language of the colonizer and she opts for writing her novel in her mother tongue to speak with her sisters rather than speak for them. She attempts to reconstruct a new version of history and rethink its incidents from the perspective of a working-class woman. As she maintains in the preface: "These stories are not mine. I've just told them things the way they are. Morocco also has a wealth of hidden tales. I often think to myself, "If only they could write, what wonderful tales they could tell," when I pass by people in the street".<sup>27</sup>

In this context, *Year of the Elephant* deals with the story of Zahra who embodies an authentic search for independence and freedom. The story takes place at the beginning of independence when women and men cooperate to achieve a nationalist goal: Moroccan independence. Zahra, the heroine of the novel, has participated with her husband in the colonial struggle against the French colonizer and has cooperated with her sisters Roukia and Safia to disseminate the national consciousness of resistance among men and women. However, after independence, Zahra got shocked by her husband who divorced her without a reasonable reason. This shocking event has led her to reflect on both her husband's behavior and her country's destiny after independence from an indigenous perspective based on the principles of Islam. Thus, she is an emblematic figure of those women who have contributed to the resistance movement and the national struggle against the colonizer. Yet, her faith and her authentic Islamic ethics trigger her tragic divorce from her husband to find herself abandoned without income or shelter. Independence, she thinks, instead of being a source of happiness and triumph, has turned out to be a total disappointment. As she maintains: "When the resistance first began, we imagined that the battle would wash away all resentment and hatred, just as we hoped that independence would allay our worries and heal our wounds like magical remedies available on the market".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 90.

<sup>25</sup>*The Last Chapter*, 157.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey towards Independence*, trans. Barbara Parmenter (Austin: University of Texas, 2009), xviii.

<sup>28</sup> Abouzeid, 78.

But, the struggle continues even worse than before the independence which becomes a synonym for corruption, disintegration, and disillusionment, especially for Zahra and the other Moroccan women who find themselves without rights. Rather, they become entangled in the meshes of colonialism and patriarchy.

As Cheryl Johnson-Odim maintains “fighting two colonialisms’ when it comes to women—one against traditional patriarchy and one against colonial patriarchy.”<sup>29</sup> Zahra like many other women has found herself humiliated and denied all her rights by her husband who divorces her and left her with “Whatever the law provides!”<sup>30</sup> Zahra’s pain and suffering have brought about her ineffable feminist consciousness. She maintains: “All these because I am a woman.”<sup>31</sup> Her divorce was an event that led her to question her situation in post-independent Morocco. Zahra participated in the nationalist resistance movement but was abandoned and put aside afterward. She comments on her misery after independence thus: “I took part in the conflict and completed tasks for my country. But what can my country do for me right now?”<sup>32</sup> Had they been given a chance, all such Moroccan women would have raised the same question. They were aware that “Change came, but only for a handful of people”.<sup>33</sup> The nationalists who brought them to the armed resistance against the colonizer are now exploiting them and excluding them from the political, economic, and cultural agendas. Fanon illuminates this ambiguous situation by claiming that “The head of the liberation movement electrified the populace by promising a radical, valiant march forward. He keeps trying to put them to sleep now...”<sup>34</sup> and to keep silent about the new emerging despair. Nonetheless, Zahra does not keep silent and does not overlook her situation she knows that her husband and the likes are but a repeated image of the colonizer and maybe worse. They could not free themselves or their minds from the remnants of the colonizer’s language and culture, rather the French language and Western culture become icons and “standards” of social integration and modernity. As Zahra explains the motif behind her divorce: “I don’t eat with a frock, I don’t speak French, I don’t sit with men, I don’t go out to fancy dinners. I am nothing but an old coin fit only for the museum shelf. Their position in society now calls for modern women”.<sup>35</sup>

It seems, then, that true independence is far from being realized. And if there is one, it is only shallow and superficial, but indigenous minds are still fraught with the remnants of Western culture and norms. Independence is but an illusion and a myth as Roman Grosfoguel brilliantly argues: “The idea that the end of colonial

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<sup>29</sup>Cheryl Johnson-Odim, “Women and Gender in the History of Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Women’s History in Global Perspective*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith, (University of Illinois Press, 2005), 56.

<sup>30</sup>Abouzeid, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>34</sup> Fanon, 114.

<sup>35</sup>Abouzeid, 10.

administrations equated to the decolonization of the world was one of the most potent myths of the 20th century”<sup>36</sup> In this context, Zahra realizes through her confrontation with her husband how the latter betrays the principles of independence and the slogans of nationalism and becomes worse than the colonizer as she describes him and his fellows: “and we are anticipating transformation from people like this! You pose a greater threat than the colonizer”<sup>37</sup> Zahra elucidates here her awareness that independence is an unfinished project and still is perpetuated by such people who have become more dangerous in their politics than the colonizer. Corruption has permeated every single field, even family bonds. The little change that has been achieved was just limited to the ruling class or what Fanon calls “the incompetent national bourgeoisie”<sup>38</sup> to which Zahra’s husband and his fellows belong to. Furthermore, Zahra mourns the nationalists in the aftermath of independence since they have become but an imitation of the colonizer’s customs and culture as if independence has never taken place as she describes: “They now consume food with forks and knives, smoke Havana cigars, and dress in furs even at the height of summer”. This elucidates that Moroccan “decolonization remains a myth and African freedom is reduced to an illusion”<sup>39</sup>, thus women’s freedom and liberty.

Zahra manages to reflect on the corruption of the law that is manifested in the behavior of her husband who has exploited the law of the Mudawana – or the Moroccan Family Code established in 1958 –and divorced her just by uttering the simple phrase of divorce:

*Whatever the law provides, in fact, "whatever the law provides," will be provided to you along with your papers. What exactly is that? Costs for one hundred days? That demonstrates how highly the law values women. Leave them on the streets with 100 days' worth of costs. ..<sup>40</sup>*

Such expression elucidates the extent to which Moroccan women were humiliated by the injustice of the law, especially on the threshold of independence. It is worth mentioning here that the amendment of such law has not taken place until 2004 whereby men and women have been granted equality in both public and domestic spheres in the new Family Code. For instance, women have been granted the right to initiate divorce, the right to child custody, and even polygamy gets restricted. However, at the time of the novel, Like Zahra, many Moroccan women suffered on account of the old biased law, but they did nothing to make a tangible amendment. Hence, in the novel, Zahra has found refuge in her religious faith to

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of power in post-colonial Africa*, (Dakar: Codesria, 2013), 3.

<sup>37</sup>Abouzeid, 65.

<sup>38</sup> See Fanon, 110.

<sup>39</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of power in post-colonial Africa*, (Dakar: Codesria, 2013),xi.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 12.

escape from the abysmal situations of the aftermath of independence. As she says to the Sheikh to whom she requests advice: "The most crucial thing is that I keep God in mind and focus on the notion that we are merely traveling through this life in order to pave the way for the next one."<sup>41</sup> Zahra's confrontation with the Sheikh reveals her passivity and surrender to the male-interpreted religious discourse. Through Zahra's exchange with the Sheikh, Abouzeid emphasizes that in addition to the colonial and patriarchal discourses that subjugate Moroccan women, religious discourse as controlled by men perpetuates such a position. According to Salah Moukhlis,

*[Zahra] wants to embrace emancipation and autonomy as modern principles, but she can't get rid of the notion that her identity is collective. She wants to stay a "guerrilla fighter," but she gives in to the notion that simply having faith in God matters in this life, and that the real reward is found in the afterlife.<sup>42</sup>*

By presenting Zahra as such, Abouzeid aims to criticize Moroccan women's naivety about the rhetoric of religious discourse. Thus, she suggests, "a better understanding of Muslim culture and not succumbing to stereotypes based on political motivations."<sup>43</sup> Abouzeid observes that the aftermath of post-independent Morocco brings no radical transformation. Women were forced to accept many things like the Mudawana (family law), without raising questions about its utility to their situations. Still, their participation in the armed resistance shows the extent of these women's outstanding courage and proves how much they are worth recognition when referring to the history of the Moroccan resistance. Their poverty, their miserable childhood, and their illiteracy didn't prevent them from taking the risk for the sake of the national cause. History should remember these women with pride and without prejudice.

## Conclusion

Written in the years following the battle for independence from colonial authority, *Year of the Elephant* articulated the visibility of women in traditional, patriarchal African-Muslim contexts at a period when female writers' personal and socio-political exposés were surprisingly rare. This first-generation novella is an expression of agency that moves both within and across borders and boundaries, and they are set in the former French colony of Morocco. Leila Abouzeid finds herself in a private environment where people from their African Muslim countries are both insiders and outsiders. Since they assert that a critical examination of traditional and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>42</sup> Salah Moukhlis, "A History of Hopes Postponed: Women's Identity and the Postcolonial State in *Year of the Elephant*: A Moroccan Woman's Journey towards Independence". *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 34, N. 3, (Autumn: 2003), 66-83. JSTOR Web. Accessed on May 29, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> See Abouzeid, 124.

religious Islam is a part of their dedication to the Islamic faith. In addition, Leila Abouzeid's writings have contributed, among many other women's writings and civil activism, to establishing the new Moroccan Family Law in 2004 that was a leading path to promoting women's rights in Morocco. Nowadays, such writings are proliferating to the extents that have paved the way for raising debates around establishing another reform of updating the actual Family law.

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