Stereotyped Images of Women on the Moroccan Public Space: Ideological implications

Dr. Touria Nakkouch
Lecturer in English & Comparative Literature
Ibn-Zohr University, Agadir- Morocco

Résumé : *L'usage idéologique du stéréotype – entant qu'idée fixe, fiction idéologique- est encore plus courant dans le domaine de la représentation visuelle qu'il ne l'est ailleurs. Les stéréotypes qui perpétuent le plus dangereusement certains aprioris du comportement social sont générés par les mass média et constituent le trait principal du discours non-égalitaire, que ce denier soit sexiste, colonial ou propagandiste. La présente communication interpelle le premier, et se veut une analyse interdisciplinaire de deux images stéréotypées de la femme marocaine en milieu urbain, images représentatives du discours sexiste sur la féminité, la masculinité et les relations genre au Maroc. Elle étudie également les retombées idéologiques des deux images en question : l'adolescente aux cheveux blonds et à la silhouette svelte, et la femme voilée. Ma démarche se situe au carrefour de la théorie culturelle sur la représentation (Michel Foucault 1984, 1988), la presse écrite marocaine (Miss, Citadine, Femme Actuelle), la recherche anthropologique (Leila Hessini 1990, Ghaleb Bensheikh 2005) et la littérature féminine (Fatema Mernissi 1997,2003).*

Mots-clés : *féminité, modèles sociaux, représentation, idéologie, fondamentalisme, différence*

1. The cognitive structure of stereotype in object-relations theory:

We all have stereotypes. We all create and use them in the process of our ego formation. Stereotype arises when self-interrogation is threatened, that is when our perception of, and control over, the world is shuffled or destabilized. Anxiety and instability arise when the child comes to distinguish between the self and the world: they result from a perceived loss of control over the world (securing food through the part-object of the breast; securing warmth and comfort through the first object of desire- the mother). As a reaction against this sense of loss, the child begins to combat anxieties associated with the failure to control the world by adjusting its mental picture of people so that they can appear "good" even when their behaviour is perceived as "bad". The object-relation theorist Melanie Klein analyses this adjustment vis-à-vis the mother as both object of love and of hate. Klein analyses this adjustment in terms of a movement from mourning for loss of the loved object, provoked by the child's destructive impulses, through guilt for such destruction, to love in the experience of reparation. Reparation here takes the form of sympathy with the mother as a whole separate self with its own anxieties.

In the first stages of this development, the child's sense of its ego is shaped to fit this pattern of "good" or "evil". The child's sense of itself splits into a good self, blessed with the sense of complete control over the world, in the anxiety-free world of the pre-oedipal; and a "bad" self, unable to control the world and thereby exposed to anxieties. In object-relations theory, this ego splitting is connected to the splitting of the mother as an object. In the words of Patricia Waugh,

> *Splitting is connected to the idealization of the "good" breast, the ideal object and, if the persecutory anxieties become overwhelming, idealization may increase or be projected on to the persecutor. If this fails, the ego may disintegrate and parts of it projected on to objects in the world (as phobias, extreme paranoia or hypochondria).* (Waugh 1989:66)

Idealization, glorification, fear and hatred are manifestations of our first stereotypes. They are crude type-castings of the ego and the world into good and evil. And they mark one stage in the development of our personality: the "bad " is distanced , made an "other", to save the self from any confrontation with the contradictions present in the necessary integration of the "bad" and "good" aspects of the self. We may, therefore, say that the deep structure of our ego is built on our very first stereotype or illusory image of us /good and them/bad. The line drawn between the two is dynamic and responds, positively or negatively, to stresses

occurring within the psyche. This normally results in paradigm shifts in our mental representations of the world, moving from loving to hating, fearing to glorifying.

While in the pathological personality, the initial crude distinction of the world into "good" and "bad" triggered by the split is there all the time, in the normal personality, stereotypes exist in parallel to our ability to create more sophisticated rational categories that transcend the crude line of difference present in stereotype. Therefore, stereotype is useful 'momentary' coping mechanism if it is used and discarded in time.

2. Stereotyped images of women on the Moroccan urban scene: case studies

2. 1. The thin fair teenager myth

A street-style image of femininity which has become increasingly voguish of late on the Moroccan street is one made of a combination of slender bearing, slight tight dress -especially jeans and décolleté tops- and light dyed-blond, red or golden hair. This image is used in TV commercials, displayed on the fashion corners of women's magazines and on shop windows and interiors. It is tempting of course to consider this image as the making of a historical juncture marked by globalization and the influence of electronic mass media. Michel Foucault, however, taught us to mistrust such phenomena as historically determined, and to examine the regimes of representation behind them. In one of his late interviews, Foucault expresses his new interest in what he calls "practices and techniques of the self". He maintains that it "is not enough to say that the subject is constituted in a symbolic system. It is not just in the play of symbols that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices. There is a technology of the constitution of the self, which cuts across symbolic systems while using them."(Rabinow 1984:369) In "Technologies of the Self", Foucault sketches out the history of the different ways in Western culture whereby humans develop knowledge about themselves; he identifies four main types of technologies: of production, of sign systems, of power and of the self. Technologies of the self, he argues,

> *permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality (Foucault 1988:18*)

Foucault recommends that such knowledge of the self be not accepted at face value, but analysed as a quasi-science, a specific "truth game" related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.

If we advance, as I am arguing here, that one of the popular models of femininity on the Moroccan street within the last decade is built on the myth of the fair , slender teenager as an image of the new Moroccan woman, it is worth examining the regime of representation underpinning such a stereotype. Here are a few facts:

- Most city centre women's wear shops bear European or American names. In the address corner of one of the *Femmes du Maroc* magazine issues, only one of the twenty six women's wear shops in Casablanca bears a Moroccan name, while two have neutral names. The rest have exotic or voguish–sounding names: "Mango", fashion Victim" "Big Follies", "No-Kiss"...etc
- In the years 2003-2008, it became extremely difficult to find dresses or skirts, the new fashion for women being jeans or slim trousers. More lately, miniskirts or medium-length pyjama looking blouses are worn on top of jeans. The fashion is now turning more and more to a hodgepodge of contrasts where the glorious 30's are forced into postmodern fusions with avant-garde fashion styles. Slim tight trousers remain a constant within these variables.
- To find your size when you do forty and above, you have to go to specialized, haute- couture shops, the norm in the fashion market being 36-38. " Taille 38: le harem des femmes

occidentales", the end chapter of *Le harem européen* by Moroccan writer and sociologist Fatéma Mernissi, relates humorously the writer's predicament in one of the temples of consumer culture in New York, the women's wear shop; She was unable to find a fitting skirt on account of her large hips.

-If you go into a re-looking centre downtown with dark hair, you can be 75% sure to get out of it with medium length or *effilé* –cut hair dyed blond, red, or golden-meshed. The re-looking corner in any of the new women magazines bears witness to this tendency.

Whether the above techniques are simple, voguish tendencies that are historically constructed or the wilful instruments of a technology of the self enforced through a regime of representation whose geo-economic objective is to invade new world markets, will depend on how one reacts to the following readings:

- The 21st century is a period when economic powers based on consumer culture (China and the USA, and now other emergent third world economic powers) are looking for new world markets. Such wear shops as "Zara", "Stradivarius" and "Mongo" are examples of cunning global market strategies, where economic powers are creating global selves in their consumer cultural image.

-The polar stereotype based on skin colour determinism, one that identifies goodness with the fair-skinned and "wickedness" with the dark-skinned is a long-standing western stereotype. Anglo-Saxon culture, whose values are exported with the fashion styles, is replete with versions or derivations of this stereotype. Even classics which are innocent of colonial or racial typecasting, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, contain residues of this myth.

- Shop space itself is made a privileged place for performances of techniques of the self associated with the new woman imagery: the use of display services such as mannequins on shop windows; display boards with photos of top models wearing make-up, perfumes or dress. The use of lighting, interior decoration and the placing of mirrors all reflect a willed strategy to fix certain cultural values and meanings round garment: in the main, these values remain pro-American: white, middle-class and capitalist.

In the construction of this street style femininity, the mass media, the written press (*Miss, Citadine, Femme Actuelle*...etc) play an important role in constructing regimes of looking. Foucault's work remains crucial in understanding the relation between techniques of looking and practices of the self as a means of institutionalizing certain images as historical identities. The institutional underpinnings of this regime of representation lies in the cultural significance attached to this imagery. Frailty, youth and vulnerability are sanctioned as traits of true femininity; fairness is approved as a standard against which other skin colours look suspect, and so are distanced as "other": they are mistrusted, glorified or sexually fetishized.

2. 2. The veiled woman myth

Another public image of femininity increasingly in vogue on the Moroccan urban scene, all life sectors included, is the figure of the wrapped, veiled woman as a symbol of the chaste, morally worthy woman. Casablanca first initiated the tradition of creating specialized shops for veiled women (i.e. "*Al Emirate*", "Top Mode"); other cities followed suit very soon. Some of the shops are haute-couture places. They work in parallel to audio-visual and electronic mass media and also to some Arab consumer magazines (i.e. *Zahrat El Khalij*) to construct a regime of representation around the figure of the veiled woman: a strongly built, generously rounded, manicured, loud–perfumed woman with a heavy make-up and the unfailing "*muhtajiba*" costume. Fineness of material and harmony of colours distinguish the dress. The veiled women' wear shops try to live up to the women's concern with their femininity and sexual appeal.

In parallel to this image, we see chador or burka- dressed women, often very young and accompanied by children and older husbands with long beards. Or they walk with women

similarly dressed. One is at a loss to decide whether the difference between the two veiling costumes is one of appropriateness, authenticity or of sect membership. The nuance between *Hijab* and "*Suphur*", widely disputed the 20th century by reformists Islamist thinkers, has, oddly enough, totally disappeared from the debate vista.

In an analysis of the significance of the veil for Moroccan women, which the Egyptian anthropologist Leila Hessini made from a poll she cast on literate urban women between 1986 and 1990, Hessini demonstrates that the wide-spread use of the veil among literate women fails to reflect a consensus on the reasons behind its use. Wearing the veil turned out to be surrounded by many ambiguities: first is the ambiguity relating to the legal status of the veil: whether it is compulsory (*Wajib*) or desirable (*Mustahab*). Some of us still remember the charge that Egyptian lawyer Nabih Wahsh raised against some Egyptian movie stars, accusing them of *ridda* (apostacy) for having discarded the *Hijab* after wearing it for some time. Uncertainty also covers some of the literate women's attitude toward the *Hijab* in its relation to the social order. For some, *Hijab* is a sign of adherence to an authentic system of social values and a refusal of occidental fashion. The same women, however, acknowledge and tolerate the ambiguity surrounding the gender/space issue, in a context which favours division rather than co-habitation. They generally believe that women should access the employment market on account of the demands of modern living, but that the division of space must itself remain unquestionable (as in the space of prayer). The wearing of the veil, therefore, translates both their sense of guilt for trespassing their legitimated space limits, and a compromise as regards the status quo, ending thereby in being out and in at the same time.

Hessini's analysis also points to the contradictions characterizing women's bodies and their sexuality. The women wear the veil to hide their bodies because the female body is entirely *aawra* and, as such, generator of *fitna* among males; they thereby enrol within the logic which deems Arab males unable to control their sexual appetites. The latter male trait is perceived as a sign of authentic virility rather than a weakness of character. Menstruation is advanced by the same women as an evidence of their lesser worth of spirituality as compared to males'. What these arguments show is the women's lack of pedagogical insight and distinction in dealing with what is temporal (reproduction, gender roles) and what is spiritual (faith, communion with God). There is in fact confusion between the two.

In "L'Islam, est-il laicissable ?" a conference presented on France TV, Ghaleb Bencheikh declares that Islam is the religion which is most compatible with democracy and secularism; the problem lies in that Muslim society adopts a line of thought characterized by fundamentalist closure and ideological opportunism. Using laicity as a cover concept, fragile Arab regimes try to gain more legitimacy by using the spiritual in the service of the political; the State issues pro-government readings to be delivered at the Mosques during the Friday communal prayer. Another problem lies in that the Muslim lay person thinks that the concept encourages free (seen as irresponsible), anarchic thinking. Laicity is therefore used as a foil division of the temporal from the spiritual. Bencheikh believes that the Muslims " *doivent faire preuve d'une extrême pédagogie et de discernement tout en gardant à l'esprit qu'ils ne sont pas les seuls dépositaires de la vérité absolue* (*should make use of extreme pedagogy and discernment , while keeping in mind that they are not the only detainers of absolute truth)*» (L'é*conomiste* Nov.2005)

All in all, the wearing of the Hijab among Moroccan urban women reflects these women's cognitive dissonance. This cognitive dissonance is the result of contradictory impulses: on the one hand, the need for employment and emancipation; on the other, the will to perpetuate fundamentalist practices since these are believed to safeguard the family unit and to protect the social order. The poll conducted by Leila Hessini also reflects the Moroccan urban women's acute sense of ethics (and of guilt) as the safeguardians of social morality. Men are spared this difficult task. It also proves that Moroccan women, despite their literacy,

generally lack the sense of personal identity and personal rights. They are part of a social or communal consciousness. They fail to see themselves as separate, autonomous selves with dreams, motivations and goals. By wearing the *Hijab,* they show readiness to sacrifice their rights as persons, in favour of group membership. The consequences of such guilt-ridden, contradictory attitudes on women's lives and their empowerment are obviously drastic.

3. Towards a Cross-Cultural Analysis of Coded Feminine Religious Behaviour

It is interesting to note that the case of the veil has been lately located at the centre of the Arab socio-political scene with the same intensity that the case of the abortion was placed at the centre of the political scene in the USA of the 70's. The manipulation of key religious concepts by conservative movements around the world is one of the questions that *Fundamentalism and Gender* (1994) by John S. Hawley examines. In one of the essays of this edited work, Karen McCarthy Brown draws attention to the incoherencies that the Anti-Abortion Movement (or Pro-Life Movement) in the American 70's was observed to have. The same group that engaged in heated debate about the protection of life showed indifference to children's lives outside of the womb. They neither created nor supported social programmes focused on child abuse, day care or juvenile drug abuse. Their overriding concern was with maintaining boundary lines between the "good" and the "bad" in society, the righteous and the sinful, the life and death sentences. They are, in other words, wholly concerned with the perpetuation of a social order.

Dealing with fundamentalism cross-culturally, Karen Brown evokes the example of the "sati" of Roop Kanmar- the young Hindu Woman who was immolated on her husband's funeral; Brown argues that the targets of fundamentalist ideology are not only the poor and the marginalised, but the people caught off balance-the disoriented. That is why fundamentalism thrives in postcolonial or historically fragile contexts. She also argues that the sati practice in Modern India should be considered with regard to two arguments: the economic condition of women and the fear of the woman's body. First, as most Indian women depend on marriage for their financial security, it goes without saying that a woman performing sati at a funeral shrine avows respect and conformity to social codes, but she also takes her life on account of the financial insecurity awaiting her. Object- relations theory may help elucidate the second argument. Dorothy Dinnerstein explains that "*the crucial psychological fact is that all of us, men and women, fear the will of Woman." She adds that male dominance and privilege are social constructs built on "a terror that we all feel: the terror of sinking back wholly into the helplessness of infancy*" (Dinnerstein 1976: 161) Fear of the woman's sexuality conditions our attitudes towards women not only in myths, but also in religious practice and in daily secular interactions. A woman is one moment a goddess, the next a monster. The sati practice in Modern India may find an explanation in the fear of the woman's will and the woman's body, and in the relief that both men and women feel when these two creative sources are disempowered.

It is tempting, in the present context, to push Karen Brown's cross cultural analysis further and draw affinities between the three key religious concepts seen above: Anti-abortion, the veil and the sati. The three, in my opinion, target the week and the disoriented; social insecurity and lack of moral rectitude are in each projected onto the body of woman. For the Anti-abortion Movement of the American 70's, this body is sublimated and confined to reproduction. For the Pro-Hijab fundamentalist movement in the modern Arab world (and in Morocco by way of example) it is hidden on account of its unruly drives and sinful impact on the male ego; for the pro-sati movement the body, being the devouring body of the goddess, is immolated and a pure, spiritual woman is enshrined instead. In *Rêves de femmes*, Fatema Mernissi has the little girl narrator wistfully compare the Germans' imposition of the

yellow badge on Jews in WWI to the Muslims' imposition of veil on women. The mother explains then that it is fear of difference that makes people behave weirdly.

4. Conclusion

Whether they are triggered by institutional or by ideological forces, and whether they proceed to the "nakedness" or to the wrapping of woman, the models of street style femininity we have seen reflect a sexual politics in terms of which women are "othered", fetishized, and unquestionably disempowered. In spite of their literacy, Moroccan women without a gender consciousness tend to adopt the knowledge of the self inherent in such models at face value. In the North African context, where women suffer as much from stereotyped representation as they do from under representation, gender and feminist studies should help us unveil the incoherencies and injustices of non-egalitarian regimes of representation, and access women to the counter knowledge of how to be fully human.

Bibliography

Dinnerstein, Dorothy, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, New York, Harper & Row, 1976

Foucault, M., Rabinow, R ed. *The Foucault Reader*, USA, Pantheon Books, 1984

Foucault Michel, "Technologies of the Self" in Martin, L.H.et al, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, Tavistock, 1988

Gilman, Sander, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, USA, Cornell University Press, 1985

Hawley, John Stratton, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994

Klein, Melanie, *Envy and Gratitude: A Study of Unconscious Forces,* New York, Basic Books, 1957

Mernissi, Fatema, *Rêves de femmes : une enfance au harem*, Maroc, Editions Le Fennec, 1997

Mernissi, Fatema, *Le harem européen,* Maroc, Editions Le Fennec, 2003

Waugh, Patricia, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, London, Routledge, 1989