

Colonial Encounters in Gendered Settings

Reflections on Mrīrīda n'ait 'Atiq, a Moroccan Amazīgh Courtesan and Singing Poet

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Abstract Mrīrīda n'ait 'Atiq, or Mrīrīda ūt-'Atiq as she is locally known, is an Amazīgh popular troubadour who has been brought to oblivion by historiography writings. She was a courtesan and a traveling poet whose physical wanderings in the mountainous villages and valleys of Tasāout and Azilal are retold in her oral and aural poetry. Curiously, the often-scornful audiences in the public markets (*souks*) where she performed never got interested in Mrīrīda's poems until she met with a French instructor who spoke the local dialect, taped the poems, translated them in French and documented them in *Les Chants de la Tassaout*.

Keywords Mrīrīda n'ait 'Atiq. Gender. Amazīgh culture. Morocco. Epistemic violence. Colonialism. Postcolonialism.

What could you offer me, tell me, young naïve man?
Days without meat... sugar and songs,
The sweat and the filth of painful labors,
The manure of stables, stinky clothes
And the frightful smoke of the dark kitchen,
While you are out to dance the “adersi”.¹
And you would ask me, the thing is quite certain,
To give birth to boys, boys, boys!
Cannot you see that I am not made for it?

(Euloge 1986, 35)

In dealing with Mrīrīda, a controversial woman of remarkable beauty, a Moroccan *Amazīgh* illiterate poetess, and one of the “victims of historical assassination”, I deem it relevant to start with a personal experience that has inspiringly been very influential in the writing of this piece. A couple of years ago, on a Sunday evening of February 5th, during its *Des histoires et des homes* TV programme, the Moroccan 2M showed Kamal Hackkar’s road-movie musical documentary *Tasanū, Tayrinū* (2017).² The title literally means ‘my liver, my love’, and it metaphorically refers to the confession of ardent emotions in the *Amazīgh* context of the Moroccan Middle Atlas Mountains. In dealing with the concept of love in the *Amazīgh* background, Hachkar has based his documentary on the narrative of the legendary poet Mrīrīda ūt-‘Atiq. This mid-twentieth century local figure symbolized *la joie de vivre*, freedom of movement and thought; and was an emblem of female resistance to the patriarchal order who blurred the boundaries between shame and honor through her poems and through her nomadic experience.

Mrīrīda has her own story, which in varying degrees represents an early colonial and precolonial feminist awareness in Morocco, and wherein the oral tradition with its elusive memories, is overshadowed

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1 This is one Mrīrīda’s poems. The translations are mine unless stated elsewhere. *Adersi* is a famous dance in the Ait Bouguemaz valley, Azilal, where men and women are grouped together in a semicircular like-manner. In discussing the *adersi* dance with my mother, she told me that men get mixed with women in lines wherein each man’s elbow is adjacent to the woman’s and that the lineup of women should more or less be equal to the men’s. *Adersi*, played with *tālūnt*, also called *taguenzāt* (*bendīr* in Moroccan *dārija*), assigned to male counterparts, often opens with sung verses that venerate God and his Prophet, then moves to various social issues about rural life and lasts overnight to reach the form of singing duels between men and women late in the evening.

2 The transliterations used in this article follow the Index Translationum provided by UNESCO Arabic transliteration wherein long vowels are represented as [ā, ū, ī]. Consonants are represented as follows: [ض as ḍ], [ظ as ḏ], [ص as ṣ], [ط as ṭ], [ق as q], [ح as ḥ], [خ as kh], [غ as gh], [ع as ‘].

by the powers of history and by the orthodoxy of the mainstream urban male-based elitist historiography. Her life experiences have been obscured by those who wrote the glorious narratives of the country, without paying much tribute to the epics that unfolded around them. Mrīrīda, who speaks of and for the other Moroccan Mrīrīdas, remains a valuable case of study. Her poetry and sung poems provide “a contested site where gender, morality, and the state intersect” (Ciucci 2012, 788; see also Ciucci 2008). Her life narrative and poetic experience are worth retrieving in the light of the intricate cultural, historical and identity discourses her individual and collective subjectivities purport to represent. What we all know about her is that she was born in Megdāz, a small ramshackle village that stretches the Tasāout valley deep in the Atlas Mountains of Azilal, earlier in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, her real name is still unknown to us; yet, the nickname given to her and by which she was famous in her tribe was Mrīrīda, as she herself states in one of her poems: “People called me Mrīrīda / Mrīrīda, the agile rennet of meadows” (Sadiqi 2003, 234).

Literature about Mrīrīda’s little story is scarce, if not almost inexistent. Few webpages have mentioned her but with no insightful critical reflections on her sung poetry. Nearly all the discussions raised in internet public domains either reproduce the French translated versions of her poems or hint to the overwhelming obscurities in which she has been drawn for long. Very significant, though, is that the mysteries surrounding the narrative of this emblematic figure have been contested by few bloggers who discussed her case.³ They state that she never existed as she seems to have been one of those mythic characters of the life dramas created for reasons that are still uncovered; and that if she ever existed at all, she only occurred in the French instructor’s orientalist fantasies. In here, Mrīrīda is meant to fade away from collective imagination, vanish naturally and disperse into total amnesia. In the midst of the shifting discourses of intentional fallacy and forced amnesia – visible enough in relegating this figure to second-hand position – and the recuperative endeavors of memory in restoring the other’s forgotten history, crops up a wonderful story of a fabulous female wandering poet. Her songs and poetry are now available to us thanks to the French instructor René Euloge. In 1927-28, while on a visit to Azilal to experience the exotic Otherness and live up to his Orientalist expectations, he discovered quite by chance Mrīrīda and her two other roommates. Bacha from Zāwit Echeikh and

3 See Lhoussain Azergui’s article “Mririda N’Ait Attik, un Destin Amazigh!”, published on December 14, 2013 (<http://neocultureamazighe.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/12/14/mririda-nait-attik-un-destin-amazigh/>). See also, abdelkarim Ochacha’s article on “Colonial Literature in the Mirror”, *al-ḥiwār al-mutamadin: al-adāb wa al-fan*, 2930, 28 February 2010 (<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=2056920>).

Bibia from Msemghir were also courtesans and performers who used to wander across the region's *souks* and perform their musical poetry for the *Amazigh Souk* goers. A French soldier first urged Euloge to visit Mririda and the two girls. Euloge states that

C'est pendant une halte à Azilal que je fis connaissance de la jeune poétesse. Mon regretté ami, Jo G... venu de Demnat me dit: "vous tombez bien. J'ai fait pour vous une découverte. Ce soir nous irons boire le thé chez Mririda. Ne m'en demandez pas davantage, car la rencontre vous réserve certainement une inoubliable surprise!" (Euloge 1986, 12)

It was during an errand to Azilal that I became acquainted with the young poetess. My friend, o G... came from Demnat and said, "It's good that you are here. I made a discovery for you. Tonight we will go to have tea at Mririda's. Do not ask me further, because the meeting is certainly hiding an unforgettable surprise for you!"

Nobody cared about what these artists were singing and rehearsing. Whatever their artistic compositions meant, the French officers and the regular visitors of the *quartier réservé* would not pay the slightest consideration to the vague poems they could not understand. Such was definitely the case with the native *taqāt* goers, the merciless *Gūm* soldiers,⁴ the merchants, the traders and the farmers, who were only taken by lustful moments of pleasure and missed the chance to look at these Mriridas' poetry with approval and respect.

The first Moroccan academic source to have mentioned Mririda and paid attention to her life story, albeit in passing, is Fatima Sadiqi's *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco*. She has analyzed the different expressive genres that women make use of in *tamazight* and in Moroccan *dārīja*, including some verses by Mririda. She has found, and she is right, "creativity, boldness and moral strength" in the poems of the "poor illiterate Berber woman living in a remote mountainous village at a period in the history of Morocco where women were denied the least of rights" (Sadiqi 2003, 235). For her, Mririda's art "is a prototype of the authentic oral female literature of Moroccan women" (235). She excelled in the art of improvising and singing *Amazigh* poems in a context wherein artistic production was singularly dominated by men. Sadiqi's mention of Mririda is an interesting historical and cultural act geared toward both voicing out the

⁴ The Moroccan *Gūm* soldiers, *les Goumiers Marocains* in French, were indigenous soldiers in the service of the Moroccan Sultan who also served in the French army between 1908 and 1956. The *Gūms* were used during the French colonial occupation of Morocco up to the early 1930s. They then served in Italy and France during the Second World War and in Indochina from 1946 to 1954.

Amazīgh women's contribution to the reshaping of literary and musical landscapes in the country, and exploring the agency of women within Morocco's cultural and linguistic "structures of power" (235) from both theoretical and ethnographic positions. Her project is a valid critical study at least in the overall argument it supports as to the starting of a recuperative terrain that touches on women as marginal voices and their contribution in the reshaping of postcolonial linguistic and cultural identities in Morocco.

Within the same vein, and in an article published in a conference proceedings edited by Sadiqi, Osire Glacier mentions in passing one of Mrīrida's poems. Glacier's article focuses on the intersection of power and on the production of narratives about feminism in Morocco, including feminist narratives themselves. Adopting an empirical-based approach, the study sketches the history of women in Morocco in general and Moroccan feminism in particular with the attempt of retrieving forgotten figures and narratives that articulate early precolonial, colonial and postcolonial feminist consciousness in Morocco. She argues that Mrīrida's voice contests the social conditions of the women of her times, and that the discourse on modern Moroccan feminism is the continuity of an indigenous feminist consciousness perpetuated through national and cultural traditions but overlooked by mainstream literature (Glacier 2012, 47-63).

Also, in dealing with Moroccan *Amazīgh* women, Cynthia Becker who has worked extensively on the *Amazīgh* women states that "women are the artists in Amazigh societies: they create and wear the public visual symbols of Amazigh ethnic identity such as woven textiles, tattoos, and particular styles of jewelry and dress" (Becker 2006, 4). Becker's work, devoted to the *Ait Khabbāsh* from Southeastern Morocco, remains a valuable theoretical source on the study of *Amazīgh* women's arts and culture regardless of its methodological shortcomings. It is not a book on *Amazīgh* arts in Morocco *per se*. It is intrinsically descriptive of ceremonial and communal rites of passage performed during women's gatherings. By being so, it overlooks various historical and cultural factors that have been fundamental in shaping the Moroccan *Amazīgh* identities. In addition, the analysis "ignores the role and influence of Islam and religious ideology in the shaping of the mores and traditions the author attempts to present" (Hagan 2008, 341-2). Becker's work's merit lies in offering interesting anthropological data on the construction of ethnic identity in visual arts in the Moroccan *Amazīgh* context, and in investigating the role of women in the maintenance and preservation of the *Ait Khabbāsh*'s artistic tradition. The merit of the book, concomitantly in line with the argument of this article, also lies in contextualizing and theorizing a feminist discourse that allows the previously unheard voices and stories to emerge against the constricting grid of national historiographical writings and elitist cultural documentation.

In delineating counter-hegemonic and transgressive voices of the margins in Moroccan musical landscape, Deborah Kapchan has published her book *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (1996). Kapchan relies on ethnographic research through an in-depth fieldwork she started in mid-1980s in Beni Mellal to read the 'body' of the *shīkhā*, the Moroccan dancing woman. Kapchan untangles the artistic and bodily prowess of the *shīkhāt* (plural of *shīkhā*) in articulating some of the more powerful metaphors of Moroccan Arabo-Amazigh identity. For her, this female performer whose singing and dancing are central to all festivities, including marriage ceremonies and birth and circumcision celebrations, represents a model of the transgressive female dancer in Moroccan society. Her study, which comes in the form of encounter with and analysis of conversations with the dancers, illustrates various discourses on women's performances in an Islamic society. It highlights the ways in which the performers' identities are negotiated within complex discourses of sexual freedom, social marginalization and moral ideals. Focusing on the *shīkhā's* body as a palimpsest of erotic inscriptions, Kapchan declares that the animated site of these dancers' physical activity and their sexually loaded spectacles make them "embodiments of the *matluq*" (Kapchan 1994, 87) with unlimited freedom that violates the borders of social restraint. The free and unrestricted *shīkhā* is accepted as "garrulous and outgoing", incarnating a sexual texture of "exhilaration and flowing movement" (94). These dancers' openness in performing sexual prowess through the manipulative forces of the body, their bodily and linguistically "loose language" on and off stage, defy religious and cultural taboos. They bear witness of the dishonorable character of the dancer/singer in the "dominant value system that degrades their material and spiritual worth" (96). One of the limitations of Kapchan's work is that it foregrounds the manipulation of the discourse on women within the Orientalist mode of representation that focuses on the definition of female voices as forms of patriarchal domination and oppression. It does not provide a genuine understanding of Moroccan/Oriental women beyond the confinements of tradition, and beyond the discursive constructions of Orientalist legacy complicated by the ethnographer's position. Still, *Gender on the Market* offers an interesting study of the Moroccan marketplace as a contradictory site of linguistic and bodily interactions where various discourses about gender, tradition and values are constructed and experienced through women's daily practices. The evocative forces of the marketplace in Mrīrīda's case are very telling. It stands as an oratorical space wherein the expressive forms and beliefs of the traditional realm are revealed and wherein this poet is in constant contestation of social categories and continuous challenge of gender boundaries.

This is also true for some Moroccan *Amazīgh* women who are seen as agents of oral tradition wherein various discourses about gendered spaces and traditional formulations of social authority are negotiated and reconstructed. Within this vein, the case of Mrīrīda ūt-‘Atiq is significant. She managed to impose the authority of her physical presence and enforce her voice in both the public and private spheres through a type of oral texts she created and sung during her nomadic journeys across the various spaces she had physically and imaginatively visited. Curiously, the presence and contributions of Moroccan *Amazīgh* women in oral tradition have largely been unrecognized in historical writings, and their physical and epistemological experiences have also been scarcely tracked in the academic groves. This is a lacuna that this piece hopes to fill through the interrogation of “history from below” as Rosalind O’Hanlon has put it. The endeavor to rescue the voices and stories of these women from oblivion and restore the left-out fragments of history is of critical importance; a process that “turns an absence into a presence and peoples vacant spaces with figures” (O’Hanlon 2000, 79).

1 Gendering Colonialism and Colonizing Gender: Reflections on Mrīrīda n’ait ‘Atiq’s Encounter with René Euloge

Despite ūt-‘Atiq’s contribution in the remapping the Moroccan *Amazīgh* cultural landscape through her poetry, she has, nonetheless, gone unnoticed, and her influences have been put into oblivion by the annals of national historiographical writings. Her achievements have been weakened and neglected because of her illiteracy and lack of intellectual pedigree, and because of her ethnic and gender affiliations as an *Amazīgh* woman. As stated earlier, Euloge had the chance to know and meet ūt-‘Atiq on various occasions and for several months. The encounter reminds us of Flaubert and his Egyptian courtesan, kuchuck Hanem. Stimulated by a set of romantic images which had fueled up his imagination about oriental fantasies and the Other’s unexplored geographies, like Flaubert himself, Euloge moved to one of the most marginalized zones of the country to experience his European “collective day-dream of the Orient” (Said 1979, 52). During the encounter with his courtesan, he states that

en l’écoutant chanter monts et vallées, avec la vie quotidienne au village, ses drames familiaux, ses joies et ses peines, je me persuadais qu’elle atteignait à ces moments-là la plus haute élévation de pensées et de sentiments et, qu’on paroxysme de ses envolées lyriques, une sorte d’ivresse la transfigurait en l’allégeant des mières terrestres. (Euloge 1986, 14)

In listening to her singing about the mountains and valleys, about the village's everyday life, her family's dramas, her joys and sorrows, I was almost convinced that at that unmatched moment she had reached the highest rise in thoughts and feelings and, in the outburst of her lyrics, a kind of intoxication transfigures her by alleviating her from worldly miseries.

In here, Euloge is keen in grasping the stock motifs and concerns of Mrīrīda's poetic experience at large. He admits that the creative potential of his poetess inscribes her within a highly refined poetic art and hints, albeit implicitly, to her linguistic ability in crafting and translating everyday tribal issues into sophisticated poetic diction. The powerful meanings that her poems/songs resonate with elevate her from earthly physical spaces up to a subliminal universe wherein she becomes possessed by the atemporal spell of the words she uses. Euloge's perceptive impressions attest to the artistic flair his courtesan is endowed with and refers to how she polishes up her words to give a more captivating veneer to the overall thematic concerns she explores. Mrīrīda handles the trepidations and tribulations of the village life to give way to a poetic sagacity about her own physical and epistemological nomadic experiences. Her poems, accordingly, are astute revelations about individual and collective experiences wherein the roughness of the mountains and valleys is tamed by the graceful sensitiveness of the poetess's feelings. These poetic motifs construct the textual fabric of her individual narrative as the case with the translated poem that I discovered while writing this piece, titled "The Brooch" and which talks aborted desires due to expatriation in a foreign land:

Grandmother, grandmother,
Since he left I think only of him
And I see him everywhere.
He gave me a fine silver brooch
And when I adjust my haik on my shoulders,
When I hook its flap over my breasts,
When I take it off at night to sleep,
It's not the brooch I see, but him!
My granddaughter, throw away the brooch.
You will forget him and your suffering will be over.
Grandmother, it's over a month since I threw it away,
But it cut deeply into my hand.
I can't take my eyes off the red scar:
When I wash, when I spin, when I drink -
And my thoughts are still of him!
My granddaughter, may Allah heal your pain!
The scar is not on your hand, but in your heart.
(Joris, Tenghour 2012, 514-15)

Coming back to Mrīrīda-Euloge unremitting connection, Mrīrīda's interest in Euloge, if there might be any, given her ways of understanding life in a bohemian-like manner, complicates the discourse of encounter of the French male visitor with his Oriental subject. It is true that the encounter occurred under conditions of asymmetrical power relations; the French visitor is white, knowledgeable, civilized and rich enough with a civilizing mission in mind, whereas his courtesan is a supposedly submissive Oriental object available for the Western male's fantasies and sexual promiscuity. Yet what we discover is that Mrīrīda's powerful presence through her pristine poetic imagination in manipulating human experiences and turning them into refined aesthetic constructions and symbolic poetic imageries fluidly dissolves and disbands Euloge's position as an Orientalist ethnographer.

Euloge has not felt at any moment the need to describe how far she was oriental; and this is quite apparent all the way through his preface to ūt-'Atiq's collection of poems. Furthermore, he seems to have overlooked, and this is one of the constraints of translation, the real meanings behind Mrīrīda's poems and songs. He might not have paid attention to one of her poems where she vehemently condemns his presence, and by extension the colonizer's, and implores him to take a quick leave back home (see the extract below). In here, it is clear that Euloge's courtesan was aware of the dangers of colonial encroachment and her involvement in resisting its premises is quite evident. To my own understanding, the founding figure of this feminist anti-colonial awareness in Morocco is accredited to Malika al-Fassi's writings (1919-2007), one of the urban elites that has found its way through the annals of Moroccan official history on national struggle against colonial presence. Moroccan history is yet replete with absences of figures from the unfathomable Morocco that are condemned to remain silenced including ūt-'Atiq herself, whose poetry that has violently been neglected on aesthetic, ethnic and elitist grounds, articulated an early feminist consciousness about national integrity and liberation. Despite the significance of these figures' contributions to the making of Moroccan history, contemporary scholarship on this critical topic is still lagging behind, producing more absences where there should be a serious engagement with little narratives about the ironies of history. This is an issue that begs for future research investigation.

In a satirical tone where images speak about themselves in clearer terms, and with depth of meanings through impressive and allegorical overtones that are both liberating and insightful, Mrīrīda says:

For you, you, it will be better for you
If you go back to your country
I know that you frequently have to swap your girlfriends
You accept any key
Because you are like an old wooden lock. (Euloge 1986, 75)

Euloge is relegated to a passive, if not frail, position by the poetess's authority and her sense of freedom to reveal her rebellious voice and vibrant passion. We feel that Euloge's voice is totally confiscated and repossessed by the spontaneous fascinating poetic skills of his courtesan, and by her instinctive drive in translating her individual and communal anxieties into poetic expression through the creative linguistic structures of her native language. The importance of looking at gender when exploring issues about coloniality and colonial difference is significant as it provides the possibility of delineating alternative forms of Orientalism (Porter 1994, 150-4). The orientalist template of encounter upon which colonial difference is constructed in the case of Euloge and his Moroccan courtesan becomes vulnerable to reversal.

The encounter of Euloge with Mrīrida entails a discussion on colonial contacts through the manipulative forces of Orientalist discourse. In his *Orientalism*, and with the Foucauldian notion of discourse in mind, Edward Said defines orientalism as a "western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient" (1979, 3). He also tells us that "the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies" (118). The colonial encounter in the Maghreb was incontestably a sexual encounter as well. Colonies, viewed as contradictory terrains where "cultures, sexualities, bodies, fantasies, and politics meet and emerge more complex for having encountered one another" (Mullins 2002, x), often were seen as sanctuary sites providing sexual prospects and bodily pleasures away from the authoritarian sexual codes that regulated individual relations in the metropolitan centers.

Following Edward Said's critique of *Orientalism*, scholars from a wide range of disciplines explored the ways in which other people and places have been constructed in colonial imagination (Aijaz 1992; Alloula 1986; Kabbani 1986). The traditional image of the Middle Eastern and North African woman that has dominated Western imagination for long is that of an oppressed, sexualized, eroticized and exoticized object. She is controlled by patriarchal and religious institutions, and often made limitlessly available for the Western male's sexual gaze. Such model of the Oriental woman as a 'non-isolated instance', which discursively hammers on Mrīrida's case and disturbs and disorients the template of Orientalist discourse, is clearly delineated in Gustave Flaubert's encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, the late nineteenth-century famous Egyptian courtesan and dancer.

The discursive prowess of both cases lies in the fact that they express the gendered shifts in Orientalist constructs. They reveal ideas about images of European stereotypical discourse about Oriental sexuality and the preconceptions associated with cultural, sexual and textual encounters between the male visitor and the oriental



Mririda út-Atiq 1940

Figure 1 Mririda út-Atiq in the 1940s, the only picture available in the public domain, retrieved from Lhoussein Azergui's article "Mririda N'Ait Attik, un Destin Amazigh" (<http://neocultureamazighe.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/12/14/mririda-nait-attik-un-destin-amazigh/>), published on December 14, 2013

woman. Yet, above all, the discursive power of such representation is in the systematic association between the Oriental woman and the concept of colony, as a vulnerable land awaiting the Westerner's conquest. René Euloge and Gustave Flaubert, who were both French males speaking from a position of authority, received the Orient as a haven of exoticism wherein their heterosexual desires could be inscribed. They aimed to possess their subjects physically, control and dominate them in a situation that "stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled" (Said 1979, 6).

According to Edward Said, Flaubert's Hanem underscored a view of the Orient as a site of feminine decadence and a "seemingly unbounded sexuality" (178). She is totally possessed and controlled by the undissipated French male visitor. She "never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her" (6). In interrogating the grand narratives of colonialism, Said's *Orientalism* fails to produce an alternative formation of the Other. His theorization of the "operations of power in colonial relations leads him, in the first instance, to take insufficient account of resistance or contradiction within imperial culture itself" (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 50), and he is caught in an endless process of reinscribing the "very forms of cultural essentialism for which [he] condemns Orientalist discourse" (50). Other critics note that he places too much emphasis on the passivity of the native while not discussing, or even allowing for, the diverse ways in which indigenous people of the East have used, manipulated and constructed their own positive responses to colonialism using Orientalist conceptions (Beinorius 2003, 149-65). Said, accordingly, focuses on the epistemic transgressions of Empire rather than on the resistance of the oppressed. His model has not only been criticized for theoretical and methodological shortcomings, but also for an incisive obliteration of "the voice of the very agents he is so keen on liberating" (Bekkaoui 1998, 32).

However, this intricate case in Mrīrīda-Euloge encounters reveals various discursive manifestations that foreground the Oriental woman as a defiant subject with unbounded freedom of movement and speech. Her poems which swing back and forth in emotions of sadness and joy, indifference and compassion, incarnate an individual self in quest for self-expression, identity assertiveness, and broader horizons of nomadic creativity and physical wandering. Thus, in so doing, Mrīrīda seems to be contesting "the mainstream historical theories that regard women as passive absorbers of orders" (Sadiqi 2003, 239).⁵ Her life experience provides a genuine case about the understanding of Oriental women beyond the confinements of tradition, and beyond the discursive constructions of Orientalist legacy whereby Moroccan women's experiences seem to be narrated within a homogeneous discourse of various social and sexual constructs that are endorsed and complicated by the mainstream narratives of colonial history.

⁵ Sadiqi refers to a seventeenth-century poem titled *rebbi Tlebt lik!* (I ask you God) by an unknown female poet in her discussion of the dynamics of gender and language in Moroccan oral poetry. According to her, the poem explores the desire that women would not dare to express publicly: "ruling over men and being free to entertain lovers. The imploration of God, as the supreme power, expresses the poet's despair in getting power and freedom from men" (Sadiqi 2003, 239).

If Flaubert's Hanem was "no more than a [sex] machine", and to a certain extent "less a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity" (Said 1979, 187) – a fact that denies her action and voice –, Euloge's Mrīrīda articulates a counter-discourse of subversion that challenges the cultural and ideological hegemony of the Western male's gaze and its discourse on identity and difference. She resists the constricting grid of representation by being the 'master' of her own narrative as an Oriental woman endowed with substantial feminine potential wherein her agency is affirmed and her pristine poetry remains an intrigue to the French visitor. She is made visible through her poems and not through Euloge's representational categorizations of how she was oriental. She has managed to speak about herself and express her identity and belongingness through her intuitive power of creativity and expressive forces of poetic reflection. If in Orientalist writings Oriental women are more often than not "the creatures of a male power-fantasy" as they are "more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (207), Mrīrīda's encounter with Euloge reverses this template and inscribes her within a much more dynamic discourse of resistance wherein the French instructor has been primarily concerned with her unimaginable ability in weaving her poems without being fully interested in describing her as an oriental type to Western readers.

In other words, Mrīrīda's power detectable enough through the choice of words and poignant thematic concerns for her poems disengages the instructor's male's gaze and underscores the reversal of the Orientalist stereotypes about Oriental women. The deeply-rooted stereotype of Muslim women confined by the patriarchal orders of oppression, wherein their voice is ultimately denied while waiting for the Western male to bring salvation, is totally undermined. Sexual liaison through physical pleasure and the unlimited sensuality in Kuchuk Hanem's case with Flaubert contrasts in meaningful terms the intrigues of poetry crafting and poetic crudeness of Mrīrīda in Euloge's case of encounter with the Atlas courtesan. This situation turns back the old specter of Orientalist ideology on itself and offers an interesting perspective as to how gendered encounters in the historical context of French colonialism on Morocco have been considered and rethought.

Just like Kuchuk Hanem in the case of Flaubert, Mrīrīda, who was unable to adjust herself to the *taqāt*'s mysteries wherein she coupled physical satisfaction with dignity and poetic sensibility, had to disappear in order to be resurrected more completely. After the Second World War, re-driven by an immortal Orientalist desire in the revival of his exotic experience after a momentary break, Euloge came back to look for the courtesan he would never be able to see again. As he himself tells us,

En 1954, le hasard, dernier et premier des dieux, me permet de rencontrer près d'Ait Ouariat chez les Ait Bou Ou Guemmêz, une montagnarde que les années avaient sévèrement marquée, mais robuste et souriante... Une quinzaine d'année auparavant, au marché d'Azilal, elle avait été l'une des collègues de Mririda, la "tanedamt", la poétesse "qui choisissait ses amants"... la courtisane retirée des affaires m'apprit que Mririda avait quitté le souk hospitalier pour vivre dans une intimité sans partage avec G., adjudant des Goumiers. Plus tard elle aurait eu maille à partir avec un Caid de la région et le sergent S. l'emmena alors au poste de *Taguelft* et en fit sa compagne pour quelque temps (Euloge 1986, 15)

In 1954, the first and last chance from the Gods allowed me to meet closer to the Ait Ouariat at the Ait Bou Ou Guemmêz, a healthy and smiling mountainous woman, although she had severely aged. About fifteen years before, in the Azilal market, she had been one of Mririda's colleagues, the "tanedamt", the poetess "who chose her lovers"... this courtesan who backed out of the business told me that Mririda had left the generous souk to live in unshared intimacy with G., an assistant of the Goumiers. Later she refused to yield to a Caid from the region, and Sergeant S. took her to the *Taguelft* post and dated her for some time.

As this extract delineates, in his relentless quest for his lost courtesan, and upon an unforeseen encounter he struck with an old woman from the *Ait Ouariât* in the *Ait Bouquemâz* tribes in 1954, Euloge tells us that this "retired courtesan" knew Mririda as they both shared the mysteries of *taqât* and those of its goers. She was a colleague to *tandâmt*, the poetess, "who was keen in choosing her lovers". She told him that she left Azilal to live in "unshared intimacy" with a local chief army officer. Later, as she refused to yield to the lustful desires of an authority officer, a sergeant major had to take her to an army garrison in *Taguelft*, a village in the upper parts of the nearby mountains, and dated her for some time before she completely vanished.

Mririda's poems that are available to us are René Euloge's French translated versions. Many of her verses and sung poetry in their original *Amazigh* language are now lost to us. If there remains any, they are only fragmented pieces from various poems, or at worst full poems with incomplete structure. This is due to the forces of age over the people who lived with this distinguished artist and learnt her songs/poems, and to the workings of time over the nature of the transmission of an oral genre that is vulnerable to the dangers of extinction.

The translations offered by Euloge's *Les Chants de la Tassaout* to more than a hundred poems cannot capture by any means the intricate images and metaphors the poems purport to convey in their orig-

inal language. Euloge himself tells us in the preface to his book that “the most faithful translation fails to fully restore the flavor of such poetry”. He is definitely right. Furthermore, it is certain that the re-translation of Mrīrīda into English would distort, disorient and deform her work further, and do harm to the poetess’s intended meanings; another injustice that runs through the discursive implications of cultural transfer and the relocation of languages transmitted through orality in the case of Moroccan women’s little known narratives.

In spite of all the constraining complications that generally surround literary translations, and particularly the translation of vernacular language, *Amazīgh* poetry as a case in point, Euloge’s translated collection of poems has at least saved Mrīrīda from oblivion and has perceptibly, albeit to some extent, succeeded in bringing out the concealed meanings in the aesthetic fabric of her texts. Mrīrīda has addressed various themes in her songs, mainly the body and its shifting discourses as a woman’s concern in a tribal context, the representation of the woman and the images such (mis)representation perpetuates in a male-oriented society, and the human relations that emanate from gendered spaces in the *Amazīgh* context. Through various poems, we witness the poetic interplay of the body with the colonial experience and the counteracting resistance that emerges in the precincts of Mrīrīda’s text. Through one of the translations of her poems titled “The Bad Lover” she states,

Leave me, soldier without sense or manner!
I can see that you are full of contempt,
Your hand raised, insults on your lips,
Now that you have had what you want from me.
And you leave, calling me a dog!
Sated with my pleasures,
You’d have me blush for my trade,
But you, were you ashamed
When you pushed gently at my door,
Up like a bull? [...]
Guest of mine for the moment, my slave,
Don’t you feel my disgust and hate?
One of these days
The memory of tonight will bring you back to me
Conquered and submissive again.
You’ll leave your pride at the door
And I’ll laugh at your glances and your wishes.
(Joris, Tenghour 2012, 513)

Mrīrīda composes as she sings and sings as she composes; stringing her words and tying up her poetry pieces together with powerful expressions and images borrowed from everyday experiences, as if she

were stringing the *Amazīgh lūbān* laces⁶ (amber stones) to put around her neck and ornate her body. Her nimbleness and skillful imagination in assembling words and composing/singing through metaphors, simile and satire have conspicuously singularized this poet's artistic creativity; thus, acquiring the seal of a *tanẓāmt* (professional poetess). In her poems, she deals with the exasperating pains of love, unhappiness and departures that yield melancholic poetic aura; real and imagined situations contemplative of issues about her individual and collective experiences such as separation and loneliness, unreciprocated love, gossiping, betrayal, death, etc. Part of her poetry, related to or induced by ardent sexual desires, involves well-knitted motifs and images that are stringed in a romantic fashion as is the case her "What do you want?":

What do you want, girl of the village below?
To marry me, is that what you are thinking?
It is said that you are hardly unfriendly,
and I too dream of holding you.
Here is my only piece of silver.
The peddler will sell you perfumed soap,
a comb, a mirror - what do I know?
But by my neck, I'll bring you a red scarf
from Demnat if you want.
What do I need, son of the high pasture,
with a piece of silver or silk scarf?
Then tell me what you want -
to marry me? What do you think,
pretty girl of the village below?
You make me laugh, son of the high pasture.
I don't care about money or a scarf,
and even less about marriage.
I expect from you
what you expect from me.
And satisfied, we will leave each other.
What I want, strong son of the high pasture,
what I want is the shelter of this bush,
where you will lie on my breasts - which I hold
out to you - and in a moment
happiness sweeter than milk,
while my eyes lose themselves in the sky. (514)

6 See Mrīrīda's picture; she is wearing one around her neck.

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