

Strategic Essentialism of Badra Figure: Strategy to Face Arabic Subalternity in Novel *L'Amande* By Nedjma

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Abstract. The construction of gender differences between men and women both patriarchal and traditionally is not an established construction. This phenomenon is a theme that is quite often discussed in the literary world. One novel that criticizes patriarchal culture, especially in Arab society, is the novel *L'Amande* by Nedjma. This novel tells how the experiences of subaltern experienced by the Badra character later influenced her character from time to time. This study uses the refer method to collect the verbal data which aims to examine how the form of subaltern that occurs in Badra figures in the *L'Amande* novel by Nedjma and the strategies carried out by these figures to deal with subalternity that occurs in Arab society. The problems that arise in this study are further understood with the concept of subaltern and essential strategies of Gayatri Spivak.

Keywords: Arabic, Strategy Essentialism, Subaltern

1 Introduction

Gender phenomena are always interesting to study from various points of view. In a patriarchal culture, gender is emphasized as a social and cultural construction rather than a biological essence. The construction of gender differences between men and women both patriarchal and traditionally is not an established construction. This phenomenon is a theme that is quite often discussed in the literary world. Literary works are the result of the imagination created by the authors. As Wellek and Warren have stated, the literary work is an innovative, imaginative and fictional work, and then the reference to literary works is not the real world, but the world of fiction and imagination [1]. Nevertheless, the author's imagination can be formed because of his psychological side and the environment that influences his thinking. Ricœur states that literary works inevitably come out of real conditions [1]. This proves that the environment in which the author lives, plays an important role in the creation of a literary work. Through literary works, writers attempt to convey the truth as well as the historical truth. This literary function can be seen in works that constitute a social documentation. Thus, authors sometimes use literary works to criticize social life, for example literary works criticizing social norms or rules in society [2].

One type of literary work is a novel, although the story in a novel is fictional, the author may be inspired by the actual situation around him. This is why it's said that literature is a reflection of society [1]. For example, the culture of a patriarchal society. It is undeniable that in a patriarchal Islamic society, a person born with a female sex will be automatically linked to the culture that has taken root in that society. The patriarchal culture is not only detrimental to

women, but also to men who must be ideal leaders, who are not emotional and who must have sons as heirs. One novel that criticizes patriarchal culture, especially in Arab society, is the novel *L'Amande* (The Almond) by Nedjma and for that reason it can be assumed as one of the things that influenced Nedjma in writing this work. Arab society is known as a society that upholds patriarchal culture which has certain restrictions for women. The Arab world, especially Morocco that becomes the setting of the novel is a former French colony. Despite being influenced by colonial culture, the social life there still adheres to a patriarchal culture that oppresses either men or women till the present day. An international journal titled "*Sexual Discourse, Erotica in Today's Arabic Literature: The Case of Nedjma's Translated Almond*" aims to discover sexual discourse in Arabic literature using the novel *L'Amande* by Nedjma. Another objective is to explore the erotic fiction in the novel and to show the Islamic vision of sexuality. In other words, this research explains how Nedjma describes the position of women in religious beliefs and cultural norms in Moroccan society in particular and Arab society in general. The research uses the methodology of ethno linguistic theory to analyze the statements of characters and their relationships with certain social cultures [3]. The difference of this research therefore lies in the formal object used, namely the ethno linguistic theory.

This novel also tells how the experiences of subaltern experienced by the Badra character later influenced her character from time to time. Not only does it narrate the subalternity experienced by the Badra figure, but also her sexual life which could be a form of resistance carried out by Badra in the frame of negotiation. In this novel, Nedjma described Badra's sexual life which was still considered to be very taboo and something that should not be discussed in Arab society. This article aims to examine how the form of subaltern that occurs in Badra figures in the *L'Amande* novel by Nedjma and the strategies carried out by these figures to deal with *subalternity* that occurs in Arab society. The problems that arise in this study are further understood with the concept of subaltern and essential strategies of Gayatri Spivak.

2 Research Method

The method used in this research is the descriptive analytical method. This method is done by describing the facts that are followed by the analysis. In this research, the researcher collects the data from several sources. The researcher study quote, observe theories, books and other information to collect secondary data to deepen understanding of the theory. After these steps, the researcher read and observes the subject of the research and underlines the sentences that correspond to the issues found in the novel. Then, the theory applied with the research method chosen to find and explain the social and cultural condition of Moroccan society, the forms of subalternities and resistances of the characters in the novel *L'Amande de Nedjma*.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Women and Subalternity

3.1.1 Women in Moroccan Culture and Social Life

As mentioned previously, Morocco is the main setting of the novel, especially the city of Tangier and a rural village called Imchouk. Morocco is a country located in North Africa. This

country is quite unique, because there is an acculturation of several tribes and cultures mainly Berbers, Arabic and Europe. This is due to the history of Morocco far before the independence. The Berbers are indigenous people of East Africa, and the distribution of the population reaches North Africa, including Morocco. In fact, at the present day the largest Berber tribe population is found in Morocco [4] [5].

For almost half a century, Morocco was colonized by several European countries, especially France. The occupation had a huge influence, especially on the social and cultural fields of Moroccan society until its independence on April 7, 1956. Although this country is influenced by colonial culture, Morocco still upholds conservative Islamic values that are very patriarchal. The consequence is that the women in the country experience double oppression, which is colonized by the colonial state and the indigenous people around them. Even when Morocco gained its independence, women still felt the same way.

In Islamic law, Moroccan women get three main fundamental rights, which are; 1) the right to life, 2) the right to be honored and respected as a mother and 3) the right to have a business or work [6]. Even though the law stipulates these rights, women are still far from freedom, especially in their relationship with men. Even before independence, women had to live in a closed place called the *harem*; which is a closed place for the wives of men and minors. They only go out to read the Koran, and to leave the place, they also have to ask permission from the husbands. Living in a *harem* is like living in a prison because the women cannot do what they want. However, for the conservative community of Morocco, the *harem* is considered to protect the virtue and dignity of women [6].

Right after independence, Moroccan women get a taste of freedom. They can go to school and get proper education which is not only focused on religious teachings. Starting in these years, the *harem* system also began to be abandoned. Various debates and discussions related to women's rights were increasingly echoed, until the peak in 2004 when King Muhammad VI finally revised their family law (*Mudawana*). Some of the revisions are; 1) change in legal age of marriage, from 15 years to 18 years 2) women can sign their own marriage contract without their father's approval. 3) a husband can have more than one wife as long as the first wife permits this and 4) the wife can file for divorce beforehand even though there must still be an agreement with the husband, unless the divorce is caused by domestic violence. This new law has certainly brought significant changes to women's freedom in Morocco [5].

Even so, the gap between the written law and practice is still very large. Some people who are still conservative assume that the new *Mudawana* is a disgrace [7], and it omits the values that have been passed on by their ancestors. Child marriages are still common, sexual harassment still takes place everywhere and rape in marriage is still not recognizable [8].

One of the settings in the *L'Amande* novel is the village of Imchouk. This village is fictional since it only exists in the novel and does not exist in the real world. However, in the novel, Imchouk is described as a rural village located in Southern Morocco, close to the desert (L'A: 20). Since it's located very far away from the city, patriarchal culture is more upheld by the people there. Forced marriages still occur frequently, including Badra, whose family forced her to marry when she was only 17 years old. She was forced to marry Hmed, a wealthy 40-year-old man who had been married several times (L'A: 29).

In patriarchal culture, having a son is very desirable, especially for men who are looking for heirs to their wealth. This is the reason Hmed married Badra, it was to get offspring from her. He would celebrate it by throwing large parties all over Imchouk, bragging and telling himself that he has succeeded in continuing the bloodline. He was never truly sincerely in love with Badra (L'A: 31).

Forced marriages are linked to the opinions from family and the people around, that keep saying that continuing education is useless for women. Marrying a rich man is considered more meaningful for women rather than continuing to higher education. They are also worried that if a woman, in this case Badra, continues her education, she will then start chasing after men and not the other way around (L'A: 30). These opinions can still be found today, especially in patriarchal societies such as Morocco. Underage children are forced to marry men whose age is much higher, and the worst thing is some families do this due to economic demands [9].

In Moroccan culture, a woman who is getting married is treated very "special" by her family. She is not allowed to go outside the house so that her skin remains white. She is also given plenty of delicious food. In the novel, Badra feels like a sheep that will be sacrificed on the religious holiday of Eid (L'A: 30). The role of the family does not stop there, someone is also given the task to check Badra's virginity before marrying Hmed. On the first night of the wedding, they asked Badra to put a cloth under her buttocks so that the blood coming out of Badra's vagina would be visible (L'A: 110). From these phenomena, we can see that women's virginity is highly praised by patriarchal culture. A woman who is not a virgin is considered impure and worthless.

During the five years of marriage, Badra carried out her duties as a 'good wife' to her husband Hmed. She served him every night except when she got her period. Hmed never cared about Badra's satisfaction, so the only thing Badra felt was pain and hatred every time they made 'love' (L'A: 37). In the real world, there are still many men who assume that the duty of a wife is to satisfy the desires of the husband, no matter if the wife is not in the mood to do so. In fact, this can be considered as rape in a marriage, especially if the wife feels constant pain.

Finally, Badra decided to flee to Tangier. Unlike Imchouk, Tangier is not fictional, and this city is one of the most important cities in Morocco. The city is strongly influenced by colonial culture, because of its status in colonial times when it was an international zone [10]. Even so, as explained earlier, Tangier also still upholds a patriarchal culture which limits the movement of women. In the novel *L'Amande*, Tangier is described as a city where there are many cafes everywhere that had men wearing *djellaba* and dressed in western clothes sitting on the terrace (L'A: 15). Due to the culture that does not allow women to go out alone or without the permission of their husbands, cafes in Morocco also end up only containing men. Women are considered bad if they go to a cafe and will get scorn from the community [6]. In addition, Badra assumed that although Tangier impressed her with its various advances, the men there seemed to have exactly the same traits as she had seen in her natal village, Imchouk (L'A: 16). Badra considered that men in both Imchouk and Tangier have the same nature. They are arrogant and ordering women makes them feel more masculine and virile (L'A: 30).

With the progress of civilization of the city that is so significant, patriarchal culture does not lose its place to still exist. Badra's lover, Driss also shows patriarchal behavior. Even though he is a doctor graduated from school in Europe (L'A: 71), he still treated Badra as an object that should not be owned by anyone but himself (L'A: 208). In fact, Driss was also unfaithful to Badra and continued to play with other women. Nedjma, the author of the novel described Driss as someone who was sexually independent but not socially independent [11]. He was able to satisfy Badra, but he did not treat her equally. As an ex-wife who never had sexual satisfaction before, this is certainly very painful for Badra. She was happy to be with Driss because he knew how to satisfy her sexual desires, but she was hurt when she saw Driss making love with other women before her own eyes. She's a subject that has the full control of her body, yet at the same time she's an object to her own lover that treats her unfaithfully.

3.1.2 Subalternity of women in Moroccan Culture and Social Life

The use of the term “subaltern” was first explained by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher regarding peasants in Italian villages. This term describes the subordinate group, especially the peasants of the southern Italian villages, who had limited social and political awareness and weak political unity [12]. After that, Spivak developed this concept that was inspired by Gramsci's hegemonic conception.

Guha explained that the term has been adapted to post-colonial studies from the work of the Subaltern Studies group of historians, who aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies [13]. It is used in Subaltern Studies ‘as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way’.

In her studies, Gayatri Spivak uses the term ‘subaltern’ for a more specific meaning. The subaltern class is a group of marginal (Eastern) non-elite groups that are pushed by cultural lines and knowledge that produce colonial subjects. Spivak famously focuses on surrounding the philosophical, cultural, political, and economic heritage of European colonialism in their colonized societies. Spivak initially emphasized subaltern in female subjects. In her essay, she wrote that women cannot speak, and as the second sex they tend to be the victims of patriarchy. Furthermore, Spivak says that; ‘in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow’ [13]. Through this quote, Spivak wants to explain that women in the colonial era experienced persistent oppression, both from the invaders in their country and by people who adhered to patriarchal cultural systems, especially men.

Spivak has concluded that the subalterns cannot speak [14]. This is not literally, it means that subalterns, especially the colonized women don't have the conceptual language so they can speak because there are no people (in this case, men) to listen to them. In the colonized society, there is no position of subject that would allow women to prove their existence. The patriarchal condition treats women always as the second sex. This idea resembles Edward Said's Orientalist theory, in which the Occident sees the Oriental as *the Other* that can be exploited and colonized.

Subalternity of women, especially in Moroccan society does not only position them in the political sphere as a "means of reproduction" because they have to bear children, but also becomes a subaltern in the social sphere because they cannot choose and must do what is considered socially stable. In patriarchal culture, a woman is considered to be successful when she gets married with a wealthy man and has children. The social reward is even higher when the woman can bear a son, since a son is considered as the heir of the family. In the case of Badra, she was forced to get married to a wealthy notary called Hmed, a man in his forties that dreams of having a son. Badra was just seventeen, but she was forced to fit in the society and give up her dreams.

Within their three years of marriage, Badra didn't get pregnant and the rumour started to spread around. They did anything to get her pregnant; forced her to drink brews of bitter herbs and sips of marriage, to straddle the tombs of saints, to wear amulets that had been scribbled on by *fqihs* (charlatan) and many other things. (L'A: 41). They didn't realize that the husband could be the source of their problem of being unable to have a child. Instead, they put all of the blame to the woman, in this case Badra.

Besides her husband, she was also mistreated by her mother and sister-in-law because she couldn't get pregnant. Badra occasionally got mocked that her vagina is just like sieve that doesn't hold any semen. They also mocked her appearance, that her being ugly is the reason why Hmed doesn't want to make love with her anymore. (L'A: 43). All of these show her

position as a woman and a subaltern in patriarchal society. She is oppressed by other women who have a higher position than her. And as a subaltern, she cannot speak. She cannot tell her feelings as there is no one to listen to her.

3.2 Strategic Essentialism as a Form of Resistance

In Spivak's concept, the people who are considered as subaltern are a group of marginal (Orient), non-elite groups that are pushed by cultural lines and knowledge that produce colonial subjects. This includes women, especially those who live in the third world countries that used to be colonized by European countries for a long time. Although Spivak has reached the conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak, it doesn't mean that they cannot do anything to fight subalternity. Spivak offers what she calls "strategic essentialism". It exists to facilitate the subalterns to be able to communicate, in order to be noticed, heard and understood. Strategic essentialism exists as if to make the subalterns voices be more easily understood and accepted by the public.

Spivak considers that subject is not something that exists by itself, not a whole entity, but it's decentralized so that identity is not something essential, but the result of a discursive construction, or in terms of Spivak it's called as "rupture". However, essentialism is not entirely negative for resistance. Because the subject is decentralized, identity becomes something that can be negotiated. Essentialism which is constructed on the basis of negotiations and political and ideological forces that are positive for resistance is called strategic essentialism [15]. Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism clearly explores ways that gender subjectivity can be mobilized as part of political strategy [12]. In this way, her ideas make a major contribution to the subject of women's formation.

Spivak's thoughts about strategic essentialism are clearly an attempt to develop more orderly thoughts about the representation of social groups that are relatively weakened such as women, colonized people or the proletariat. In an interview with Ellen Rooney, Spivak said that if someone thinks of a strategy, that person must look at where groups of people or movements are situated when someone makes claims in favor of or against essentialism. Strategy for one situation: Strategy is not a theory [12].

The author of the novel *L'Amande* herself shows the behavior of strategic essentialism to talk about what is taboo in the Arab world. She chose to use pseudonym name and to write her novel in French to have more freedom. She was afraid that her book would not have been published if she wrote it in her mother tongue, Arab language [11].

Through Badra, she tries to criticize the patriarchal culture that oppresses women. As the main character in the novel, Badra also shows the behavior of strategic essentialism as a resistance to the subalternity that she experienced. She tends to "negotiate" to deal with these pressures and does not fight back with violence. She flew away from Imchouk to Tangier, which she thought would allow her to have more freedom (L'A: 11). She started to love the city despite the fact that the men are almost the same as those in Imchouk. The difference is that she could do anything she wanted rather than just being at home and a wife to a man she never loved.

After meeting the European-educated doctor Driss, and discovering sexual pleasures from him, she decided to become a prostitute. She controlled with whom she would spend the night, not the other way around. She used her clients to satisfy her, they funded her to travel the world and bought her expensive gifts (L'A: 214). In Imchouk, as a subaltern that got lots of oppressions, she would not have been able to do any of this. But in Tangier, many men begged to sleep with her. When they thought they were the masters of her body, they were nothing but its tools to satisfy Badra's sexual desire. In these ways, Badra is a subject that has committed

what is called strategic essentialism. She used to be subaltern, but she chose to fight back, not in a radical way but in a negotiating way which led her to be the subject of her own life.

4 Conclusion

The women in Arab culture are always placed in a position of subaltern. In this position, not only do they become the second sex in a patriarchal culture, but they are also treated as others in social and cultural life. This happens even between the relations of women who are also oppressed with who have a higher level of social class. This differs from what the women in Western countries and the women in Third World countries fight for. Although they are in the position of subaltern, it does not mean that they cannot fight for their justice. They always have strategies to fight for their identity as an essential subject. Those strategies can also take the form of resistance that is reached through negotiations.

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