

## The Politics of Cultural Identity and cultural Auto-criticism in Tahar Ben Jelloun's L'Enfant de Sable

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### Abstract

The European invasion of what would be known as its peripheries was deeply rooted in the desire to conquer other people and exploit other territories. Basically, the conquerors aim at gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas. In order to justify its exploitative endeavor, any colonial enterprise tries to make the subjugators believe that the colonizer is the bearer of progress, enlightenment, and other supposedly universal liberal value in the colonized countries. 'Nobel mission' is the well known phrase which is used heavily in this context. A panoramic view of the colonial discourse would definitely reveal that while the west and its cultural practices are conceived to be the norm/standard, the non-white and the formerly subordinated cultures are constructed as its antithesis, primitive and backward. The goal of this article is to shed light on the politics of identity both as concept and in its relation to the postcolonial world. Generally the aim is to identify this concept before proceeding to highlight how both the colonialist and the nativist approaches to it are obviously tendentious and ideologically moved. A discussion of the importance of cultural auto-criticism as carried out in Tahar Ben Jelloun' Novel about the status of women in Morocco will bring the article full circled.

**Keywords:** Cultural identity; Postcolonial literature; colonial discourse; cultural ambivalence; Cultural syncretism; multiculturalism

## Introduction

Western cultural imperialism at the expense of other territories and cultures marked episodes of violent encounters between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ and between disparate cultures. These cultural clashes resulted mainly from the tendency of colonial explorers to distort and oftentimes deny the existence of the Other’s culture. Indigenous cultures were portrayed as backward and savage in order to legitimize the imposition of their colonial counterparts. These ideologically inspired depictions of the previously colonized ‘Other’ have given birth to a distorted image of their cultural identity. The questions that arise now in the postcolonial world are as follows: what constitutes the most effective means to readjust this distorted identity? How are postcolonial subjects to reconstruct their cultural identities without falling into the trap of essentialism?

In fact the above are just two of the many questions facing post –colonial critics and intellectuals. Some Arab critics and writers’ still enquire about ways to reinstate the Others’ historically marginalized identity and how to revalorize the previously subordinated Arab in a world ever dominated by western white ‘Self’. In *L’idéologie Arab Contemporaine* Abdulla Laroui (1967), a Moroccan philosopher, asks “who is the ‘other’ and who am I? “ By the late 1970s Khatibi (1977) reiterated the same question in *La Double critique liberation* when he wondered “which occident is it about? Which occident is opposed to ourselves? Who are we ourselves?” (Translation mine; 137)

At the heart of all the above questions lie the problematic issues of the other marginalized identity and ways to revalorize the previously subordinated Arab ‘other’ in a world ever dominated by western white ‘Self’. These questions have triggered off different reactions from different critics in the post colonial societies. There are those who believe that the persistent western hegemony is most likely to devastate the ‘Other’ and his culture, hence the emergence of Islamized movements and ‘Negritude Movements,’ among others, all of which represent what is referred to in this article as Nativism. Others like Wole Soyinka, Wilson Harris and Edward Said, conversely, underline the need to avert extreme angles of conceptualizing the kind of relationship to be established between the West and its former colonies. While admitting the need to resist western hegemony, they equally emphasize the crucial role of scrutinizing native cultures and do some kind of auto-criticism because “in some respects” as Amílcar Cabral argues, “native culture is very much a source of obstacles and difficulties, erroneous conceptions of reality”(78)

This second view is advocated by the proponents of cultural syncretism. A syncretic view of cultural identity is an alternative paradigm that goes beyond the binary polarities underlying not only ‘Manichean’ constructions of colonialism and its practices, but also the nativist reconstructions of the postcolonial subject’s cultural identity.

## Politics of cultural identity in the post-colonial world

Before proceeding to juxtapose nativist and colonialist approaches to the Others’ cultural identity to show how they are both ideologically loaded and therefore contested, it seems initially crucial to reflect further on the notion of cultural identity itself. The latter I believe has a lot to do with imagination, not least since as Stuart Hall (1993) puts it “it is always constituted within not outside representation” (392)

Yet, before going any further, it is worth taking time to highlight how culture and identity are related in more ways than one. In his introduction to *culture and imperialism*, Edward said (1994) defines culture as “each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known

and thought” shortly afterwards “culture becomes associated with the nation or state” so that Edwards Said concludes “this differentiate us from them ... culture in this sense is a source of identity” (XIII). This definition suggests that the relation between culture and identity is a relation of cause and effect; we can hardly talk about ‘One’ identity irrespective of their cultural background. Different societies and communal groups are recognized by virtue of their differences at the cultural level. This partly explains why each and every cultural group is identified in terms of the particular culture its members produce in order to bestow meaning on their life. I say meaning because without cultures life would be nonsensical and absurd.

Cultural production in every social group depends not only on its members’ convictions and deeply rooted beliefs, but also on a considerable degree on their location in space and time. This again explains why cultural identities differ from one another and why micro-cultural identities are often found within one macro-cultural identity. The culture originating from the north of Morocco for instance is somewhat different from that in the far South or Far East but all of them are inherently related in one way or another. For these subcultures partake of the macro-cultural identity, that is called Moroccan cultural identity.

There is yet another sense in which culture and identity are related. A look at nationalist movements during the colonial era reveals that they sought to drive the colonial powers of the “peripheries” or colonies. This reflects a struggle for territorial emancipation. At a deeper level, however, it has at its heart the ultimate goal of sustaining the colonial subjects’ identity or better still independent identity. We have already seen how the latter is embodied in culture. Thus, the painstaking struggle to overthrow colonialism to regain a free nation is in fact an attempt to preserve a people’s way of life: their cultural beliefs and convictions. This is natural given that cultural freedom and independent identity entail in the first place a struggle for a free country; that cornerstone that is likely to make a meaningful debate about the construction of culture and identity possible.

Cultural identities are diachronic despite their synchronic aspects. That is, our cultural identity or “who we are” is not always the same but goes on changing all the time. Stuart Hall (1993) rightly observed that “far from being grounded in the mere “recovery” of the past... cultural identities are the points of identification which are made within the discourse of history and culture” 394). Hall suggests that a group of people’s cultural identity is not static or “once and for all”. It is rather bound to change as it is subject to an everlasting influence of such external factors as “history and, other cultures and power”. It is perhaps true to argue that nowhere is this diachronic aspect of cultural identity lucid and concrete than in the example of the American culture. It was previously dominated and declared of minor importance when it was a British colony. Now, however, it is hard to imagine anyone who would deny that it is daily gaining ground. The unprecedented expansion of the USA culture at the price of other cultural identities is conclusive evidence as to the diachronic nature of cultural identity.

Seen from this vantage, cultural identity partakes of the past, the present and the future. That is to say “who we are” is part of what we were in the past and surely will to a large degree determine what we will become in the future. Again in Stuart Hall’s (1993) words “cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all lying unchanged outside history and culture”. Nor is it a concrete entity which once lost or distorted one may fight to regain. This is then the way in which culture is diachronic. That is also perhaps the main reason that, as we shall see, explains the futility of both colonialism and Nativism; the first in its attempt to impose a monolithic culture and the second in its attempt to revive the pre-conquest cultural identities.

### The 'Other's' Cultural Identity: The Colonialist Perspective

Colonialist literature delineated a distorted image of the "Other's" cultural identity. That is hardly surprising since we know beforehand that it was almost exclusively geared to rationalize subordination and legitimize conquest. Illustrating how this cultural distortion is carried out necessitates a brief discussion of representation and how it functions ideologically. Ideological representations, in their turn, are nowhere evident than the body of literature that accompanied and fostered the imperial project of expansion, namely colonial texts or colonial discourse.

The unprecedented increase in the scale of writing about the peripheries/ former colonies on the eve or during the period of colonial enterprise is very suggestive. It constitutes a conclusive evidence to safely maintain that the colonial project relied heavily on discursive backing to justify itself. Colonialism, in other words, was not only a matter of military and political power but of text, discourse and representation as well. The latter played a key role in the whole project of colonial expansion. It was geared specifically to accomplish the twin purposes of endowing colonialism with humanitarian dimensions and constructing the natives as degenerates whose enslavement or potential extermination would sound quiet natural and justifiable. It was particularly for the latter purpose that the ex-colonized cultural identity turns out to be distorted within the narratives structures of the colonial discourse. So, colonized subjects become not only constructed as "different and others" in the colonialist literature but also grow "to see and experience themselves as others" Stuart Hall (394)

As a matter of fact, there appears to be a general agreement among post-colonial critics that all colonial texts are ideologically driven. Like Edwards said who maintained that there is no innocent text, Jan Mohamed (1995) argues that the colonial text can be read at two levels; the surface level or the 'surface-text' and a deep level or the 'sub-text'. While the former "purports to represent specific encounters with specific varieties of racial others," the latter "valorizes the superiority of the European culture (19). Biased representations are surely what make all the difference between what Jan Mohamed calls the surface-text and the sub-text.

No colonial text can claim to depict or speak about the previously colonized other objectively. All colonial representations of the 'Other' and their culture converge on valorizing the western culture and undermining that of the natives. This process of undermining is accomplished through projecting stereotyped accounts on the subordinated culture. For a stereotype is defined by Homi Bhabha as "the projection of all that the self considers negative onto the 'Other'" (Cited in *Introduction to Post Colonial Theory*," 129)

Additionally, viewed from the colonizer's perspective, the 'Other' and his culture are identified in terms inspired by groundless assumptions of racial and cultural superiority. In order to illustrate this point one needs to trace how the natives are represented within the texts of the colonial literature. It is perhaps no exaggeration to observe that they are almost invariably depicted as the opposite 'evil' of the 'angelic white man'. Bhabha reminds us that "the space of the other is always occupied by an *Idée fixe*: despot, heathen, barbarian, chaos and violence" (quoted in the introduction to post colonial theory 129). One might quiet safely add that good-for- nothing, idiot, primitives and a plethora of other unsatisfactory labels are all the stock in trade of the colonial discourse. Part of this state of affairs may be attributed to "the imaginary representation of indigenous people which, as Jan Mohamed observes, "Tends to coalesce the signifier with the signified" so that "to say native is automatically to say evil" (Ibid 19)

The natives apart, there exists ample discursive evidence to note their culture was not immune from the stigmatizing descriptions or the destructive practices of the colonizers.

Indigenous cultures were sometimes declared less important but oftentimes non-existent. They were particularly subject to distortion as a preliminary step towards their destruction. Franz Fanon (1994) contends in “*National Cultures*” that “a national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in every systematic fashion” (46). This is just one of the many point of views Fanon shares with Edward Said (1994). The latter affirms that “all colonial schemes began with an assumption of native backwardness” (96). He goes on to say that “the natives’ reality” in the eye of the colonizer “has not historically or culturally required attention” (75). These remarks suggest that only rarely was there any recognition of the ‘Other’ culture. And if there were any, it was only with the view to delineate it as primitive and backwards.

Hegemonic representations of the colonial discourse do have drastic repercussions not only on the native cultures but on those they stand for as well. The incoming of the western cultures often triggered off the ebb of the indigenous ones. Put differently, under colonial dominance the indigenous culture increasingly becomes out of place while that of the colonizer gains grounds as a result of the colonialist cultural representation with its ability, as Erik Erikson (1993) pertinently explains, “To project into minority group all those qualities and characteristics which it most fears and hates within itself.” This creates for the minority a wholly negative cultural identity.” (Quoted in introduction to postcolonial theory p 12) With this wholly negative cultural identity the natives end up experiencing a sense of self-hatred and cultural panic. They grow to breed as we shall see later a sense of cultural ambivalence and gradually become individuals as Franz Fanon (1967) put it “without anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless and rootless” (175).

Colonial discourse, therefore does not only distort or proclaim the Other’s cultural identity of minor significance, but also imposes certain cultural standards in terms of which the ‘Other’ is always presented with deformed image of his or her ‘Self’. This brings us full circled to my initial contention that colonialist literature can hardly be said to have depicted an objective cultural identity of the ex-colonized subjects. Thus, to say that cultural identity of the subordinate other is accurately constructed from the colonialist vantage point will be surely misleading.

### **Nativism: discursive reconstruction of the ‘Other’s’ cultural identity**

Following Edward Said’s phrase that “domination breeds resistance”, it was quiet predictable for the colonized subordinated groups to react, at times discursively but oftentimes physically, against the process of denigration to which they were subjected. Discursive practices, which constituted a site of textual resistance, were just part of the actual military and physical confrontations and struggles against colonialism.

I shall soon try to expound on how post-colonial literature is symptomatic of the ex-colonizer’s fervent resolution to challenge imperial exploitation, racial oppression and biased representations. It is interesting however to point out that some of the earliest configurations of discursive resistance emerged in what was soon to be criticized as essentialist views of cultural identity. Like their colonialist counterpart, nativist representations are based primarily on repudiating the intrusive cultures and venerating aspects of the indigenous ones. This way of conceptualizing the anti-imperial resistance is called Nativism, its salient tenets being grounded in expressing nationalist appeals to a pure and uncontaminated cultural identity such as pan-Africans, Arabism and Negritude movement. In fact, Negritude movement is the most frequently cited example whenever the issue of Nativism is evoked in the post colonial scene.

The Negritude movement is often said to be amongst the earliest anti-colonial movements to withstand western cultural hegemony; it is said to have marked the hey-day of decolonization and ‘third world nationalism’ around the 1920s up until the mid-20th century. Aimé Césaire (1972) and Léopold Senghor, who are among its leading figures, claimed that the Movement was primarily established to serve as an instrument of liberation from the colonial dominance. Most curiously, Senghor defines it as movement that stands for “the sum cultural values of the black world” – this definition, pertinently enough, already reveals how negritude is a downright anti-thesis of colonial discourse, not least since it involved thinking in terms of race and cultural binaries.

Excessive nostalgia for the past and the pre-conquest cultural identity coupled with uncritical acceptance of all that is indigenous are responsible for the severe criticism that was leveled against the leaders of Negritude Movement. In an attempt to ‘write back to the colonizer’ against his systematic destruction of indigenous cultures, they made the same axiological mistake of binarizing the world into another couplets of “self/other” “black/ white” etc. Some critics went so far as to argue that this attitude is just another legacy of colonialism. Franz Fanon for instance contends that “it is the white man who creates the negro, but it is the negro who creates Negritude” (quoted in introduction to post-colonial theory 52), which amounts to saying that white racism and colonialism made the subordinate “Other” grow to feel and think only in terms of race and ‘Otherness’. This result in only another distorted cultural identity but this time depicted by the ‘Other’ himself and bitterly criticized by the anti-negritude members and the proponents of the cultural syncretism.

Negritude Movement’s ‘racist approach’ to cultural identity triggered off anti-negritude criticism against a similarly distorted form of the ‘Other’s’ cultural identity. Wole Soyinka mocked this totalizing attitude observing sarcastically that “a tiger does not proclaim its tigrity but it jumps”. This is an implicitly ironical criticism of the leaders of negritude for their lack of profound insights into the colonial hegemony and marginalization of the ‘Other’. Their approach was especially problematic in that it was contended with reversing the binary oppositions and idealizing all that the colonizer previously said was degenerate, black and African. By adopting these neo-racist attitudes, initially inherent in the European prejudice, some colonial writers draw a picture of the indigenous cultural identity that proves to be just as distorted as its colonial counterpart.

Thus, Nativist cultural identity turns out to be debatable since it ascribed to the natives some inflated attributes that are just as inaccurate as the stigmatizing ones that pervade the colonial discourse. Amílcar Cabral shares with Fanon his objective view of the post colonial cultural identity when he rejects both Nativism and colonialism with equal vehemence. Cabral in particular undermines “indiscriminate complement, systematic exaltation of virtues without condemning faults, blind acceptance of the values of the culture, without considering precisely what presently or potentially regressive elements it contains (quoted in Introduction to post colonial theory 57)

### **Towards a syncretic view of cultural identity**

So far; I can only hope that I have made it clear how it is of capital importance to avert both extreme angles of conceptualizing cultural identity: one has to divert not only “the great white error of racist stereotyping” but also “the Black mirage” to revive the long-gone past and pre-colonial cultural identities. That said, the following will offer to discuss cultural syncretism

and multiculturalism as alternative synthetical paradigms most likely to secure a sense of postcolonial cultural difference and terminate Western cultural hegemony.

A syncretic view of cultural identity is an alternative cultural paradigm that is not only necessary but imperative as well. It is necessary because it transcends the notion of binaries and questions racist assumptions from the colonial and the postcolonial discourse alike. Its basic assumption is grounded in a dialogical relationship among discrepant cultures beyond any uncritical acceptance or uncritical rejection of the Other's culture. Second, cultural syncreticism is most likely to encapsulate the polar opposites and bring to the fore a reconciliatory notion of cultural identity that would hopefully discredit both colonialist and nativist nationalisms. This is very crucial to achieve what is described in Beyond Orientalism XII a" peculiar unity in diversity". Finally a syncretic view of culture is highly likely to secure Todorov's wish not only to "equality without its compelling us to accept identity" but also "to a difference without its denigrating us into superiority /inferiority" (quoted in Beyond Orientalism 37)

Put in a nutshell, Post colonial cultures are doomed to be multicultural for different reasons. To start with, the unprecedented increase in the scale of cultural contacts, which was accentuated first by colonialist expansion and now, perhaps with intensified degree, by globalism. The second factor, which is likely to accent the multi-cultural nature of the postcolonial world, is the resolution of each cultural group to preserve some of its cultural peculiarities at a time when disparate cultures are getting less and less unfamiliar with each other. Last but not least, cultural syncreticism is likely to prevail since no culture can claim to live in seclusion any longer. All cultures come somehow in touch with each other, influence one another and increasingly grow familiar. I fervently endorse cultural syncreticism as it is said to lie somewhere between the two extreme approaches discussed previously. Given that it is as far-fetched to eliminate the colonial influence on Eastern cultures as to recover a pure and uncontaminated pre-conquest cultural identity, it follows that a syncretic view of cultural identity is not only imperative but inevitable as well.

All in all, it seems that both nativist and colonialist ways of approaching the 'Other's' cultural identity start from the apprehension of cultural and racial superiority. For this reason both ways culminate in deformed forms of his cultural identity. It is perhaps partly for or this reason that the majority of the post-colonial generations experience a state of powerlessness to choose between native and metropolitan cultures. This state of affairs plunges young people from previously colonized countries in a maze of cultural ambivalence; they are eager to catch up with the modern west and all along this desire there is a fear of cultural assimilation and cultural alienation. This amalgam of eagerness for, and fear of, the very same thing/object, which is in this case the ex-colonizer and his culture, is precisely what I describe as cultural ambivalence. In order to illustrate this cultural ambivalence in more concrete terms, it is extremely relevant to end with a significant quote from *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward said when he said, and rightly so, that "Some Arab leaders [in fact this is true about the majority of the post colonial subjects] who spent their lives denouncing American interest also spend considerable energies getting their children into American Universities and arranging for Green cards" (356).

The next part is geared to discuss one of the most successful novels entitled - L'Enfant de Sable - by Tahar Ben Jelloun's, a Moroccan Author writing in the French language. This is believed to be highly relevant to the first part of this paper in that it serves as a concrete example of how native cultures -and not the former colonizer-are oftentimes the cause of backwardness and trauma of formerly colonized 'Other'. More specifically, the ultimate goal of the discussion

bellow is to shed light on the situation of Moroccan women and the gender discrimination they suffer from in the name of culturally established conventions.

### **Cultural-Autocriticism In Tahar Ben Jelloun's L'enfant De Sable**

When asked whether the protagonist of "La Nuit sacrée," who is also that of "L'Enfant de Sable", is about the Trauma of the Muslim Woman in Morocco, Tahar Ben Jelloun, the Author of both novels, replies

I think what I want to show is the process of an emancipation. The traumatic experience that Zahra has to undergo could be that of a people fighting for liberation. It is a woman's struggle to become what she should have been had she not been a victim of an aggression against her sexuality and all her being." (Jeune Afrique: 1988, Trans mine 44)

Ben Jelloun's comment on his novel makes it possible to approach it at two discrepant, but intrinsically related levels. On the one hand, it traces the physical and psychological ordeal Zahra has to go through before she manages to achieve a sense of self-cohesion in terms of identity. On the other hand, this very same ordeal may legitimately be interpreted as an allegory of Morocco's cultural identity under colonial dominance. That is to say, the epistemological and physical violence to which Zahra is subjected can; in an extended sense, be seen as a metaphor of the nation's body under colonialism.

Yet in the light of my discussion of Nativism above, I will confine my reading of Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel to its first level of interpretation. That is, my argument will take it that the author tries to reveal how "in some respects" as Amilcar Cabral argues "[Native] cultures are very much a source of obstacles and difficulties, erroneous conceptions about reality" ( cited in An introduction to Post-colonial theory,58) In L'Enfant de Sable, Tahar Ben Jelloun carries out a kind of cultural auto-criticism. He seems especially to question the tendency to subordinate women and polarize masculine from feminine. He calls for the freedom of female subjects from the conventionally based gender polarities.

A panoramic view of the post-colonial world reveals that opinions differ and sometimes are opposed to each other when it comes to determining the kind of relationship to be established between the West and the East. There are those who believe that the Western persistent hegemony is bound to devastate minority and previously dominated cultures. Others, however, underline the need for a critical scrutiny of the native cultures as well.

In L'Enfant de sable T.B. Jelloun seems to allegorize precisely this last view. His novel, represents a meticulously critical reading of certain negative practices that are prevalent in Moroccan society. A society where women are still marginalized and discriminate against in the name of conventionally established customs and cultural traditions. Thus, as need be stressed from the start, T.B. Jelloun's novel is not meant to undermine the values of Islamic religion; it is rather meant to condemn the very tendency to exploit this religion for rationalizing unacceptable cultural practices.

The novel traces the development of the central character. The latter is a baby girl named Ahmed/Zahra, who is made to assume a male identity. As we shall see, she represents an individual who falls prey to patriarchal thinking, which is prevalent in Moroccan society. At a profound level, T.B. Jelloun seems to suggest that the trauma of the post-colonial subjects does not always necessarily need to be traced back to colonialism. He reminds us through Zahra's traumatic experience that the physical retreat of the colonizer means virtually nothing for the

always subordinated female Other, not least since she is fated to live under the pity of the patriarchal figures who represent another; if not worse, domestic colonizer.

Through its female protagonist, the novel problematizes what is meant to be a woman in a culture where the son-preference is deeply rooted in the mind of the people. It posits, as I have said, an explicit criticism of patriarchy and a bitter portrayal of how women are victimized just because they are different in terms of gender. This victimization is particularly through Zahra's experience, yet my focus will be put on the female character in the novel, the basic argument being that they are all victims of patriarchal notions that seemed to have rooted themselves in such post colonial culture as the Moroccan one.

The novel opens with an anonymous storyteller introducing Zahra's father. From the title of this chapter "Homme/ Man" and the way Haj Ahmed is described, we immediately understand that he is a prototype of a male despot with virtually unbounded rights over his family. He is said to be obsessed with the idea of getting a baby son. For up until the beginning of the novel; we know that he has seven daughters with no male child. Thus, he devises a scheme upon a secret agreement with his pregnant wife to raise the expected baby as a male regardless of what its gender turns out to be. On the day of its birth, the child turns out to be a baby girl. However, apart from its parents and the mid-woman, who burst into "YOU YOUs!!!!" announcing that "it is a man, it is a man, and it is a man" (26). It has crossed nobody's mind that the new born child is a baby girl.

A couple of days later, a circumcision ceremony is held as "conclusive" evidence with respect to the male gender of the child who is baptized as Ahmed. But, here again, none recognizes that the blood stems from the father's thumb and not from the child's non-existent foreskin. All the ensuing efforts in the novel are geared to illustrate how Zahra is socialized a male. Many episodes are devoted to enumerating how she is instructed to distinguish between what is female and what is male's behavior and how she is supposed to behave according to her "own" as a male "at home as well as outside of the house" (42)

To go back to my thematic concern, I believe that TB Jelloun is ridiculing the male hegemony especially through Haj Ahmad (Zahra's father). He shows how the latter's despotism has driven it into his mind that he can even transmute a female into a male and vice-versa. In fact Haj Ahmed represents one of those whom Ben Jelloun targets in the implicit satire and criticism that are at the heart of the novel. The remaining of this paper will attempt to show how the writer avails himself of the disguise or 'fetish' technique to reflect the fragmented identity of the protagonist. Through the latter's object-like status in the family, Ben Jelloun conveys the ultimate message of the novel; he makes an appeal for a thoughtful and objective re-evaluation of what appears to be regressive cultural practices like the problem of patriarchy and the propensity towards female subordination.

From the day of her birth, Zahra is subjected to a series of deprivations and dispossessions to such an extent that she turns out to be reduced to the level of an object or fetish. She is defraud of her authentic identity and made to adopt the disguise of a male: a completely different, if not antithetical, 'self' that has virtually nothing to do with her female identity. This plunges her in a web of hypocrisy and subterfuges to gratify her father's eagerness to regain his social position and secure a male heir. This father/daughter relationship sounds somewhat ambiguous. For me to explain away this ambiguity, I will approach Zahra's case from a Freudian perspective. Yet, before proceeding to illustrate how so, I wish to swiftly discuss and explain Freud's notion of fetishism. Fetishism for Freud refers to those cases wherein "the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it" (quoted in

Introduction to post-colonial Theory, 126). That is to say that the fetish functions as a mask or normalize sexual difference. Freud instances this notion by the example of the child when it fetishizes the mother's leg to rationalize the absence of the material penis and make up for the fear emanating from the potential hazard of castration. The fetish, therefore, normalizes difference and compensates for something that is badly needed or non-existent.

To come back to the novel, I think the analogy suggests itself that what Zahra is for her father (or family) is exactly what the leg is to the child in Freud's theory of fetishism. Put simply, Zahra is fetishized to supplant the so-hoped for male heir. Thus, just as the fetish must always be present for sexual satisfaction, Zahra is constantly reminded that she is not a female –and that 'being a male' should not cry, use "Henna" or join her mother to public bath as a grown up. Also, just as the fetish works in Freudian theory as an object that serves to disguise sexual difference by providing a substitute in the child's mind for the absent penis, so is the case of Zahra. She is fetishized to substitute in her father's mind for the absent male 'son' in the family, make up for his fear to die without a male successor and above all halt the social humiliation resulting from the family's difference (desire of a male child).

The only difference though in the above analogy is that Freud maintains that the Fetishist has control over the chosen objects (fetish). He seems to have presupposed that the fetish is always an "inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces" (cited in Introduction to Post-colonial Theory 126)". In the case of *L'Enfant de Sable*, Haj Ahmed does not fetishize an object but an individual or a human being. This explains his failure to sustain control over his fetish /Zahra for a long time before she emerges from an object of comfort, which represents the arrival of the sun and "la fin des tenebres"<sup>26</sup>, to that of a despotism and terror when she decides to push "la logic jusqu'au bou" and be precisely the male that she is not.

Still within a Freudian framework, and because of being socialized as a male, Zahra grows to breed a sense of ambivalence towards her identity. This ambivalence results especially from her full awareness of what her adopted self represents of threat and attraction; a male mask constitutes a threat since it amounts to denying her authentic feminine self which already starts to prevail when she notices her growing breasts and menstruation. Yet, on the other side of the binary, this male mask holds an attraction since it allows her to enjoy the privileges "that I would never have known" had she allowed the woman in her to surface.

Thus, in this sense, Zahra's choice is not so much of an identity as of what that identity holds in store for her "I have done a lot of reading and I have opted for happiness" (51). Her motto at this stage is that a masked identity with dignity is far better than a true self in slavery and humiliation. This suggests that, given her conscious choice and complete awareness of what she is doing, Zahra does not deny her femininity. What she rejects is rather the disgrace and indignity that femininity is liable to bring about in her culture. To explain this seeming paradox offers the opportune moment to go back to the umbrella theme of the novel.

Given that Zahra's denial of her female identity is only momentary, it can therefore be interpreted as a pause that has allowed her to question the kind of life her mother and sisters seem to be contented with. By virtue of her temporary alienation from her true self, Zahra climbs to the vantage from which she looks back and grows cognizant of the object like status to which female subjects are reduced in her society. Hence, her firm resolution not to trace her steps back to the same level: "I could not have lived or accepted what my sisters, just like the rest of the other girls in this country, endure" (53)

By assigning to his female protagonist a masculine role, and given her successful attempt in assuming that role, TB Jelloun posits a bitter irony revealing that the whole myth of masculinity is but a cultural construct that is essentially man-made. He implicitly suggests that the tendency to binarize individuals according to their gender is a social construct that is based upon groundless assumptions of gender superiority and male hegemonic tendencies. This fact is made all the more explicit through Zahra's tyranny over the family even before the death of her father. It seems to have gone out of the latter's mind that Zahra is a female. He becomes somewhat submissive and obedient "if that pleases you Ahmed!" "as you like Ahmed." Thus Zahra's experience as a male subject reveals that gender discrimination emanate particularly from those conventionally established conceptions of male and female identities. Zahra herself comes to this conclusion from an early age when the narrator observes that "she is a nervous and intelligent child who has swiftly learned that this society has more preference to men than to women" (42), hence her decisive resolution to be precisely the male that she is not.

By adopting a male identity and suppressing her true self, Zahra experiences a sense of double identity which culminates in her rebirth as a free individual with a free will. As mentioned earlier on, she is brought to think exclusively in terms of male subjects; she is baptized as Ahmed/Zahra, a name which already reflects a sense of duality as it is composed of two proper names (Ahmed and Zahra). As time elapses, she grows into an adolescent, but her parents are quick to mask her feminine traits, she says "the cloth bandage around my chest always squeezes me" (17) which is quit normal since the apparition of her feminine traits will definitely menace the disguise. The latter, however, is already threatened when she has her menstruation. She realizes that the growing breasts and the ensuing blood are all symptomatic of the latent rebellion of 'Zahra' the true self against 'Ahmed' the Mask or in her own words "the resistance of the body to the name" (46) which are in the long run that of reality against appearance.

Still under the trauma of dualities, Zahra says "I am the architect and the building" (46). This implies that while her outward appearance reveals a male identity, the feminine self which is the essence of her being remains repressed. This plunges her in hypocrisy of constant role playing: she displays a despotic attitude towards her sisters and mother and once she retreats to her bedroom, she becomes her true self contemplating her genital organs and feminine traits. This long introversion brings her to realize that she cannot go on putting a male mask "I have live in the illusion of another body, dressed in someone else's clothes and feelings. I have been cheating almost everybody until I eventually realized that I was only cheating myself" (169). This painful experience of dual identity will bring about her revolt and contentment with her femininity as a subject in difference but not a subject as an object other.

Zahra's revolt against her appearance constitutes defiance against her father's patriarchy and against the whole society's biased notions regarding female subjects. "If I were a man" Zahra says "I would say that I am Ibnou Batouta, but I am only a woman" (164). By comparing herself to Ibnou Batouta who is a famous Moroccan traveler, Zahra makes it explicit that she is aware of her constant oscillation between two discrepant identities. Thus, her final choice to be her true self epitomizes her rebirth. It is a birth at the age of 25 years old without parents "but" Zahra asserts "with a first name of a woman, getting rid of all the lies"(153). This firm resolution to assert her femininity by giving up the name of Zahra and the practice of transvestism is, in fact , Ben Jelloun's challenge to male domination and at a profound level, to conventionally hierarchical order in which women are "Othered and objectified".

The protagonist of the novel apart, it appears that the other female characters are highly symbolic of the subordinate position of women in Moroccan society. Before Zahra's birth, the narrator enumerates how her sisters and mother are looked at and treated by their father. The birth of each and every one of them constituted for him more of an occasion to mourn than to rejoice. They are ascribed no identity since he takes no trouble to name them. His profound indifference towards his daughters is all the more made explicit by the story teller in the novel when he points out that the father keeps doing his best "to forget them, to get rid of them away from his life"(17). Besides, throughout the novel, these seven daughters are either addressed or talked about but never given a chance to speak for themselves. In no single instance can we find them mentioned individually. They are represented as one entity which stands for a curse and humiliation in the eye of their patriarchal father.

It is particularly in this respect that I deem Zahra's case highly ironical. We can not help but notice that her father's attempt to socialize her as a male is a blessing in disguise. For this occurrence is precisely what will contribute to her awakening to the subordinate position women occupy in her society. All along her disguise as a male subject, Zahra manages to contemplate the status of her submissive mother and obedient sisters. This will culminate in her decision to regain her individuality. She will not only reject the adopted male mask but also refuse to be reduced to the inferior status of her mother and sisters. She rightly observes that "if the women are looked at as being inferior to men in our culture, it is not because god wanted that or the prophets decided so but simply because they accepted their status" (66)

One feels at this point that it is no longer Zahra who is speaking but Tahar Ben Jelloun, the author himself. And this may be another reminder to explain away our doubt about the author's standpoint vis-à-vis religion. As mentioned before, nobody should be under the illusion that the novel undertakes a project to undermine our Islamic values or beliefs. Rather, what is questioned and contested in the novel is the very tendency to sustain male hegemony and superstitious practices in the name of Islam. From Zahra's observations, we can deduce that the Author makes sure to discriminate between what is cultural and what is Islamic. In *La Nuit Sacrée*, which depicts Zahra as a full fledged female subject enjoying freedom and recounting her own story, one can spot Ben Jelloun speaking, here again through one of his characters when the councilor says "I love the Koran like an amazing poem...I hate those who exploit it to restrict the freedom of thought."(55) Thus the problem, Ben Jelloun seems to suggest, does not reside in Islam as a religion but when the latter is used as a means for exploitation and an excuse to normalize subordination and maintain dominance.

Tracing the image of 'the mother', Fatima Lasses, in the novel will make it all the more explicit how the female subjects are victimized by male dominance. Like her daughters, Zahra's mother epitomizes the submissive mother-figure who is another prey to her husband's tyranny over the whole family (society). Being held the sole responsible for giving birth only to baby girls, she finds herself forced to go into starving diets and drink all sorts of bitter and suffocating remedies. When all these fail, others experiments are devised. Yet the most dramatic of them all is when she is flogged to use the hand of a corpse to eat couscous and then let it caress her naked belly. Instead of helping the poor Fatima give birth to a male baby, these superstitious practices generally culminate in her loss of consciousness. By enumerating these details about Zahra's mother, Ben Jelloun foregrounds another category of suffering females.

Similarly, as a 'wife', Fatima is not allowed to have any say as regards her daughters' personal or family life. Her presence in the family is strictly confined to pleasing her husband and propagating the race. In fact, she symbolizes the conventional mother prototype and the

overwhelmingly submissive female figure that Zahra herself would have become had she not been awakened by her father. That said about Zahra's mother, the whole picture Ben Jelloun tried to sketch about the image of women in Moroccan culture becomes thus complete, his final message conveyed and his auto-criticism of the native culture well carried out.

### Conclusion

Cultural identity is bound to remain an issue of great significance in the post-colonial writing against domination and cultural hegemony. It is also most likely to remain a source of contention and controversy among post-colonial critics and intellectuals. However, as need be stressed again, a double task is required; post colonial discursive practices against subordination should in no way adopt colonialist or nativist beliefs. They should remain vigilantly critical of both the legacy of colonialism and the propensity towards nationalist or nativist cultural identities. In *L'Enfant de Sable*, I hope to have been clear how the author problematizes the notion of patriarchy and the tendency towards female subordination as an example of how the trauma of the post-colonial subject need not always be blamed on colonialism. Generally my concern has been to illustrate how native cultures, too, have their pitfalls and they accordingly require critical scrutiny and reconsideration.

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