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The expences of Love: Seduction, Poetry and Jealousy in Mauritania

Corinne Fortier

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Middle East, Social and Cultural Studies

Etudes culturelles et sociales sur le Moyen-Orient

Corinne Fortier, Aymon Kreil,
Irene Maffi (eds)

Reinventing Love?

Gender, Intimacy and Romance in the Arab World



PETER LANG

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Affective and sexual intimacy are sensitive issues in the Arab World. However moments of closeness between men and women have always been possible, perhaps even more so today, thanks to the spread of mixed-gender social spaces and new communication technologies. Further, while undeniably embedded in gendered relations of power, love is a highly ambivalent field of experience that involves a good deal of negotiation between partners and with family and can stand in tense relationship to patriarchal domination. Often, however, romantic love is contrasted with love after marriage. This book precisely explores the relationship between love and marriage in the contemporary Arab world. By sketching the paths of amorous encounters in the Arab world, it introduces the reader to the conflicting configurations that shape love practices, providing new insights into a still-emerging field of inquiry. It examines notions of gender, intimacy and love through ethnographic case studies that offer an insight into current dynamics in Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

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Reinventing Love?

Middle East, Social and Cultural Studies

This series focuses on encounters, conflicts and transformations from the 15th century to the present and beyond. It invites works from various disciplines of the social sciences and humanities that consider the adoption, development, or reconceptualization of basic social and cultural phenomena in the Middle East, as broadly conceived, at any time from the fifteenth century to the present, particularly in consideration of future implications. The series privileges studies adopting the anthropological and historical approach in order to analyse the symbolic systems and social practices of the various societies of this area of the world.

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Corinne Fortier, Aymon Kreil, Irene Maffi (éds)

Reinventing Love?

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CORINNE FORTIER

Chapter 2

The Expenses of Love: Seduction, Poetry and Jealousy in Mauritania

Abstract: In the Moorish society of Mauritania, the sphere of seduction and passion, very often poetized, coexists in parallel with the marital sphere. It is thus never his wife to whom the poet addresses his poetry but another woman that he desires. Among Moors, seduction aims for the conquest of the desired woman, who is divorced or even married. The lover's figure is a feminized figure, because he can no longer control himself and is subject to a passion that is annihilating him. However, even when the man is in this state in the seduction phase, marked negatively with passivity and suffering, it is only a temporary situation that represents minor harm on the way to conquering the woman and gaining a dominant position over other men. For a man, conquering the courted woman is also a way of defying his rivals. The courtesy context which seems to glorify women in fact essentially highlights the rivalry between men. His relationships with women reveal to the man what creates his virility: generosity, courage and self-control. As in most societies, Moorish men are mainly the initiators of sexual relations, as if the free expression of their desire is authorized more than that of women. The fact that the man is considered the desiring subject and the woman the desired object is a major cross-cultural gendered element which justifies men's appropriation of women's bodies.

Keywords: Mauritania, love, passion, courtship, seduction, expenses, poetry, virility, jealousy

Love Passion

Among the Moors of Mauritania,¹ who were once nomadic, many aspects of their lifestyle still appear to be related to former habits and the social representations they shaped, even if most people now own houses, cars, and mobile phones and have access to the Internet. For example, one's house is always open to the incoming host, as a tent would be; the oral word still mostly prevails over the written word; mobile phone and virtual conversations have not replaced physical encounters; and oral poetry retains its special place, as in many Bedouin societies.² Moorish society is known as a society of a million poets. Poetry is very common in this society because poetry is inseparable from love affairs. Accordingly, the study of love poetry allows an understanding of gender relations among the Moors.³ Indeed this poetry, through the archetypal situations it describes, of which I give account in this chapter, reveals the models that shape the gender roles when it comes to love relations. However, the topic of love poetry, and more generally the topic of love, are often neglected in anthropological research.⁴ Yet more than any other topics, they afford deep insights into intimacy in a society. The love poems quoted in this article were collected and translated by myself.

Love was not born in the West during the twelfth century, as Denis de Rougemont (1972) contends: the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry of the sixth century testifies to its existence in the ancient Arab world. These poems are well-known among Moors and inspire the local poetic forms, *nasīb* and *ghazal*. They are well-known because most Moors can understand their literal Arabic. These poems of Bedouins in the Arabian desert find a

1 In Mauritania, alongside Arabophone Moorish society one also finds Halpulaaren and Soninke communities.

2 See for example Lila Abu-Lughod's (1986) study of Bedouins in Egypt.

3 This article is based on ethnographic observations, interviews and confidences gathered during my periods of fieldwork among Moors in Mauritania between 1996 and 2018, in Nouakchott, the capital, and in the desert (*bādiyya*).

4 Apart of the work of Lila Abu-Lughod cited above.

particular echo among the nomads of the Sahara, as they evoke the tent, the encampment, the desert, the tribe, the veiled women wearing henna and ankle bracelets (*khalkhāl*); all Bedouin *realia* which are familiar to Moors.

Among Moors the sphere of seduction and passion, very often poetized, coexists in parallel with the marital sphere governed by Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Masculine love poetry arises from a man's unsatisfied desire for a woman. It is thus never his wife to whom he addresses his poetry but another woman that he desires. As for feminine love poetry (*tabra*), it circulates only among women, modesty preventing them from publicly displaying their desire for men. Among Moors, as elsewhere, men initiate extramarital affairs more frequently than women because expressing their desires freely is socially much more acceptable for them than it is for women. The fact that the man is considered the desiring subject and the woman the desired object is a major cross-cultural gendered element which justifies men's appropriation of women's bodies (Fortier 2004a). This article considers the issue of love from the perspective of masculine poetry.

Among Moors two kinds of love coexist: love for wives and love for mistresses. The first is a marital feeling which develops within the framework of conjugal relationships; the second, passionate love, is exclusive to mistresses. Passion is forbidden, while marital love is licit. The first belongs to the domain of pleasure and immediacy, while the second involves a sense of duty and its duration over time.

These two kinds of love are evoked in a poem using the metaphor of water, which is particularly significant in a desert region where it is an invaluable resource. The poem refers to a married man who goes on a journey with goatskins full of water. On his way, as a flash of lightning announces torrential rain he pours the water out of his goatskins. The flash of lightning represents love for a woman at a first sight, and the rain falling is the image of the passion which makes the man abandon his reserves of water, symbolic of the marital relationship. It shows that the idea of love at first sight is not only a Western idea, as some historians such as Jean-Claude Bologne (2017) claim, because we can track it in classical Arabic poetry.

For a long time, it was rather unusual for anthropologists to reveal the *hors champ* of passionate love. They preferred to focus on the alliance system, neglecting extramarital relationships occurring before, during or

after married life. However, such relationships are not uncommon, at least among Moors. Pastoral nomadism, as well as men's frequent travel for commercial or political purposes, favour them. Nowadays the relative anonymity of contemporary cities also provides a perfect setting for such affairs. Such relations are not even taboo among Moors, as they are in other places around the Mediterranean area and North Africa. These meetings, while illicit from a religious point of view, are socially tolerated as long as they remain discreet.

Courtly Love

Moors have inherited a specific Arabic dialect, *Hassāniyya*, from the Arab populations (*Banī Ḥassān*) present in the country since the fourteenth century, and a courtesy code inspired by ancient Arab chivalry or *futūwwa*.⁵ Some historians (Von Hammer-Purgstall 1849) even hypothesize that Arab chivalry pre-existed European chivalry and influenced it. This courtesy code is very similar to that which appeared in the West during the Middle Ages. The similarity is in the 'common medieval cultures which can be found, in broad terms in both the Christian West and the Muslim East' (Zakeri 1996: 32). The courtesy code does not contradict Islamic values, which have been present in the region for a long time.⁶

As in the thirteenth century in France, the courtesy code represents a social distinction which differentiates the 'courteous' or the 'courtier', from the villain (Duby 1981). Among Moors, courtesy distinguishes noble persons belonging to noble tribes such as warriors (*ḥassan*) and marabouts (*zwāya*) from non-nobles such as tributaries (*znāga*), blacksmiths (*m'almīn*), griots (*īggawan*), and former slaves (*ḥarāṭīn*). The courtesy code is still alive among Moors, despite the rise of the individualism and the influence of a

5 See Farès (1932) and Vadet (1968) on the Arabic notion of *futūwwa*.

6 In West and North Africa Islam was present even before the Maliki Islamic school of jurisprudence introduced during the eleventh century by the Almoravids (Berbers).

certain Islamist discourse (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013), and a man cannot diverge from this code without losing his honour.

Men appear in Moorish poetry as devoted admirers of women in a tone similar to that of Arabic pre-Islamic poetry and Medieval Occitan madrigals, which mostly describe the woman as a mistress of whom the poet is the devoted slave (Lavaud and Nelli 2000). There has been a strong link between Mauritanian courtly love and the Arab Bedouin tradition since pre-Islamic times. Two types of love poetry circulating among Moorish men are inspired by two types of Arabic love poetry: the *nasīb* and the *ghazal*. The first traces of these two styles go back to the sixth or seventh century.

The *nasīb* has a nostalgic style, evoking places haunted by women and the delicious pangs they provoke. The poet sings of the absence of his beloved, identifying her with the place where he met her. Some link the term *nasīb* to the Arabic verb *nasaba*, meaning 'to sing of a lady's beauty and the trouble she inspires' (Blachère 1975). *Ghazal* refers to a more straightforward type of poetry related to flirting. The word *ghazal* itself derives from the verb *ghazala*, meaning 'courting' (ibid). The *ghazal*, the more popular form of poetry among Moors, generally takes the shape of a quatrain (*gāf*), and is essentially composed with the aim of reaching the heart of the beloved.

The noble man devotes himself to the 'game' of love as he devotes himself to the 'game' of war, both being a form of challenge. The means used to conquer the woman are similar to techniques of hunting and borrow their vocabulary from warriors' and hunters' language. The woman is a prey, a gazelle, according to the classical Moorish and Arabic poetic image, an object of envy which men try to capture as a precious trophy. Thus, women are not much considered for themselves but appear rather as assets in the competition between men. The courtesy context which seems to glorify women in fact essentially highlights the rivalry between men. Seduction represents more than the courting of women: it is a way to perfect male qualities, as in the *fin amor* (Duby 1988: 47; Baladier 1999: 82). Thus the 'game of love' is an initiation process, because it is through mastering it that young men acquire self-control (*ḥkam rāsu*), a virtue also known in the Medieval West under the name of *mezura* (Wettstein 1945).

Night Meetings

Seduction is a rite of passage in which young men compete with other pretenders. One of their favourite settings is late meetings, when in the cool of the night they improvise poems in honour of the attending girls. Men engage in night meetings from puberty, or, according to the local expression, as soon ' [the boy] has worn sarouel trousers and fasted for Ramadan' (*rbaṭ sarwāl u šām ramaḍān*) at around twelve years of age. For girls it can start very young, at around the age of nine (Fortier 1998). This type of courtly meeting, similar to that known to Tuaregs by the name *ahal*, is locally given the Arabic term 'night assembly' (*jamā 'at al-layl*). They begin after the night prayers and go on until very late. They generally take place far from houses, on moonlit sand dunes. Such an atmosphere can stimulate the participants' poetic inspiration.

These evenings are always accompanied by music which resounds in the night's silence, so that they are also named *hawl*, a term that refers to Moorish music, which usually consists of a rhythm on a small hand drum (*tbal*) played by one of the girls and the sound of a griot's lute (*tidinūt*) or the harp (*ardīn*) of a griotte. To please the young women the men do not spare their poetic eloquence, as shown in this quatrain: 'It is my seventh verse (*qāf*) since the beginning of the evening, / and when my beloved deigns to smile, I shall improvise the eighth and the ninth, / the tenth and the eleventh (...)'.

During these night meetings the most-courted girl is named 'the one who stole the head of the ostrich' (*shālat rās n'āma*). The ostrich's head, which reaches higher than that of other birds, symbolizes both the woman's exceptional beauty and its inaccessibility. The ostrich, in Moorish tales, acts as a vain and disdainful woman infatuated with herself. Her narcissism appears in another local expression: 'the one with a long neck' (*twīlat ar-ragba*). Besides improvising poems, to show his desire for a girl at a night meeting, a young man can throw his turban at her (*zrig ḥawli 'alibā*), indicating that he has set his heart on her. This gift is called 'the head of the ostrich' (*rās n'āma*).

A woman of lower status, usually a former slave or blacksmith, may steal the turban (*ḥawṣa*), knowing that its owner will buy it back from her.

Today, as money becomes important in Mauritania, a young man will show his interest in a woman by buying back the stolen object with a considerable amount of money. In this way he asserts the gender roles by showing his generosity, which is associated with masculinity.

Women who have been honoured with poems can acquire a reputation beyond the assembled circle. Among those who 'arouse the duel' (*labrāz*) at the night meetings, some will become *shabībāt*. This term, built on the same Arabic root as *shabāb*, youth, is used for a woman whose name is praised by all; in this respect being quoted in poems which will remain in the oral memory is a great acknowledgment for a woman.

Love Poems

Love poems express the pathos of the passion with its distress, suffering and fury. For example, a poet describes the beloved as well as the pains and the joys which she arouses in him in the following verse: 'When she was tinged with henna, / the one that I love, / suffering appears / which was not in me'.

The man is enthralled by the woman: he becomes blind, he loses his mind or his heart (*galb*),⁷ she cuts his heart to pieces (*qṭa 'ti galbī*), he is possessed by her (*māla ' bihā*), she drives him crazy, he wastes away (*mitmumi*), she is killing him (*qatlatnī*), he is dying for her (*muta 'alik*). In this poem the lover exclaims: 'Oh! My friends / she knew to show herself so weak, fragile and vulnerable, / yet it was me she murdered / without worrying about the loss'.

The beloved woman is an enchantress who has 'tied [the man's] head' (*marbūṭ rāsī*). The expression '*rbīṭ rās*' is generally used for lost cattle which, when found, must be immobilized with a magic spell (*hijāb*). This phrase, which belongs to the pastoral register, is used in matters of love to evoke the apathy of the lover bewitched by his beloved. And if the beloved woman's

7 On the symbolic meaning of the heart in Arabic and in Islam, see Corinne Fortier (2007: 17).

presence makes him suffer, her absence is far more painful. An archetypal phrase expresses the suffering provoked by the beloved's absence: 'I am languishing with love for you' (*mitwaḥashak*). This expression derives from the Arabic term *waḥsha*, which means to languish, commonly used in *Hassāniyya*. Today in Mauritania young people use an expression derived from French, *fanatique*, which refers to obsession and madness: 'You have made me fanatic about you' (*fanatisaytini*).

Far from hiding his flame, the lover tries to inspire the same passion in the woman by revealing it through his poetry in an attempt to disturb her through the expression of his feelings. It is not until the woman is touched by the man's vibrant appeal that she can give him her favours in response to this love. The lover's tears are intended for the one who causes them, with the intention that she will soothe them. In love poetry the woman is often called 'the reason for my sorrow' (*sabab at-tulāh*), or 'the reason for my death' (*sabab qatlī*). The pain of love is known in *Hassāniyya* as *saqam*, a classic Arabic term that refers to physical disease. This kind of love is close to the *pharmakon* (Derrida 2006) which is the cause of the pain and also its remedy.

The lover's figure is a feminized figure, because he can no longer control himself and is subject to a passion that is annihilating him. Paradoxically, a man whose virility is characterized by self-control can be nevertheless possessed by passion, because for a man, being in the grip of such agony and confessing it to the one who has caused such disorder is the unavoidable preliminary step to the conquest of his beloved. The lover occupies a feminized position as a victim of passion; he seems to have lost the self-control expected of men, and furthermore his submissive attitude towards the object of his love testifies that he is in a situation of dependency, which among Moors and in other societies is usually characteristic of the feminine position. More generally, the feminine position is a fundamental characteristic of a person in a state of passion.

Thus, he has to show himself to be both extremely patient towards the woman he loves as well as profoundly disturbed. However, even when the man is in this state in the seduction phase, marked negatively with passivity and suffering, it is only a temporary situation that represents minor harm

on the way to conquering the woman and gaining a dominant position over other men.

From this perspective, poetry, which until recently was exclusively a masculine domain among Moors, constitutes a weapon of choice in the same way that it was a weapon for troubadours in the Medieval West (Roubaud 1971). Like courteous love, the means used to conquer the woman are similar to techniques of hunting and borrow their vocabulary from warriors and hunters' lexicons.

Carnal Conversation

The poems aim to win a girl's heart by praising her beauty. But while a woman's appearance and erotic way of moving are important, her witty spirit counts just as much. The art of conversation is particularly valued, and numerous women hold salons in their tents or houses. This act of conversing with people of the opposite sex is also connected in thought and vocabulary to the act of making love. Thus the term most usually employed to designate intimacy between a man and a woman is *titwannas*, which means 'talking with,' from which the word for lover, *wanīs*, and mistress, *wanīsa*, are derived. In this Muslim society where the prohibition against men and women touching each other is important, conversation between lovers is laden with carnal overtones, close to Roland Barthes' (1977: 87) description: 'The language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words by way of fingers, or fingers at the end of my words.'

Men seek the company of a woman who attracts their attention with humour tinged with irony and audacious allusions. A local phrase, borrowed from the gustative vocabulary, describes a witty woman as 'salty' (*malāḥa*), which in English would be the equivalent of saying that she is 'spicy'. A woman who knows how to lead a conversation and is quick on the draw, approaching men and replying to them without shyness, is said to be 'rough' (*harsha*). But it is necessary to underline that the impudence displayed by

a woman in her interaction with the other sex limits itself to the sphere of speech, because it is up to the man to initiate the first physical contact.

Secret Visits

A man who, after a hard fight, wins a girl's favour at a night assembly continues to show her his affection by trying to meet her privately. Among Moors, especially in the desert, moments of intimacy between young people of the opposite sex are rare. It is only at night, when the woman's parents are sleeping, that the young man can try to approach her more closely. The clandestine character of these night visits appears in the term used in this context, which is directly related to the notion of 'secret' (*sarriyya*). By making this visit, which is attended by many risks, the young man shows his beloved that he is ready to die for her.

In the past, young men might travel very long distances to join their beloved. If a man owned a camel, he would harness it in the middle of the night in such a way that the camel could not grunt, so that he could travel unnoticed. If he was too young to own a camel he travelled on foot, and moving forward in total darkness he risked getting bitten by a scorpion or a snake. Having arrived at the woman's encampment, the visitor would make sure her parents were sleeping. When he had entered the tent, he would awake his beloved by gently pinching her nose (*naghlag al-vassa*).

Then they would converse in low voices. The young man would lie down behind the girl, who would turn her back on her parents so that they would not perceive the visitor if they woke up. He might be cautious enough to prefer to court her through the thin fabric enclosing the back of the tent (*ukhar kurar*). Seeking her company was perilous, because if he was discovered her father would not hesitate to chase him away with a stick or a rifle.

The visit could go on until late, and the lover would have to fight sleep so as not to be found asleep beside the girl. He would leave as discreetly as he had come to be back in his own encampment before dawn in order not

to be discovered. The night visit was a test for the lover who, having defied the dangers of the desert (scorpions, snakes, thorns and cold) and overcome the fear of divine punishment for illicit contact between unmarried men and women, exposed himself to the risk of being discovered. These dangers were the price he had to pay in order to join his beloved. By this visit marked out by risks, he showed his beloved that he was capable of dying for her. Moreover, such proof of love was also an initiatory test whereby the young man proved his bravery to the woman he loved on the one hand, and to friends of his own age on the other (Fortier 2003). After this visit he would inform his friends in great detail about his perilous adventures.

The Expenses of Love

Young men who visited their beloved in the night generally brought her a present, for example a perfume bottle (*bush min musk*). Today, young men offer women a henna (*hanna*) or hairstyling (*zhvir*) session, or another object of feminine finery such as a veil, a handbag or a jewel. These presents are given to pay tribute to the woman and her beauty, and as such are called 'gifts to beauty' (*hadiyāt al-jamāl*). They are necessary proofs of love, and a man trying to seduce a woman cannot avoid making these offerings. The lover has to show himself generous to the woman he loves, sparing no effort, because spending his time and money without stint is like giving himself to her. In the love relationship the man must show his generosity, which is part of his honour. This poem gives an account of the necessary spending for love:

I want to be with her / I do not wish to distance myself from her
I saw her / yesterday while I was crossing a deserted place
For her, I lost / so much wealth, oh misfortune
For her, I lost / so many quatrains (*givān*) and poems (*tal'a*).

Women are not expected to show gratitude when accepting poems and presents. For example, a poet deplores the losses provoked by an unhappy

love affair, due in particular to the gifts (*tam'a*) given to griots to sing the poems he had composed for her to his beloved. However, in spite of the poet's bitterness about the disproportion between what he says he gave her and what he has received from her, he tells us that he continues to love her and still dedicates his poems to her.

This sort of feeling (Fortier 2004b) resembles the *joi* of troubadours, which combines enjoyment, suffering and the game (Roubaud 1994). Likewise, the woman's refusals, far from repelling the lover, arouse his desire. It is considered part of the game of seduction and explains why women are affectionately called 'traitress' (*khawwāna*) in some poems. Furthermore, the lover's disappointment not only shows his beloved's indifference but also reveals the level of his love. The poems, like the numerous presents and services offered to the beloved woman, thus all participate in what Roland Barthes (1977: 99) broadly calls 'the expenses of love'.

Through these ordeals young men learn to control their desires. The woman's caprice is answered by the constancy of the lover. Here again, the vocabulary of *fin amor* (Dragonetti 1960) can help in understanding the logic of the exchange between the lover and his beloved: women give themselves gradually to their lovers to test them, and the man is called a 'sufferer' (*sofridor*) (De Rougemont 1977). Likewise, Moorish women grant concessions to men only progressively: at first a smile, then a wink, and so on... To test their pretenders' patience (*ṣabr*), women refuse any physical contact for a long time. However, they sometimes let the lover steal an object that she is carrying. The lover preserves this object affectedly next to his heart, putting it in the pocket of his boubou (*darā'a*).⁸

The stolen object is archetypally a toothpick (*miswāk*), an erotic object because the woman has held it between her lips and chewed it sensually. Through the mediation of this metonymical object, the lover kisses her indirectly. Other objects that she has touched can play the same mediating role, such as a rosary (*tasbīḥ*), a ring (*khatma*), or a watch (*waqqāta*), which the lover wears to be closer to the beloved. This 'souvenir'—the French word has been borrowed in *Ḥassāniyya*—also supports him in the absence of the beloved, sometimes even after his death, as described in a poem where the

8 The boubou refers in French to the long loose-fitting garment worn by men in Mauritania.

lover remains faithful to the woman he loved even in the grave, keeping objects that she had carried with him in the tomb.

The fetish object represents not only the beloved woman but also the love relationship itself. By showing it, the young man makes the relationship public. More recently a photograph of the beloved has fulfilled this role; the lover carries it in the pocket of his boubou and shows it proudly to his friends. Women are the object of men's desire; a desire that they learn to discipline through the courtship itself. Proof of love is also proof of virility.

Accessible Divorced Women

Nowadays physical contact between unmarried people is not so rare. Women know how to dispense certain favours (kisses, caresses) in exchange for their lovers' gifts. Unlike numerous Mediterranean and North African societies, Moors do not value virginity highly.⁹ In the field of seduction, the women with most visibility are divorcees.¹⁰ According to the local expression, they are like 'the shadow of the tree' (*sadrat lamgîl*) under which men can take a nap. It is considered easy and pleasant for a man to be intimate with them because divorcees are no longer under the control of their husbands or fathers. Free again, divorced women can participate in night meetings where young men compose poems to seduce them as they do with young unmarried women. They are even freer than they were before marrying, because they are scrutinised less by their relatives. Today divorce is common in Mauritania, so that a 22-year-old woman may already have been married three times, while it is common for a young man of that age to still be single.

Dating takes place at the woman's home. As in many other places, the tent or house is considered her domain. One of her roles is always to be welcoming and open to visitors. Many divorced women are in a precarious economic situation, especially when they have children for whom the father

9 This is also the case in Tuareg society (Drouin 1992).

10 On the status of divorced women among Moors see Corinne Fortier (2012 and 2016).

does not provide, and men's visits can be a great help in such a setting. When a man spends a night in a place he does not know, for reasons of business or politics for example, he is likely to visit a divorced woman. This type of relationship is normally extremely brief. However, if he has the opportunity to return to the same place he may visit her again. If she decides to grant him her favours she asks him for a present such as a veil (*malhfa*). The man is supposed to respond to all her financial requests, acknowledging that she must be sexually experienced as a divorcee.

In Nouakchott some divorced women recognized as *shabībāt* do not hesitate to strip the rich men who court them of their money. Women who are skilful in obtaining material advantages from their lovers are called *mishtamra*, a term derived from the word *shamra*, which refers to opportunism. This term, far from being pejorative, designates an audacious woman who knows how to benefit from her influence on men. Sometimes men who have embezzled public money for the sake of a woman's beautiful eyes end up in prison.

Today nobility is still important, but money has become a more essential element of seduction. A noble man deprived of any sign of wealth such as a car or a house may encounter difficulties in his womanizing. Most women nowadays look for a 'boss' (*baṭrūn*, the Arabized term for the French *patron*) and seek to benefit from his generosity. One of young men's favourite pastimes is hunting women in the evenings. This practice is legitimized by the common assertion that 'a young man is always in search of an adventure' (*shābi dawart 'azza*). Young men roam (*iṣādar*) through the city in groups, often by car, in search of women. In particular they go to the salons of divorced women to try their luck. New expressions inspired by the French language have appeared: '*tantī*', from *tenter*, to try, and '*tdrāgī*', from *draguer*, to hit on someone. This new behaviour is typical of city-dwellers (*dāshra*), especially in the capital. In Nouakchott, one type of entertainment consists of going out of the city at the weekend (Thursday and Friday), to drink milk, hunt bustards, and conquer country girls (*bādiyya*), whom these rich city-dwellers describe as 'good meat'. The men arrive at isolated encampments with their big cars and their expensive presents from the city to try to impress the 'country women' (*broussardes*) and seduce them.

Inaccessible Married Women

In Moorish society, seduction aims for the conquest of the desired woman, who is divorced or even married. The desire for these categories of women reveals the challenge that motivates such courtship. Seduction is a test for the man, who must show his virile virtues by being patient, generous, attentive and brave. Like medieval Western courtly love, the supreme test is to win the heart of a married woman, who is by definition inaccessible. The transgression is social but also religious, as according to the Koran (IV, 24, transl. Arberry 1980), the wife is a forbidden woman. A man's desire for a married woman is enhanced by the illicit character of the relationship. The furtive night meeting suits this type of relationship, which is marked with the seal of secrecy. The man's visit to his beloved is not without risk, and the transgression is always accompanied by fear. The attractiveness of this transgression motivates men to try and visit married women frequently.

The clandestine character of the extramarital relationship forces the lover to use subterfuge to meet the woman. The husband and the lover have to be, according to the *Hassāniyya* expression, 'like cow's horns' (*kīfal-grūn al-bagra*), suggesting that they must not meet. The lover's ingenuity consists of seizing convenient moments when the husband is away. Generally there are many occasions to visit her, the husband being absent from home most of the time; during the day he attends to his work taking care of his cattle, his shop, or his office, and in the evening he usually meets up with friends. Men also very often leave their wives for long periods in search of pasture for their livestock or trade in Senegal or in Mali, to visit their distant relatives, or to travel in the country for political purposes. It is easier for lovers to meet in the Mauritanian capital than in the rest of the country, because in Nouakchott married women can circulate freely in the daytime and even drive their own cars.

The husband's prolonged absence can encourage some men to visit these forsaken wives frequently. Like divorced women, they may be short of money due to the absence of the husband, on whom they depend economically, so they may find some financial relief in the arrival of other men offering them presents in exchange for favours. This kind of practice is tolerated by society as long as it remains secret.

In the game of love, women are seen as objects of desire for men and their own desires are never acknowledged. The woman who is courted draws some material advantage from seduction relationships, knowing that most of these will be temporary. The man supports the cost because it flatters his virility, of which generosity is part. It also stimulates his taste for conquest associated with challenge. A woman has a more difficult game to play to win respect, because by immediately granting her favours she may appear to be too easy, endangering her dignity, which is closely socially related to modesty. She must defend her image of the inaccessible woman who will admit the lover to intimacy with her only through patient effort and prodigality. His relationships with women reveal to the man what creates his virility: generosity, courage and self-control.

Husbands Who Are Not Jealous

It is believed that Moorish husbands grant a certain amount of freedom to their wives to receive men in their tents or houses and to circulate in the public sphere as they wish. Husbands consider their wives precious goods which grant them social prestige, thanks to their power of seduction. Often flattered by the idea that they have married a woman whom numerous men desire, men allow their wives to play their mundane role by receiving admirers at home. A husband should not be jealous of this assembly of lovers as long as he keeps his exclusive right to the possession of his wife. She should grant only 'a jaw' (*tamnablu hank*) to lovers, meaning a polite smile and a friendly word.

The Arabic traveller Ibn Battûta (1982: 403), describing the life of people in the old city of Walata in the fourteenth century, was surprised by the freedom in the Moors' customs: 'In this country, the women take friends and companions among foreign and unrelated men. The men, for their part, have partners whom they take among their non-relatives. It often happens that a man enters his home and he finds his wife with her companion: he does not disapprove of this conduct, and does not take offence at it'.

If a wife's extramarital affairs are discreet, the husband should not try to catch her out. Jealousy is considered a base feeling that a married man should not show, because the nobility of his behaviour requires that he controls his emotions. In such a situation, again men must visit their beloved furtively: everything is possible as long as it remains discreet.

From this viewpoint, the fault is less adultery than a lack of discretion when committing it, so that when a husband surprises his wife in an unacceptable situation he is forced to defend his honour. He chases away the lover with his rifle or with insults, and then has an argument with his wife. It is one of the few accepted reasons for men to beat their wives. However, although adultery is condemned, violence towards a woman is condemned even more. A woman who suffers from such violence may dramatize her misfortune by shouting and tearing her clothes to reverse the opprobrium to her husband.

Jealous Wives

Men are more actively involved in extramarital relationships than women. Adultery is more socially acceptable when committed by men, as it fits their supposed need for conquest (Fortier 2013a). Moorish women compare men with camels who eat the leaves of a tree while casting their eyes over the foliage of another branch: always in search of a new affair.

However, when a Moorish woman suspects her husband of infidelity, as a sign of her disapproval, she may return to her parents' home (Fortier 2011). Some women leave their husband with their children after learning that he has composed a quatrain about his love for another woman. In such cases the husband usually sends a delegation of respectable men to his wife to ask her to forgive his faults and come back. Furthermore, to redeem himself and as proof of his love, he should offer her valuable presents.¹¹

11 This also applies in Tuareg society (Casajus 1987: 66).

Among Moors, as in many societies, the marital relationship has a main purpose: the creation of a family. The wife has several duties towards her husband, one of which is to give him children. In parallel, a man will seek extramarital relationships not for procreation but for pleasure—pleasure which can also be pursued in the marital relationship. For a man, the extramarital relationship aims to secure the desired woman, challenging his rivals and asserting his virile qualities. Some husbands can gain prestige from having an attractive wife, but this does not necessarily suffice to calm their thirst for conquest outside the marital relationship. A wife gives her husband progeny, enabling him to fulfil his social role as a father. A mistress, on the other hand, stimulates his taste for challenge because she does not belong to him legally. Whether a mistress or a wife, the woman provides the man with the opportunity to demonstrate his virile qualities, whether related to conquest or to fathering respectively.¹²

Conclusion: Masculine Desire

For Moors, seduction aims at the conquest of the desired woman, whether she is a virgin, divorced or even married. For a man, conquering the courted woman is also a way of defying his rivals. This approach is similar to what Sigmund Freud (1987: 49) describes as the conditions of masculine desire in certain cases: ‘[...] the lover shows no desire to possess the woman for himself only, and seems to be fully at ease in the triangular relation [with other men]’.

Women are assets to what is in fact masculine rivalry. The lover’s rivalry concerns all the woman’s other suitors as if they themselves were objects of desire. In this respect, Freud showed that sexual rivalry implies more interest in the rival than in the woman, an observation confirmed by Roland Barthes (1977: 80): ‘Jealousy is an equation involving three permutable

12 On the importance of becoming a father in this and other societies, see Corinne Fortier (2013b and 2017).

(indeterminable) terms: one is always jealous of two persons at once: I am jealous of the one I love and of the one who loves the one I love. The *odiosamato* (as the Italians call the 'rival') is also loved by me: he interests me, intrigues me, appeals to me'. However, such a feeling is inadmissible because it implies that other men are thought of as objects of desire. Thus, men express themselves through the fight for a woman, who is presented as the sole target of their desire.

If a man cannot be considered an object of desire, it is because he is primarily seen as the active subject of desire. As in most societies, Moorish men are mainly the initiators of sexual relations, as if the free expression of their desire is authorized more than that of women. In this society sentimental and sexual attraction are a man's privilege. The right to express one's desires is an element of domination in so far as women are deprived of it. The fact that men are considered the subjects of desire and women its object is a major cross-cultural element which ensures men's appropriation of women's bodies and structures relations between people of the opposite sex.

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