Review

Helen Moffett

> *The Almond: the sexual awakening of a Muslim woman*
> by Nedjma, translated from the French by C. Jane Hunter,
> Grove Press, New York, 2004.

This book comes packaged as a statement of sexual and cultural revolution. Extracts from reviews on the cover describe it as "fearless"; "a book of incredible audacity"; "shocking [and] raw"; and its anonymous author is described as a "literary guerrilla warrior" whose book is "an act of political resistance – the provocative rebellion of a Muslim woman".

Remarks like these, along with the stirring words of the author in her Prologue, promise something truly groundbreaking, a liberatory insurrection from a surprising quarter. She writes:

> I have attempted to break down the walls that now separate the celestial from the terrestrial, body from soul, the mystical from the erotic.
>
> Literature alone has the efficacy of a "lethal weapon." So I have used it.... My ambition is to give back to the women of my blood the power of speech confiscated by their fathers, brothers, and husbands. In tribute to the ancient Arab civilization in which desire came in many forms ... where love was liberated from being sinful, in which both having and giving pleasure was one of the duties of the believer.
>
> I raise these words ... to the health of Arab women, for whom recapturing the confiscated mention of the body is half the battle in the quest to healing their men (1).

These are exciting, defiant and even visionary words. The approving review in the South African weekly newspaper, the *Mail & Guardian*, reports the author as saying:"The body is the last taboo.... It is the last battle for democracy. I didn't want to write politically, but I did look for something radical. This book is a cry of protest."[1]

There are numerous Muslim women writers on the African continent and elsewhere who are tackling contentious issues (including explicit discussion of sexual matters), with no small degree of risk attached, given today's climate of hardening fundamentalism and increasing anti-Islamic hysteria. But even

within these increasingly polarised and essentialised spaces, there are counter-narratives, traditions that deserve to be explored and celebrated.

A beautiful and sophisticated Egyptian anthropologist who had lived in London and New York City for most of her life, told me this story of returning to do fieldwork in Egypt. Here, in a remote rural village, the local women drew her into the *hamman* – where she was overwhelmed by the overt sensuality displayed by dozens of stark naked women of all ages, as they groomed themselves and each other with frankly erotic ease and evident pleasure, exchanging sex tips and jokes. She commented wryly that of all those present, she was by far the least comfortable with her body.

This book gives a similar glimpse into the world of rural Moroccan women. There is no doubt that it breaks new ground in terms of the cultural anthropology of sexuality. I found it most absorbing and useful in the insights it gives into how sexuality was expressed and explored in an apparently rigid and conservative rural community – a small Arab village in the 1960s. As a child, Badra, the heroine and narrator, shows a healthy curiosity in the sexual workings of her own body, those of her playmates, and the adult women around her. She paints a vivid picture of a close-knit community of women whose bawdy conversation and sex advice, both teasing and supportive, belies their supposed sexual repression.

In this world, groups of teenagers engage surreptitiously, yet freely, in homosocial, same-sex explorations as rehearsals for heterosexual activities. These are not that dissimilar from the ritualised forms of heterosexual petting and adolescent exploration traditionally found in Muslim communities in Nigeria (see Charmaine Pereira's feature article "*Zina* and transgressive heterosexuality in northern Nigeria" in this issue). There is little cross-gendered contact, however, although the boys and girls delight in spying on each other's masturbatory adventures. At the age of fourteen, without a trace of coyness, Badra flaunts her nakedness in front of her male peers, delighting in her power over them.

Nevertheless, this is also a world of harsh double standards. When Badra's brother impregnates one of the local girls, he is obliged to marry her, but she is the one who is disgraced and treated like a servant – not he. Meanwhile, at sixteen, Badra is married off to a brutal and lustful older man, who is desperate to beget an heir. The wedding night is a terrible one; particularly distressing is the scene of feminine complicity in what amounts to marital rape, in which the local women, including Badra's own mother, literally hold her down

while her husband deflowers her. This kind of narrative frames the privileging of heterosexual penetrative intercourse as the only form of sexual activity that is acknowledged. This allows a paradoxical sort of freedom. When the village wise woman, after an invasive examination to check whether Badra's hymen is intact, announces that "no man has touched her", we know that she has indeed been touched and seen many times, by many people of both sexes. However, none of her adolescent adventures ever damaged the all-important hymen. This makes a salient point about patriarchal sexual hypocrisy.

Balanced against this, we find noteworthy same-sex alliances between co-wives – who are fiercely supportive of each other, but will not tolerate their husband visiting prostitutes, for instance. Aunt Selma, to whom Badra finally flees, is the most interesting character of all – she leaves her husband to move to Tangiers, where she lives as a liberated, independent and sexually assertive women. Yet she is also pragmatic, determined that Badra should establish her relationship with her lover, Dris, on a firm financial basis. Her character fades from the story, which is a great pity.

So there are certainly elements of this story that are valuable. Nevertheless, it disappoints in terms of the boldness of its stated project. The sex scenes, while racy and explicit, rehash a trail well-trodden by the bodice-rippers of pulp fiction. All that is left to titillate is the knowledge that this time, the tale of bedroom acrobatics, "searing kisses", a "womb aching with desire", nipples that turn into "incandescent tips", complete with frank references to vaginas, penises and anuses (to the point of tedium), is being recounted by a Muslim woman. And this draws the reader into the politically dubious territory charted by Edward Said in his path-breaking volume, *Orientalism*, where the Occidental reader becomes a voyeur peeking around the veil, into the *hamman* or harem, spying on the spicy mysteries of the East.

Even the cover illustration plays into this: it shows the curvaceous figure of a woman, swathed in saffron cloth in such a way that her belly is bared, but her head and arms (which are raised above her head) are entirely obliterated by the tightly wrapped fabric. The image is faintly suggestive of bondage, even suffocation, and although this may indeed have been the repertoire the cover designer wanted to suggest, the result is that while the voices of the women in the story may "break the silence", the female figure on the cover is yet again veiled, masked and mysterious.

If there is any mystery that is "unveiled" in this book, it is that the narrator Badra's romantic and sexual life is little different to that of any middle-class

woman in almost any urban environment, who becomes the mistress of a wealthy and dissipated professional man. The trajectory of their relationship – initial attraction and seduction, sexual fireworks, the growing insecurity and disillusion of the woman who realises that she cannot win her mate's fidelity, the petty power struggles and subtle jockeying (usually around money), the final realisation by the disenchanted mistress that her only option is to manipulate her lover through jealousy, and the inevitable violence that this incites – is only too familiar from thousands of Western patriarchal narratives. Badra's sense of disempowerment in the relationship, her blind investment in a romantic fantasy, and the rather pathetic and underhand methods she finally resorts to in order to subvert the dynamics of the relationship, have little or nothing to do with her cultural or political identity as a Muslim Arab woman. Likewise, it is disenchanting, both for Badra and the reader, to realise that the sexual freedom touted by her lover Dris does not spring from any emancipatory or even rebellious principles, but from his descent into dissolution.

Neither does the book add anything of real weight to the long-standing debate in feminist theory – that of the difference between pornography and erotica.[2] There is no doubt that some readers will find the book pornographic, and some may find it erotic. But I felt that it met the criteria for neither. The writing is not exploitative or degrading, neither does one feel that the author is presenting graphic sex scenes for gain; but there is also little authentic sense of celebrating desire or women's sexuality. It is exploratory, certainly, and there is no doubt that Badra experiences real and intense sexual pleasure with Dris. But her experience of desire is all too often articulated in terms that render her helpless, powerless and dependent on her male lover. Although she enjoyed her sensual explorations as a teenager (when she held the lofty ambition of having "the most beautiful sex in the world" [83]), once Dris enters her life and body, she seems to relinquish sexual agency, reclaiming it only much later, and then sadly, for purposes of manipulation – as when she flirts with her lover's male friend (with whom he is also having an affair) in a feeble attempt at "payback". Some of the scenes in which she miserably witnesses her lover engaging in group sex suggest a disempowerment every bit as real as when she was a young bride enduring her husband's brutal attentions. At times, one suspects that all she has done is switch from servicing one man's sexual agenda to that of another – the only difference being that one was a conservative rural patriarch, the other a sophisticated and worldly libertine with catholic sexual tastes.

This is not to suggest that Badra comes across entirely as a victim whose

only option is to try and spark her lover's jealousy; in the course of her relationship with Dris, she enjoys great sex and becomes a wealthy woman – not bad going for a "farm" girl from a humble village. But once again, this differs little from the plot of any Western romance novel – Catherine Cookson transplanted from the Yorkshire moors of the nineteenth century to twentieth-century Tangiers. Perhaps, in an era in which Muslim communities and Arabs around the globe are being "othered" like never before, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

It is also worth commenting on the quality of the writing. The author herself insists that her writing is "free and crude", but while I suspect that she is referring to the frankness with which she writes (she uses the word "cunts" in the fourth line of her opening paragraph), it is also an accurate description of her writing style. This veers energetically between lyricism and cliché, and is larded with breathless hyperbole, which becomes tiring after a while. Of course, the fault may well lie with either the translation or the editing; perhaps endearments like "my wounded kitten" (103) and "my little apricot" (126) read better in the original French, although I doubt that Badra's description of her post-coital state ("And I was nothing but a floating lotus flower" [105]) would be any less risible in another language.

Another omission in the book is any sustained attempt by the narrator to integrate her emotional and sexual experiences with her religious faith and culture. There is one brief passage in which she muses,

> When did I last say a prayer, make my ablutions? ... Only the fasting of Ramadan remained intact ... at sundown my first sip of water rose to Heaven accompanied by just one wish: that God accept the sacrifice of my thirst and my hunger, that he know that my body was still capable of being faithful to him.

But then she goes on to admit, "But I made love with Dris during Ramadan, breaking my vow.... All I could find to say to God was, 'Don't look at me now'" (186-7).

Given that there is a rich tradition in Islamic writing that celebrates sexual joy as a blessing from God, and fuses the erotic with the spiritual in a way that is often counter-patriarchal (in that it emphasises the necessity for mutual heterosexual pleasure and satisfaction),[3] it seems a pity that the author is not able to bridge the gap between her experience and the tradition she speaks of in her Preface, in which "both having and giving pleasure was one of the duties of the believer".

Neither is it ever explained how she manages to flout orthodox Muslim convention with such apparent ease. The threat of violently enforced patriarchal precepts is hinted at only once – after Badra has fled her cruel and loveless marriage, her aunt Selma warns her: "Your brother Ali is still angry. He has sworn to purify the family honour by smearing yours across the streets of Tangiers" (58). But this danger never resurfaces.

Nevertheless, as noted above, this book does have value for its anthropological insights. It is also to be hoped that it sparks further disclosure by women, Muslim and others, who feel constrained by their cultures to refrain from exploring their sexuality and sharing these journeys with others.

References

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Footnotes

1 21 June 2005.

2 Space does not allow for a fuller discussion of what constitutes pornography and erotica, or how these differ. For purposes of this review, I find Cynthia Itzin's brief account useful (even though it is firmly located in Western discourse): "Definitions of pornography for purposes of civil rights legislation in the USA and sex discrimination in the UK define pornography not just in terms of sexual explictness, but also in terms of subordination *and* sexual violence *and* sexual objectification. Legal definitions of pornography also distinguish between pornography and erotica (i.e., sex and sexually explicit material which is non-objectifying, non-violent and non-subordinating)" (1992, 18).

3 I am no expert on this tradition; my introduction to literature of this kind was kindly provided by Sima Fahid, a historian at the University of Massachusetts, who researches Persian/Iranian erotic writings.

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