



# The Mystical, Chaotic, and Atemporal: Neocolonialist Literature in Moroccan Secondary Education

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## Abstract

Because France has colonized Morocco, the Moroccan Educational system became colonial. French protectorate implemented assimilation, then an adaptation approach to education. Even in post-independence Morocco, the French system continues to structure Moroccan education albeit with the diverse reforms from 1956. Hence, the literature assigned in Moroccan secondary education establishes neocolonialist tropes; that is, Morocco is represented as a mystical, chaotic, atemporal, and backward space. Naguib Mahfouz's *The Thief and the Dogs*, Ahmed Sefrioui's *La boîte à merveilles*, and Mohammed Khair-Eddine's *Il étaitunefois un vieux couple heureux* legitimize Morocco's need for westernization and Modernity. Accordingly, the neocolonial traces are to be found also in the literature assigned in the Moroccan secondary curriculum.

**Keywords:** Francophone Literature, Education, Neocolonialism, Morocco, Colonialism, Orientalism

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Pre-Independence Morocco Education

French Imperialism has begun in 17th century North America, yet this first phase seems to be lost with the beginning of the 1800s.

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“These early episodes of expansion contained, in embryo, aspects of later incursions into foreign lands - the search for power and prestige, often overlaid by religious or cultural justification, the conquest of territories by force of arms” (Aldrich, 1996). With the colonization of Algiers in 1830, the second phase of French colonialism started. West Africa, the Maghreb, East Africa, Middle East, East Asia, and the Pacific were under the French Empire. French colonialism is thought to have ended in the 1960s because its colonies have gained their independence. Still, the Maghreb has been and continues to be, a recurrent destination for Western European powers, especially France.

With the Treaty of Fez in March 1912, Moulay Abdel-Hafiz has signed the beginning of French colonization in Morocco because the Makhzen failed to reinforce order within the country. Morocco, accordingly, had become a French Protectorate enabling the French to advocate their administrative, legal, economic, and educational agendas. The first visible act of colonialism is reinforcing French as Morocco’s primary language. Alongside the military hegemony, France has sought to “unify” the multicultural and multilingual communities under the French “civilized” language and culture. The reinforcement of the French has established the marginalization of Darija and Amazigh; the latter became associated with poverty, the poor class, and labourers while the former, with the bourgeoisie, ruling class, and the “civilized” French.

European anti-colonialist voices emerged although the majority supported the French Civilizing Mission. Jean Jaures commented in the parliament after colonizing Morocco in 1912 on behalf of the Socialist party:

There existed [before French takeover] a Moroccan civilisation capable of the necessary transformation, capable of evolution and progress, a civilisation both ancient and modern.... There was a seed for the future, a hope. And let me say that I cannot pardon those who have crushed this hope for pacific and human progress - African civilisation - by all sorts of ruses and by the brutalities of conquest. (Qtd in Biondi & Morin, 1992)

Other anti-colonialist focalized the Moroccan civilization and its historically rich culture, yet France had already commenced the expansionist, colonial agenda. The colonial “Golden Age” based on settler colonialism, exploitation, and imperialism has been from 1918 to 1940. The colonial government increased “investments” in production, infrastructures, labour contract, and market places for French exploitation. Because the common Europeans were indifferent, the government heightened the mannerisms of colonialism especially through the discursive hegemony of education.

The French government established a centralized and uniform system of education in all its colonies. Moroccan schools could not function without French permission; Ministry officials reinforced the implementation of one educational policy even in private schools (Garnier & Schafer, 2006). The latter allowed only government-certified teachers who were, dominantly, from France and other European countries. French was the sole language of instruction as were the educational materials. The class size was large and training was only in basic skills. Through this policy, the French intended to efface local culture while imposing their own unto Morocco (Bryant, 2015). The oftentimes justification for this intention is the “liberation” and “civilizing” of the indigenous people from their “backward” culture. This perception already positioned the French in a futuristic, higher level of civilization which the colonies could only achieve if they are colonized (Sagini, 2015). The French government added three elements to its colonial education policy. First, school fees were abolished at all levels of the curricula. Second, all education was to be secular which implied the secularization of missionary and other church-governed schools. The state became the largest provider of elitist and selective education. Third, elite schools only enrolled when there were job vacancies in the colonial administration (Gifford & Weiskel, 1971). These three policies reinforced the colonial administrative rule over the educational system.

Vocational education has converted Urban and Muslim schools to vocational schools in 1917. The Directorate of Education, also, opened the Industrial and Commercial School in Casablanca to further the importance of Vocational education in Morocco. “In

rural schools, as well as in many urban schools, the curriculum reflected the central role of agriculture in the Moroccan economy. For example, students were taught the vocabulary and basic principles of agriculture in *leçons de langage* and *leçons de choses*” (Kozakowski, 2020). Because Morocco underwent economic and social changes towards Europeanization, vocational education attempted to facilitate the new skilled workforce to benefit the French economy. They promoted industry and manual trades more than intellectual professions. This ensured skilled workers with cheap pay, easy working conditions, and no governmental support. Indigenous students continued to be perceived as inferior although they were highly skilled workers. Also, vocational education continued to attract and benefit Europeans and Jewish students more than their Muslim counterparts because prestigious technical and professional qualifications, the *Baccalauréat technique*, did not accept Muslims in the 1950s.

With forwarding the assimilation policy, indigenous people were to become French. Education has been the tool of not only reinforcing French superiority but also devaluing the cultural practices of the colonized. That is, textbooks continuously represented the Moroccan as inferior to France and the French culture. The assimilation educational system has failed. The colonial curriculum no longer attempted to assimilate the colonized masses and dismiss their culture but was gradually trying to “improve” the Moroccan ways of life. The educational system was divided into a two-track policy. The Moroccan masses had basic education while Europeans had advanced education; this resulted from the belief in the European superior race and the indigenous’s mental limitations (Kelly, 1984). Because of the Brazzaville Conference in 1944, the French government constructed French metropolitan schools in Morocco. Enrollment increased, but it continued to be highly selective. The rates of enrollment in French colonies for indigenous people were steadily increasing: 6% in 1880, 13-14% between 1890 and 1910, 18% from 1920 to 1930, and 24% until 1940. But, in France, 84% in 1890-1910 and 74% in 1920-1930 (Benavot & Riddle, 1998). The stark difference between enrollment in the colonies and France situates the selective and elitist educational policy which perceived the colonized as an

inferior being. The latter idea, furthered through the curricula itself, became a self-evident notion for both colonizer and colonized.

## **1.2. Post-independence Moroccan Education**

The Moroccan educational system experienced varied changes after 1956, the year of Moroccan independence. The new Moroccan government initiated the Arabisation project to instil Standard Arabic and unify the educational system. Mohammed El Fassi, the first Minister of Education in independent Morocco, attempted to Arabize the entire preparatory course in 1957 as his first step towards the Arabization of Moroccan education. Yet, Amazigh activists and politicians have criticized the overt dismissal of the Amazigh language and culture. El Fassi's failure to fulfil his project has led to his resignation (Marley, 2004). The main hindrances to the process of Arabisation were addressed and debated in the "Comission Royale de l'Enseignement" held in 1958: the shortage of Moroccan teachers competent and proficient in Standard Arabic; to remunerate, the Moroccan government hired teachers from the Middle East, especially Egypt throughout 1958 (Grandguillaume, 1983). The full implementation of Arabic was met with diverse challenges such as insufficient materials written in Arabic, lack of Moroccan Arabic teachers, and the decline of students' achievements particularly in sciences.

Accordingly, the colonial French system of education persisted and continued in the former colonies even after independence. Its elitist and selective structures became the basis for the national education of the new nation-states (Heggoy, 1984; Garnier & Schafer, 2006). The reforms were slow and surface-level because the structural basis remained the same; that is, the curricula continued to be dominantly in French (Swink, 2014; Paasche, 2015). Even if Morocco attempted to include the dominant local language, Moroccan education continues to teach major subjects in French. A notable difference from the colonial period is the enrollment rate increase at the primary level. The rate has risen from 30% in 1960 to 50% in 1970, 60% in the late 1970s until 1995. After this stagnancy, the 2000s initiated the resurgence of the enrollment rates again since it neared 100% by 2009 across former French colonies (Dupraz, 2013). Yet, directly after independence, Morocco

struggled because of the rigidity of the educational system, which is structured for the French benefit.

Hence, after almost 10 years, the Minister of Education stopped the Arabisation project and return to the French system of education in 1965 (Ennaji, 2002). Although another attempt to revive Arabization in 1970; that is, the secondary school system had only Arabic while French was dismissed. But, French continued to be the language of the sciences in Moroccan universities. The eradication of the notion of Arabization in the 2000s has brought positive feedback, yet the National Charter of Education has received much criticism because the new reform had no clearly defined objectives. The ineffectiveness of the educational system throughout the 2000s has led to the launch of the Emergency Plan in the period 2009-2012 to increase the Charter's effectiveness. To fund this endeavour, Morocco had loaned 60 million dollars from the World Bank as they urged schools and teachers to use materials in Standard Arabic (World Bank, 2010). Still, the plan was not successful because of the widespread of French, the practices of teachers in classrooms, negative attitudes of students toward Standard Arabic. French, then, has continued to be persistent within the Moroccan education system although the Moroccan government attempted to dismiss it. Yet, the dominance of not only the French language, but their perception of the world continues to dominate the Moroccan education system. This is further exemplified in the literary materials assigned to secondary education.

## **2. Methodology**

In this paper, Textual Analysis is used to investigate the ideological and discursive ellipses which are implied within texts. This qualitative methodology examines the structures, content, themes, and meaning of a text. Unlike other methodologies, Textual Analysis enables the research to scrutinize the selected literature's implications and context thoroughly. Close Reading has been used as the primary research method to complement the aforementioned methodology. This method is used to scrutinize the neocolonialist tropes through patterns, structures, themes, etc. The three novels have been chosen because of their institutionalization within the

Moroccan Secondary Education curriculum. The Moroccan government and Ministry of Education have no record of other novels assigned before 2010 which is the earliest recording available. Accordingly, the researcher has opted to use these three novels as a case study because of this imposed limitation.

### **2.1. The Literary in Secondary Education**

The dominant literature concerning Moroccan education in independent Morocco focuses on the students' perceptions, textbook evaluations to better language acquisition, and teachers' evaluations. The neocolonial praxis of Moroccan education, which is based on the French colonial system, seems to be backgrounded. Although there is research articulating the French influence on the Moroccan curricula (Benthalia, 1983; Zouhir; 2013; Azikiwe, 2014; Bullock, 2014), the literature assigned in Secondary education seems to be assumed as neutral. The novels which Moroccan students have to master to pass the regional and the national exams are situated as innocent representations of the world. Only one of these novels is Arabic while the rest are either Francophone or French. This resulted from the maintenance of the French colonial education which already positions their literature and culture as superior to its Moroccan counterpart. Interestingly, The only Arabic novel is not from Morocco but Egyptian; this reinforces the lack of competent Standard Arabic speakers compared with the Middle East. Yet, even this novel positions neocolonial tropes and representations of the Middle Eastern subject.

Naguib Mahfouz's *The Thief and the Dogs* was published in 1961. The plot revolves around Said Mahran who was released from prison after four years, but he finds his wife Nabawiyya already married to his friend and follower Illish Sedra. The betrayal has been intensified because Nabawiyya and Illich refused to let him see his daughter Sana. He went away from their house intending to kill them both! The sheikh Al-Junaidi, a friend of Said's father, gives Said spiritual advice since he was also a prisoner. Said went to visit Ra'uf Alwan, the Executive Director of *Al-Zahra'* newspaper but leaves his office angrier because Ra'uf is no longer the revolutionary law student. Said decides to steal from Ra'uf's mansion, yet when he was caught Ra'uf does not call the police.

Upon visiting Al-maalam Tarzan, Said acquires a pistol to kill everyone that betrayed him. Said goes to Illish's house and kills Sha'ban instead because Illish and Nabawiyya sold the house. Al-Zahra' newspaper features Said's crime and theft history. Said decides to kill Ra'uf, yet he kills another innocent person. In the end, he fights with the police but is arrested. This novel is considered dominantly existentialist because of the overt meaninglessness of Said's actions and their consequences. Yet, the neocolonial perspective seems to be dismissed.

The east is represented as a space for chaos, betrayal, and exoticism. Said becomes the Eastern barbaric subject whose only purpose is to kill even those he loves. Al-Malam Tarazan's café reinforces this barbaric representation beginning with his name. Tarzan is a man who behaved like an animal since he lived in the jungle from when he was a child. Hence, the café, and the east in general, could be viewed and understood as a jungle in which lawlessness dominates. Ra'uf represents the bourgeoisie who came from humble beginnings, yet have changed once they held power, especially since he was a revolutionary. Ra'uf represents the "national bourgeoisie" who came to power after the colonies' independence and imitated the colonizers' ways of life (Benharrouse, 2019, p. 6). This is confirmed through the mansion, bodyguards, chauffeur, and power over the media. These representations confirm the eastern disillusionment and lostness without the colonizer's administration.

As the only Arabic novel, it focalizes the failure of the independent East and the reality of the Eastern subject whose past seems to be "better" than his present. The novel implies Eastern lawlessness and unruliness. The latter was the colonial motives for the enforcement of the French protectorate on Morocco; hence, independence meant the return to the barbaric, savage, and uncivilized East. Also, "literature has often been a site for the expression of dissent against the authoritarian regimes that have succeeded decolonization, as well as against extremism in the Maghreb, and has been treated as an object of suspicion and controversy as postcolonial regimes have struggled to transition to democracy" (Hiddleston, 2015). Said's arrest at the end does not mean the end of this representation, but its continuation in a



vicious cycle of betrayal and murder. That is, the plot begins with Said's release from prison and ends in his arrest. Accordingly, the sole Arabic novel in Moroccan secondary education already positions the Eastern as in need of France's protectorate.

*La boîte à merveilles* by Ahmed Sefrioui published in 1954 is considered a canonical work of Maghrebian literature of French expression. The plot begins with the narrator's feeling of loneliness. To escape this dire feeling, the narrator turns to his childhood memories. He remembers when he lived in The Seer's house with other families; the rituals of dancing, singing, and smoke made the narrator see demons and devils. He believed he was different from other kids. He loved the invisible world while his wonder box let him live in other places. When Sidi Mohammed goes to Al-Hamam, the Moorish bath, he passed out because of the high pressure. The child develops a bad perception of women through Hamam, his father's stories, and his mother's curses. The family is convinced that red-eye has doomed them because they are always tired. The narrator moves to describe Al-Msid, the Quranic school, in which the children are reciting the Quran while the Fqih is asleep with a stick in his hand. Then, Sidi Mohammed tells us about the day of Achoura' and their preparations for it. At this time, Lalla Aicha is divorced and her husband marries the barber's young daughter because Lalla Aicha cannot give birth. After Achoura, the child becomes sick the same day while the father lost all his wealth and went to the outskirts of Fez to work. The father's absence and his sickness made the wonder box a source of horror. They went to visit Sidi Al-Arafi to foresee and change their fate which amazed the child. The next day the father sent a lot of gifts while news of L'Arbi's divorce was widespread. The father returns and happiness filled their house. The child returns to play with his wonder box and confesses that this is an autobiography.

*La boîte à merveilles* positions Morocco as a mystical space in which the supernatural rituals and practices are normal. That is, although postcolonial writers seem to be critical of otherness, "But, again and again, post-colonialism runs into the problem of narrating Otherness" (Khair, 2009). The Seer's house manifest the mystical Morocco which dominated travel writings and travelogues of different foreigners from Edith Wharton, Edmund

Holt, Frances Macnab, to Wyndham Lewis. Morocco is considered an irrational space, where devils, fairy tales, folktales, etc., exist. The narrator's continuous blackouts, the family's exhaustion, and the father's bankruptcy are the result of red-eye. Sidi L'arafi cures the latter through supernatural power. Interestingly, after the visit, every wrong has been righted: the father is no longer bankrupt, L'Arbi divorces his new wife, the child no longer sees ghosts, and the families are happy. The consideration of the novel as an autobiography reinforces these neocolonial representations, especially since the author is Moroccan. The novel becomes a social realist work that documents the praxis of *The Arabian Nights*. The characters' obsession with supernatural phenomena manifests the "atemporality" of Moroccan culture. Throughout the novel, the French are not represented in the same manner as the Moroccans. The European is implied as a scientific, rational being whose purpose is to levitate the colonized from their fantasies.

The novel depicts the easy access to wealth in French Morocco since the father has been bankrupt and came back wealthy again. In this regard, the subject is represented as capable of social agency, yet the Moroccan continue to work as storytellers or Seers. Although the novel has been written in colonized Morocco, the characters are not resisting but are only concerned with red-eye, devils, and their neighbours. This seems to be shared throughout North African Francophone Literature:

The third trend in maghrebian fiction involves the problems of identification, the search for identity, for one's roots and ancient heritage. The search for a father and for an identity, both individual and collective, was one of the main themes in the books of the Generation of 1952; but now that independence has been won, one finds analogous questions and approaches. (Dejeux, 1983)

Because Sefrioui is a Moroccan, his representation holds authority for the European reader. This focalizes the dominant European view of the Moroccan as mentally limited and backward. While the French are exploiting Morocco, the colonized subjects are concerned about mysticism. The valorization of the French administration is apparent further because Sidi Mohammed in the present is lonely and saddened; that is, since the novel has been

published in 1954, the beginning of the independence negotiations, the narrator seems to be alone and romanticizes mystical French Morocco. Hence, *La boîte à merveilles* represents French Morocco as a mystical, oriental, and atemporal space similar to the Arabian nights while feeling lonely in present Morocco.

Mohammed Khair-Eddine's *Il était un fois un vieux couple heureux* was published in 1993. The Years of Lead, the 1981 drought, and the 1960 Agadir Earthquake contextualize the plot. The latter revolves around an elderly couple, Bouchaib and his wife. The couple is a mystery in the village, but the villagers say that Bouchaib has travelled through the Northern cities and even went to Europe. Yet, when he returned to the village, he never travelled again. He frequents the mosque, the weekly souk, and Sidi 'Hmed O Mossa Festival. Everyone respects this family, yet they want to know the reason for the lack of children; Bouchaib sees children as failures because they only travel and forget their lands. As Modernity seeps through the village, the couple continues to use traditional ways of life while others are forgetting their traditions. One night, the couple felt a huge earthquake at midnight. It destroyed the entire city. In the morning, the villagers became consistent with their prayers because some thought it was Gog and Magog while others believed it was God's wrath on Agadir since its youth drink wine, do drugs, and engage in sexual intercourse with the Christians. Bouchaib was not interested in their assumptions since he told his wife about the plates rubbing against each other which make the earthquake occur. Everything about the village has become modernized. This confirmed Bouchaib's theory of the failure of modernism since these foreigners are searching for the land. Yet, he wants to use the radio to disperse his traditional Amazigh poetry. The youth is irresponsible and only want modernity; they are selling the land although their ancestors died for it. One day Bouchaib's old friend Redouane visits him after 30 years. Redouane tells him that his poetry is famous in France. At the beginning of the next year, the drought made everyone suffer. The king decided to sacrifice instead of the entire country, yet some were angry which led to riots and chaos. Bouchaib confesses that he also changed because he used to write about love and everyday life, yet he started writing about food. After two years of drought,

the village became empty because everyone migrated to the city. The couple continues to live in the village.

The novel positions the formerly colonized subjects as accepting of the western way of life; that is, the youth are all searching for the western civilization at the expense of their own. Also, the migration of all the villagers for modern means focalizes further the willingness to accept European culture even in independent Morocco. The Moroccan youth leaves the village and the 'land' to look for wealth in Europe. Bouchaib disapproves of these youth and is disappointed in how their land is no longer important to them, especially since France is not better. Bouchaib describes himself as the Guardian of tradition since he continues to reject anything Modern or European. His wife shares his views because she does not want to be like the obese and lazy Modern women. "Characters in a literary text exist through narration, but in postmodern literature, mimesis is toned down, and their narratives are often fragmented, contradictory, and challenge the readers' ability to perceive the characters as personae (Berge, 2005). The couple's critical comments and views of Modernization have been the basis of different readings which situate the text as a response to colonialism. Yet, Bouchaib is also fragmented, contradictory, and paradoxical which negates these readings. That is, when Bouchaib was youthful, he left his village and went to Europe in search of money, modernity, and wealth. But, because he is now an elder, he criticizes the youth for doing what he has done. Also, Bouchaib does not want to use any modern means except the Radio to distribute his poetry; but, his poems are made accessible to the Europeans, not to the Moroccan which structures another paradox: Bouchaib is still seeking fame in France although he dismisses their culture.

Accordingly, the critical comments are negated because Bouchaib himself seeks the western recognition of his own culture. Redouane's visit and the news of his fame in France were not met with disapproval. Furthermore, the description of the village as a space from history centres on the neocolonialist representation of Morocco as an atemporal space. The village is rescued from this atemporality only through accepting European culture which sets the power relations in favour of the former colonizers. Still,

Bouchaib wants this space to be atemporal and orientalist since it attracts tourists; hence, Morocco becomes an orientalized space for the foreign European to visit whenever they are tired of their Modern “civilization” and culture. Bouchaib is, in fact, not an anti-colonial but a neocolonial figure whose views affirm the colonial representations of Morocco as a theme park for Europe. Bouchaib’s paradoxy affirms his neocolonial self-representations.

Throughout the three novels, one notices the neocolonial representation of Morocco, especially since they become a cultural product for the western reader. These constant depictions mediate the reinforcement of the Western and European orientalist perception of Morocco and the Middle East. The publication houses market for these novels as cultural products to be consumed since they conform to the already self-evident western views. As Kwame Appiah argues, “the best known among this highly diverse body of [postcolonial] writers and thinkers operate as latter-day culture brokers, mediating the international trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (Appiah, 1992, p. 149). Thence, the Francophone is not only orientalist but commodifies Moroccan culture. Although *The Thief and the Dogs* is written in Arabic with an Egyptian publication house, it continues the commodification of the Middle Eastern space post-independence. Mahfouz’s Nobel Prize in 1988 centres the translation of his work as the cultural product for the Western audience; this is furthered through Mahfouz’s adaptation of European literary techniques. Hence, the three novels are written for a European audience through an orientalist, neocolonial perspective.

## Conclusion

Moroccan Secondary education legitimizes these neocolonial representations. The Moroccan student has to not only read these novels but to memorize their themes, characters, and perspectives to graduate. This implied French curriculum seeks the internalization of the neocolonial representations within these novels because they already situate the French as superior. Accordingly, post-independent Morocco continues to situate itself as a former colony in need of modernization and westernization. The lawlessness, exotic, orientalist, and atemporal representations

of Morocco reinforce neocolonialism. Although the educational reforms are funded and implemented, their failure is evident through the literature, especially since the other novels position the European as an adventurer, civilized, humane, ordered, etc. For instance, Voltaire's *Candide* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* echo the famous colonial representation of Daniel De Foe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which essentialize the European as the master and colonizer. The Moroccan student, accordingly, would readily accept these representations as self-evident since they "are" within Moroccan curricula. The former colonizer continues its dominance through representation even in post-independence Morocco. Therefore, the novels in Moroccan Secondary education are evidencing Morocco's inferior and France's superior position. Future research would investigate the student's neocolonial beliefs.

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