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Crossing Borders, Shifting Identities: The Transnational Journey of Wafa Faith Hallam from Morocco to America

Tariq Bekkaoui
Researcher and Professor of Business English, Communication, and Soft Skills at ENCG, Chouaib Doukkali University, Morocco

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Abstract

Wafa Faith Hallam's memoir, The Road from Morocco, presents a profound narrative that spans the personal and cultural journeys of two Moroccan women, Wafa and her mother Saadia, against the backdrop of postcolonial shifts and Western influences. Born into a conservative Muslim society and later migrating to America, their stories intricately map the contours of identity, freedom, and resistance within and across the boundaries of tradition and modernity. Wafa's transition from a lifestyle characterized by personal freedom in Morocco to confronting the harsh realities of domestic violence in America, alongside Saadia's quest for autonomy and escape from patriarchal constraints at home, reveals a profound disillusionment. Both women anticipated that America would offer them romance and liberation, only to encounter even more intense patriarchal oppression. The idea conveyed in the narrative is that the West, contrary to its image as a bastion of gender equality and freedom, can exhibit even more severe forms of gender despotism than those found in traditional Oriental societies. The memoir presents a deconstructive counternarrative that critiques both the West and Western feminism. The Road from Morocco is not merely a recounting of personal history but a significant contribution to the discourse on postcolonial identity, gender dynamics, and the immigrant experience, inviting a reevaluation of simplistic paradigms of gender liberation and oppression.

1. INTRODUCTION

Moroccan women’s diaspora literature has flourished with contributions from notable authors such as Laila Lalami, Leïla Slimani, Zineb Mekouar, Wafa Faith Hallam, Najat al-Hachmi, Saeida Rouass, Naima El Bezaz, Rachida Lamrabet, Rachida M’Faddel, Intissar Louah, Salma Moumni, Betty Batoul, and many others. These writers explore themes of gender, cross-cultural encounters, and the search for identity. Their works examine the complexities of navigating multiple cultural identities both in exile and in the homeland, addressing the challenges of patriarchal structures and the quest for personal and communal self-understanding within the diasporic experience (Daoudi, 2023; van der Poel, 2023).

Among these significant contributions, Wafa Faith Hallam’s autobiography, *The Road from Morocco*, stands out as a compelling narrative that explores the personal histories and societal challenges faced by two generations of Moroccan women. This memoir, rich in its engagement with themes such as gender dynamics, the clash of cultures, and the quest for autonomy, offers readers a window into the complex life of its protagonist, Wafa, from a rebellious daughter in a conservative Morocco to a battered wife in America, to a lonely mother in diaspora. The narratives of Wafa and her mother, Saadia, both in Morocco and later in America, epitomize the wider struggles and compromises faced by women contending with traditional constraints while pursuing personal freedom in a swiftly globalizing world.

In his March 2011 *Tingis Magazine* piece, "Faith Abundant," Majid lauds Wafa Faith Hallam's memoir, *The Road from Morocco*, stating, “The more I read into Wafa Faith Hallam’s *The Road from Morocco*, the more I realized I was holding a book that—if all literary lights are not dimmed by convention—should become an instant classic.” He considers the writing and publication of *The Road from Morocco* an act of “literary courage (al jur’a al-adabiya),” comparable to Mohamed Choukri’s *For Bread Alone* and *Streetwise*.

Majid is particularly struck by the didactic gender implications within Hallam’s narrative, seeing it as a book of “precious lessons about why freedom and equal rights matter, why the male oppression of women in Arab and Muslim societies is a sad farce, why rich life experiences are still the only reliable ingredient for a soaring story.” The book is also an illustration that “identity is a complex construct that is nearly impossible to tease apart” (Majid, 2011). Majid further praises Hallam as emblematic of “a universal woman and citizen of the wide-open world from the get-go.... Wafa is beyond narrow national categories. She is what we like to call a ‘free spirit’” (Majid, 2011) that transcends narrow nationalistic boundaries.

However, Majid’s interpretation of Hallam overlooks the subtle, ironic contradictions embedded in her examination of gender, as well as the layers of complexity and paradox that Hallam intricately weaves into her portrayal of gender dynamics. This oversight becomes particularly significant as the narrative crosses borders and cultures, moving to America, a country often idealized as a land of dreams, a sanctuary for gender emancipation from patriarchal oppression, and a staunch advocate for human rights. These contradictions not only add depth to the narrative but also provide a layered critique of the notions of a liberating, benevolent West and the facets of identity Majid admires. The memoir unfolds into a postcolonial critique of personal and cultural identity against an American backdrop reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, highlighting a disillusionment and frustration with the American dream. This article calls for a more critical examination of the memoir's engagement with gender discourse and identity than what Majid's initial interpretation implies.

The Road from Morocco unfolds against the backdrop of significant historical and cultural shifts, tracing the journey of daughter and mother as they seek to define their identities beyond the conservative boundaries of Moroccan society but an equally oppressive West. Through the lens of their experiences, Hallam crafts a narrative that challenges monolithic representations of Arab-Muslim women and offers insights into the multifaceted realities of navigating tradition, modernity, and the spaces in between.

As we embark on the journey through Hallam's memoir, this article aims to dissect the layers of cultural, gender, and generational narratives that *The Road from Morocco* presents. It is a story of defiance and resilience, of the pain of displacement and the bittersweet victories of self-discovery. This introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of these themes, inviting readers to reflect on the complex interplay of factors that shape the immigrant experience and the enduring quest for self-definition and freedom in a postcolonial context.

2. The Westernized Rebel Girl of the Casbah: Breaking Boundaries, Embracing New Gender Identities

In her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi describes how the Oriental harem’s hudud, sacred frontiers, confine women within oppressive patriarchal boundaries. “When Allah created the earth,” she says, quoting her father, “he separated men from women and put a sea between Muslims and Christians for a reason. Harmony exists when each group respects the prescribed limits of the other; trespassing leads only to sorrow and unhappiness” (Mernissi, 1995, p. 145).

According to Mernissi (1995), these “sacred frontiers” of the hudud delineate not only the division of public and private spaces along gender lines but also draw religious borders between the Dar al-Islam (House of Islam) and Dar al-Harb (House of War), demarcating the realms of Muslims and the Nasara, or Christians. It falls upon the good Muslim to guard the harem's sacred space, and by extension, the sacred domain of Islam, against encroachments by either women or Nasara.

Wafa Faith Hallam was born in 1956, in the heart of the medieval medina of Rabat, to a devout father who diligently upheld the sacred hudud, and an unconventional mother, Saadia Zniber, who never hesitated to challenge them. With her mother's encouragement, Hallam attended French schools in Sidi Kacen and Lycée Descartes in Rabat, mastering the French language long before she was introduced to classical Arabic.

While attending French schools, Hallam embraced a distinctly Western lifestyle. She reflects, “I grew up going to French schools, smoking at 14, dating gays, wearing miniskirts” (Hallam, 2011). She further elaborates on the experience of growing up as a Westernized Moroccan girl within a conservative Muslim society:

“I was educated in French schools exclusively and raised like a French girl who happened to live in a majority Muslim country. Hence, growing up, my identity was not only a source of puzzlement, it was also and mostly a burden for a young westernized woman yearning to be free and not be caged because of her gender” (Hallam, 2016).

Hallam is unwavering in her pursuit of personal freedom. Shortly after her mother’s divorce and being free from her father’s authority, she falls in love with Kamal, a neighbor who is an artist and married to a French woman. A self-confessed hippie, Kamal “rejected all established social values that could put any restrictions on his belief in universal love and peace” (Hallam, 2011, p. 90). Without guilt or shame or requiring any sentimental commitment, Hallam offers herself to him to deflower her, a decision she looks back on without regret, saying:

“Strangely, I, too, was happy; I couldn’t have hoped for a more casual defloration. It was perfect as far as I was concerned. I thought about it often, and always fondly. It felt honest. No big words or promises or pretences. We were merely attracted to each other, expressed it, and moved on, period, no strings attached and no remorse" (Hallam, 2011, pp. 92–93).

Hallam's approach to her virginity diverges sharply from traditional views held by many Muslim girls, who see virginity as crucial for marriage and family building. She perceives it instead as an impediment to her freedom, choosing to part with it casually and unconventionally. She considers her defloration trespassing of all hudud, an emblematic quest for autonomy and self-definition.

After consciously and unabashedly relinquishing her virginity, Hallam embarks on a series of romantic entanglements. Her subsequent affair is with her French teacher, a relationship that comes to an abrupt end upon her realization of his homosexuality. Next, Hallam finds herself enamoured with Paul, a balding thirty-four-year-old divorcé and father of a young son. She openly admits, “I was completely in love with Paul,” she confesses, “and I felt secure and happy. His charming little villa in the Souissi became our love nest" (Hallam, 2011, p. 104).

Accompanied by Paul, Hallam travels abroad to Spain. It is there she encounters what she perceives as true freedom, liberated from the social and cultural constraints or the fear of legal repercussions that she faced back home. Reflecting on her experiences, she notes:

“I took in the exquisite whiff of unbridled individual freedom. I was free to share a hotel room with Paul, hold his hand, and let him kiss me if I so desired. I was free to wear a low-cut dress and show off my suntanned skin…. In Spain, I did not have to be concerned with prying, condemnatory looks from men in the street and everything around me felt exciting and open-minded” (Hallam, 2011, p. 104).

In mid-1970s Morocco, Hallam had to navigate her quest for personal freedom amidst prevailing social and cultural norms as well as legal constraints. Her unconventional behavior risked attracting social hostility and could even lead to arrest and prosecution. Reflecting on her experience as a Muslim girl living in a traditional society, she writes:

“I had always known there were things I simply could not do…As a result, I was always careful not to ruffle too many feathers, plagued with the self-consciousness of a social outcast adopting liberal conduct at my own risk and peril. At the most unexpected times, I could be the object of a disapproving stare or demeaning slur, or even humiliated by a perfect stranger by being denied the rental of a hotel room with a non-Muslim, or even simply be arrested by the police” (Hallam, 2011, p. 104).

Hallam is acutely aware of the risks associated with challenging traditional social norms, which is evident in her cautious approach to social conduct.

Hallam’s unconventional nature extends to her romantic relationships as well. When Paul departs for a trip to Paris, the eighteen-year-old Hallam willingly engages in a relationship with Michel, a thirty-two-year-old “gypsy-half-blood” from Toulouse. She writes:

“Michel was a born seducer; when he put his gaze on me, I was reduced to hapless prey. It felt like there was nothing I could do to save myself from his claws.” He is a “pleasure-seeking playboy. . . He did not believe in fidelity and commitment or, for that matter, in marriage and children, or any of the conventional ideals that I valued . . . the more I tried to resist him, the more charm and seduction he deployed, always with wit and humour” (Hallam, 2011, p. 107).

The couple sets off for Zagora, Tinduf, and as far as the edge of the Sahara. Afterwards, with her repeated sexual escapades, Hallam leaves school and accompanies Michel on a long trip around the world selling leather-bound French books. As a hedonistic playgirl who imposes no limits on her sexual behaviour, Hallam seeks neither marriage bonds nor promises of commitment from her lovers. Likewise, her partners do not anticipate lifelong fidelity from someone who embraces sexual independence.

In Morocco, Hallam ends her relationship with Michel and falls for David, a successful Jewish businessman. She describes him with mixed feelings:

“His seductive smile, perfect tan, and sweet talk were all red flags. But I was too young, easily flattered, and I let him seduce me without much resistance… he was a charming, attractive dandy… He was in his mid-thirties and thought himself a paragon of elegance and style” (Hallam, 2011, p. 95).

Their affair is complicated by David’s marriage and his prominent status in Rabat, necessitating secrecy and leading to a brief relationship.

After parting ways with David, Hallam becomes involved with Jean, a “beautiful and stylish son of an African ambassador.” She admits seeking “something more exciting, if not more fulfilling,” describing him as “a very tall and athletic, sexy young black man who moved on the dance floor like a born performer; he was beyond good-looking—he was stunning.” Reflecting on her infatuation, she notes:

“I was not in love with him but with his looks, his shiny, ebony skin, statuesque body, and soft thick lips" (Hallam, 2011, p. 96).

Hallam’s early biography offers insight into a Moroccan society caught between rigid traditional norms and liberal Western values. Despite cultural constraints, Hallam, with her sexually independent and Westernized lifestyle, navigates her experiences without significant molestation or persecution. Her relationships are driven by the pursuit of pleasure without attachment, and notably, except for Kamal, all her lovers are either French or from non-Arab-Islamic backgrounds, including a Moroccan Jew and an African.

Hallam’s life, sexual adventures, and journeys in and outside Morocco expose us to another type of Arab-Islamic gender and post-independent Moroccan femininity. A new type of woman who, though living in a highly conservative and patriarchal society, is inspired by French and Western liberal lifestyles and cultural values. They slip away from tradition and pursue a fiercely independent life. Majid (2011) comments that Hallam’s journey:

“upends the notion that women from Arab and Muslim backgrounds are helplessly trapped in male-dominated structures. Inspired by French and European traditions of openness, Wafa roams across the globe seemingly unimpeded, traveling from country to country.... Wafa forges her own destiny and is amply rewarded for it. She takes risks every step of her journey. She abandons herself to passion unapologetically” (Majid, 2011).

While Majid (2011) celebrates her agency, *The Road from Morocco* chronicles an altogether different story. If we examine *The Road from Morocco* as a postcolonial autobiography alongside Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, an intriguing contrast emerges, bringing an interesting conclusion to light. While Mustafa Sa'eed, the protagonist in Salih, endeavors to liberate Sudan and Africa through metaphorical sexual conquests of white women (Hassan, 2003, pp. 309–324), the heroine in *The Road from Morocco* allows herself to be seduced and conquered by foreign males, especially from the ex-colonial establishment.

Her story is permeated with instances of surrender and submission, as highlighted in her own words: “I let him seduce me without much resistance,” “Michel was a born seducer; when he put his gaze on me, I was reduced to hapless prey,” “he seduced me, and I hesitantly surrendered my body,” “His honesty and directness immediately seduced me" (Hallam, 2011). Ironically, Hallam breaks from patriarchal power and control and achieves liberation and agency only to find herself ensnared in a cycle of male sexual conquests, which paradoxically leads to her submission under a new form of male dominance and sexual subjugation.

Hallam’s narratives detail her liaisons with older, often married men or those in delicate social positions, necessitating secrecy and discretion in their encounters, thus relegating her to the margins as a secondary participant in these dynamics. She reflects on her experiences with a poignant self-awareness, stating, “I couldn’t help but feel like the heroine of a cheap novel" (Hallam, 2011, p. 96), commenting on her sexual exploitation. Thus, *The Road from Morocco* seems to offer an ironically gendered counter-narrative to Tayeb Salih’s narrative of an Arab male’s conquest of Europe.

3. Diasporic Dilemmas: Gendered Oppression in the Land of Dreams

In 1980, at the age of 24, Hallam embarked on a journey to Gainesville, Florida, determined to forge a new beginning. Shortly after her arrival, she enrolled at Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville, where she completed her associate degree within a year. Following this achievement, she continued her education at the University of Florida, earning her BA the subsequent year.

In the fall of 1981, about thirteen months after her arrival, Hallam met Robbie O'Brien at a Halloween party. Robbie, a 22-year-old with both American and British heritage, quickly became an important part of her life. Together, they moved to New York, where Hallam, driven by her passion for education, pursued graduate studies at New York University. There, she obtained her MA in International Relations and Middle Eastern Studies, earning six distinguished awards in the process. On October 3, 1983, at the age of 27, Hallam and Robbie married.

The marriage did not dampen Hallam's academic aspirations. She enrolled in a PhD program at the University of New York, completing her coursework, passing the comprehensive exams, and conducting the majority of her research for her doctoral dissertation. Alongside her studies, she took on various jobs to support her family, made a down payment on an apartment, and in 1988, five years into their marriage, welcomed their first and only daughter, Sophia.

Remarkably, life in America marked a significant transformation for Hallam. She left behind her previous lifestyle and devoted herself to her studies, work, and family—a life she had not envisioned before her move to America. This shift not only reflected her maturity but also underscored the responsibilities she embraced in her new homeland.

However, life in America didn't unfold as idyllically as Hallam had hoped. Her initial traumatic disappointment stemmed from her husband, Robbie, who turned out to be irresponsible and outright abusive. Hallam recalls a particularly painful moment when Robbie abandoned her at a time when she needed his support the most:

"My income was dwindling… and I was inundated with hostile calls from creditors. Robbie had left me with two mortgages, two co-op maintenances, and a mountain of credit card debts. He had exiled himself and relinquished all responsibility leaving me to care for a young daughter and an ailing mother, with no steady income, no child support or alimony, and no health care" (Hallam, p. 238).

Rather than the anticipated bliss and peace, Hallam's first and only marriage becomes a source of frustration, suffering, and financial strain. Quarrels with her American husband are frequent and sometimes escalate into violence. Hallam vividly recounts one such brutal altercation:

"He turned, grabbed me by the hair, and smacked my mouth and nose. 'Shut the fuck up, you bitch! You'll have to listen to me now.' I was struggling with his hand as he suffocated me, threw me on the bed and sat on top of me, pushing me down with the full weight of his body. I tried to fight him off with all my might, gasping for air, tears running down my cheeks, meeting his hands. I could still make out his distorted face, the spittle gathering at the corner of his mouth. He's a beast, I thought. How could I love such a monster? 'See what you make me do?' he let out between his teeth, panting noisily, not letting go of me. 'I could kill you right now, see? Happy now?' I felt dizzy, my chest burning, my strength deserting me… He is going to kill me this time, for sure… Fear engulfed me as I turned limp" (Hallam, p. 160).

Hallam endures her physical and verbal abuse, admitting with self-contempt: “I viewed myself as a pathetic fraud of a woman, who stayed with him in spite of his sadistic streak” (Hallam, p. 161). On another occasion, he violently kicked her and subjected her to abuse simply because she wished to stay in bed rather than accompany him on a city outing. Consequently, she portrays him in the harshest terms, referring to him as a "beast," "monster," and "a deranged psychopath" with a "sadistic streak.” Besides his violent temper and behavior, Robbie is involved in promiscuous relationships. Wafa sues for divorce. The bankrupt Wafa lost her apartment. Thus, her marriage has “a fairytale beginning and nightmarish end” (Hallam, p. 161).

Significantly, in her autobiographical memoir, *The Road from Morocco*, no Arab man matches the brutality against women exhibited by the American-British Robbie. Through her narrative, Hallam effectively inverts the conventional Orientalist stereotypes of Arab men as sexual tyrants, offering a postcolonial critique that challenges Western perceptions. This reversal not only highlights the unexpected source of her suffering but also serves as a powerful commentary on the complexity of identity and the unpredictability of abuse across cultural boundaries. As a postcolonial narrative, *The Road from Morocco* can be described in the words of Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* as a “conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories” (Said, 1994, p. 216).

Lila Abu-Lughod, in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, discusses how “images of oppressed Muslim women became connected to a mission to rescue them from their cultures” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, pp. 6–7). She critiques the Western narrative that positions Muslim women as downtrodden figures awaiting "new lives by enlightened ‘saviors’ who rescued them from ‘savages’" (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 14). In the context of Western feminism, Hallam's journey of liberation, celebrated by Majid, is emblematic of the perceived necessity to rescue oppressed Oriental women. Hallam, a woman of color, navigates from the patriarchal structures of the Orient to America, a supposed bastion of sexual freedom and gender equality, only to discover patriarchal oppression in its most cruel form. *The Road from Morocco* portrays a narrative twist where it is the white woman who is in dire need of emancipation, not the Third World woman. This intervention by a Third World woman into America and the discourse of Western feminism is laden with political significance and ideological implications, challenging conventional narratives and suggesting a reevaluation of feminist priorities and strategies. This postcolonial subversion of selfhood and otherness, identity and difference binarism is by no means coincidental. It is further problematized in the portrait of the American husband of Hallam’s mother.

4. Dreams and Nightmares of Gendered Diaspora

Saadia was born in 1939 in French colonial Morocco. Unlike her illiterate sisters and most girls of the time, she attended school and was able to read and write. She especially loved reading Egyptian romance novels.

Throughout her marital life, she dreamed of being freed from her husband. What exasperated her was his lack of ambition and his boring nature. He was a government functionary who couldn’t make ends meet and who often relied on the generosity of his spouse’s brothers. Saadia also disliked him for his grumpiness and moroseness.

He was well educated and in addition to his perfect knowledge of classical Arabic, he spoke French fluently. He was a devout Muslim who found particular pleasure in going on spiritual escapades during religious festivals.

Within five years of marriage, the teenage wife gave birth to two girls and two boys. This put considerable financial strain on the family and on her body. She decided to stop having more babies and stop listening to her husband's religious argument that babies come with the will of God. She avoided falling pregnant and planned to resort to abortion if she fell pregnant. This control of her body was Saadia's first act of resistance and defiance to her husband. Hallam recalls:

"Her revolt first expressed itself in her resolution to bear no more children. She loved her kids, but four were more than she had bargained for, and she was determined to stop at that no matter what.... resorted to multiple successive abortions as a perfectly acceptable birth control method in her mind" (Hallam, 2011, p. 23).

When contraceptive pills were introduced in Morocco, Saadia used them. They signified for her "a new liberation for my mother as well as for millions of women around the world" (Hallam, 2011, p. 24). She was determined never again "to be a slave to her body" and felt "empowered... in ways that only she could really appreciate" (Hallam, 2011, p. 24).

The family moves to Sidi Kacem where the father becomes the manager of a store owned by one of his wife's brothers. Here in this small town, with a sizable French colony, Saadia enrolls her eldest daughter, Hallam, in a French school, l'Ecole La Bruyère, which is part of La Mission Universitaire et Culturelle Française, thus initiating her into the world of the French language and culture.

In Sidi Kacem, Saadia starts to care more about her looks and to wear European clothes. "As soon as we arrived in Sidi Kacem," Hallam writes, "and to the consternation of my dad, she'd started wearing Western clothes when she ventured outside the house and in the store.... And when her brother gave her some money on the side to buy her children new clothes and schoolbooks for me, she got herself a new suit as well" (Hallam, 2011, p. 29). Her husband gazes at his Western-looking wife with a mixture of fear and fascination.

Saadia begins helping her husband at the store, an opportunity for her to go out of the home. And soon after she takes driving lessons and obtains her driving license. By that time her husband has bought a Déesse car:

"At the wheel of the white Déesse, my mother looked positively glorious. She was in her mid-twenties and stunning with all the radiance and glow of youth; a young brunette Brigitte Bardot. She was watching her diet and had lost weight. She had mastered the art of applying make-up and styling her hair, and she dressed in fashionable and flattering Western clothes" (Hallam, 2011, p. 34).

The husband's love for his glamorous wife grows more intense and so does his jealousy. "Her beauty and charm made her stand out and be noticed, but so did her sweetness..... In the end, she always did what she had in mind, either ignoring his outbursts or confronting him head-on, forever acting like a rebellious child with him. Incredibly, her defiance only made her dearer to him" (Hallam, 2011, pp. 34–35).

In the winter of 1965, Saadia accompanies her mother to Madrid to have a cataract operation. The trip lasts for two months. In the Spanish capital, Saadia "breathed, in deep gulps, the free air of a completely different society, one that was homogeneous in its Western identity and its budding social liberation" (Hallam, 2011, p. 37). Hallam reflects on her mother's liberation and what her trip abroad meant for her:

"Her own emancipation.... meant that she had to be constantly fending off the implicit condemnation of all sorts of people around her.... Arab women who adopted Western ways had to learn to live with a disapproving society and ignore the ever-so-pervasive cultural concept of shame, or 'ah'shouma' as it is called in Moroccan Arabic. My mother instantly recognized the meaning of individual liberty in the streets of Madrid. In her mind, the road ahead was being revealed in ever-clearer focus, even if she did not yet know how long her journey would take or where it would take her" (Hallam, 2011, p. 38).

Back home, after an exciting trip to Spain and the freedom she had experienced there, Saadia's relationship with her husband deteriorated and her dislike of him grew stronger and bitter; their quarrels became a daily routine. Her husband finds solace in drinking heavily and religious escapades.

Saadia begins her secret scheme to win her divorce. There is a law in the Islamic Sharia that allows a wife to sue for divorce if her husband is absent for a time and fails to provide for his family. Saadia waits for this opportunity, and when one summer her husband travels to Meknes to look for a job, Saadia goes with her children to stay with her brother and secretly files for divorce and waits for the expiry of the customary period. Hallam celebrates her mother's divorce as a liberation from a backward patriarchal Morocco:

"After almost twenty years in a reviled union," writes Hallam, "my mother had defeated her husband. As our father vanished from our lives, so with him did everything that was seemingly backward and old-fashioned. We had once and for all chosen our mother's camp, and it was firmly set on the grounds of modernity and French culture" (Hallam, 2011, p. 76).

In both her memoir and interviews, Hallam speaks about her mother as a strong woman who frees herself from all kinds of social and cultural shackles. Her divorce is also read as a revolution against a traditional patriarchal society. Her mother, she says, "dreamed of plotting her own marital coup against my father."

With the help of her brother, the newly divorced Saadia, aged thirty-four, moves to live in an apartment in downtown Rabat with her four children. They embark on a new life, a life of unrestrained freedom:

"The summer of 1974 was also a time when Mom, my sister and I spent many Friday and Saturday nights in discos or parties as the best of friends.... My early promiscuity had an unforeseen effect; it turned my attention away from my mother, who until then had been the center of my universe, to men" (Hallam, 2011, p. 99).

About her divorced mother, Hallam says, "She was sought after and pursued by many suitors. Had she been living in Paris, her conduct would not have raised an eyebrow, but in Rabat she was living on the edge of appropriate behavior and needed to be considerably more discreet. There was too much gossip" (Hallam, 2011, p. 82).

Saadia falls in love with Berto, a married but separated Moroccan Jew, owner of a gym. Besides introducing her to the world of fitness, he also introduces her to passionate love. Hallam says:

"What Berto introduced in my mother's life was infinite care and affection, love and tenderness, laughter and joy, and so it was no surprise at all she quickly fell in love with him. After having experienced the dread and gloom of marital life with my father for two decades, she was delighting in the fathomless pleasures of reciprocated love. In the eyes of her beloved, her true self emerged, and she became something other than mother or wife; she became a woman. The power of his love had freed her from her lifelong shackles" (Hallam, 2011, pp. 100–101).

However, their relationship was doomed from the start. Though both were Moroccans, they were separated by religion. She was Muslim and he a Jew. His father was categorically opposed to a relationship between his only son and a Muslim divorcée and mother of four children.

Having broken up with Berto, Saadia comes to New York in December 1983 to visit her newly married daughter, Wafa. Saadia instantly falls "in love with America and the American Dream" (Hallam, 2011, p. 175). Being devastated by broken love and having experienced social alienation, she "made up her mind that this was the home she had always longed for. In many ways, the trip to New York signified a point of no return for her" (Hallam, 2011, p. 175).

While in Morocco Saadia lived on the charity and generosity of her brothers, in America she looks for work and is hired as a cook in a restaurant called "Marrakesh West," owned by two Jews whose Moroccan-born mother "had instilled a particular fondness for Moroccan cuisine and culture" (Hallam, 2011, p. 176).

In 1989, fifty-year-old Saadia meets in a bar Chester, "a handsome and well-mannered fifty-two-year-old" Vietnam veteran. He is attracted to her exotic beauty, sweet temperament, and refinement. After a few weeks of dating, Saadia and Chester get married. "She was sure she'd found her protector at last—the man of her dreams—charming, good-looking, and such a good lover. He was going to take care of her, give her the security she yearned for" (Hallam, 2011, p. 212).

The narrative takes a darker turn with the experiences of domestic violence at the hands of her American husband, Chester, shattering the myth of the West as a sanctuary of enlightenment and gender equality. This inversion of Gayatri Spivak's "white men saving brown women" (Spivak, 1999, p. 284) to "white men oppressing brown immigrant women" is a poignant critique of the intersections of race, gender, and immigration in the context of American society. These complexities of oriental gender representation unfold into broader issues within feminist discourse. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty:

"Discourses of representation are confused with material realities, and the distinction between 'Woman' and 'women' is lost. Feminist work on women in the third world which blurs this distinction (a distinction which interestingly enough is often present in certain Western feminists' self-representation) eventually ends up constructing monolithic images of 'Third World Women' by ignoring the complex and mobile relationships between their historical materiality on the level of specific oppressions and political choices on the one hand and their general discursive representations on the other" (Mohanty, 1988, p. 77).

Such oppression takes a tragic turn when one day Chester, the Vietnam veteran, wrongly accuses his Moroccan wife of having robbed him of his money. The furious veteran locks Saadia in her nightgown on the terrace in the freezing cold. He is unmoved by her screaming, crying, and begging:

"How long was she glued, like a fly, stuck against the glass pane of the terrace door, after her ranting and raving had died? She couldn't tell. Her body had turned numb, before her mind froze in a paralyzing wrath, hostage of its relentless and obsessive chatter" (Hallam, 2011, p. 213).

When the horrible husband came back and opened the terrace door, the almost dying wife spat on him. He slapped her hard and left.

Hallam notes pitifully that this was “the incident that had precipitated her descent into insanity” (Hallam, 2011, p. 211). The idealized conception of American manhood of mother and daughter must have been deeply shattered. The diasporic woman’s enchantment with the land of dreams and freedom turns into disillusionment.

The physical and mental health of the traumatized Saadia deteriorated quickly. She returned to Morocco where she passes away. America, the land of dreams, was an utter nightmare.

5. Conclusion

In some diaspora novels, the West is portrayed as a land of freedom for immigrant women, offering opportunities for acquiring agency and self-assertion. In Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Nazneen, a young woman from a rural Bangladeshi village, moves to London to marry Chanu. As she adjusts to life in a new country, she confronts societal expectations, patriarchal norms, and her own aspirations for independence and self-fulfillment. By the end of the novel, while Chanu decides to return to his homeland, Nazneen remains in London enjoying the city's opportunities and reveling in her evolving identity and newfound freedom (Jackson, 2015, pp. 104–118).

Unlike Monica Ali, Hallam engages in a deconstructive critique of Western patriarchal authority. In America, a land where Muslim immigrant women face patriarchal oppression, the female protagonist, in her struggle for agency and freedom, rediscovers the positive values of her own culture.

In a number of lectures and radio and TV interviews, Hallam observes that with regard to gender in Islam, there is “such hatred and misunderstanding of what Islam is all about” (Hallam, 2011). She continuously works to correct these misconceptions. She states in a TV interview, *The American Dream Show*, that the “prophet always saw the women and the girls as a blessing.” She states elsewhere that the Prophet:

“married a woman who was older than him, who was a business woman, he was surrounded by women all the time who might have their heads covered but their faces naked; they had conversation with him. His first follower was his wife, she was older than him and accomplished and an independent woman” (Hallam, 2011).

Hallam blames the harsh conditions of women in Muslim societies on the patriarchal misinterpretation of Islamic scriptures. She states that the teachings of the Prophet have been distorted and reinterpreted to serve patriarchal ideologies, resulting in certain Islamic societies, like the Taliban, “reverting to the ways of old days” (Hallam, 2011).

Following the teaching of the Prophet, Hallam says about her father that he was overjoyed at the birth of his daughter, Wafa:

“My father is a tremendously good Muslim and when I was born his first child he thought it was a blessing” (Hallam, 2011).

He loved her as “the apple of his eyes, and his hero” (Hallam, 2014), cared about her, and diligently taught her Islam and French. He strongly believed in the education of girls. Her father, she explains, “was very proud of having daughters and that reminds me of Malala this little girl from Pakistan who unfortunately had this terrible accident happened to her but her father always pushed her and wanted her to be educated and so did my dad very much so" (Hallam, 2011).

So, Islam in her views has improved radically the condition of women, because in the pre-Islamic era, women were tortured and the burial of baby girls alive was prevalent, while Islam prohibited female infanticide and advocated parental love for girls, their good upbringing, and education.

In the context of women and learning in Islam, Hallam proudly refers to the establishment of the Qarawiyyin University:

"By a woman who really, you know, valued education. So, of course, when we see what's coming out of the Middle East and the Arab and Muslim world lately, we think it's very backward and very bad for women. But at the onset, it was revolutionary and very liberating for women. You know, Muslim women were inheriting property much longer before Christian women" (Hallam, 2014).

Concerning divorce in Islam, Hallam is also eager to remove misconceptions. She explains:

"Everybody knows that Islamic law does not allow women to ask for a divorce, which is true; however, it also provides—and a lot of people don't know that—that Islamic law provides for a woman to be divorced if her husband abandons her or doesn't provide for her and her children" (Hallam, 2011).

It was this provision that her mother deployed after twenty years of marriage to win her divorce and freedom.

In her *Road from Morocco*, Hallam chronicles the struggle of her mother for liberation and freedom. Her mother, she states, "lived her life as a very strongly independent woman," and through her, Hallam seems to promote the gendered agenda of empowering and encouraging Arab-Muslim women to free themselves physically, economically, and psychologically from patriarchal control and social incarceration. Hallam sees the Arab uprising as an opportunity for Arab Muslim women to make their voices heard.

Another issue that Hallam tackles concerning women in Islam is the veil. With her adherence to universal spirituality, Hallam's initial condemnation of the Islamic hijab will change. "I used to oppose the veil," she emphasizes, "but I've come to see it as like the nuns... the nuns put the veil on as a way to signify allegiance to God and their faith. It doesn't bother me anymore." The veil has become for her a symbol of piety:

"Like the habit and veil of Christian nuns, is the hijab a simple uniform worn to show renunciation of ego and earthly desires as well as identification with the Almighty? If such is the case, then I was ready to salute them" (Hallam, 2011).

It is quite interesting how Hallam's journey to America has led her to embrace spirituality and develop a tolerance for practices such as her attitude toward the veil, which is often condemned in the West as a symbol of sexual and patriarchal oppression. In defending the veil, Hallam draws on the perspectives of Laila Lalami and Aida Alami, who also advocate for it as a matter of personal and cultural expression. For them, supporting the veil is integral to upholding human rights and respecting individual choices—principles they consider fundamental priorities (Bekkaoui, 2018, 2019).

In fact, the subversive irony in Hallam's *Road from Morocco* is that the white American husbands of the mother (Saadia) and the daughter (Wafa) surpass in their cruelty the oriental husbands mentioned in *Road from Morocco*. Like her father, Robbie is lazy and unambitious, yet unlike him, he is abusive and violent. The same applies to Chester, who treats his Moroccan wife, Wafa's mother, with savage cruelty. Obviously, Hallam lays bare the oppression and suffering that immigrant women are exposed to in America. Hallam's vision of America is at once a celebration and a bitter critique, and thereby she completely reconfigures the meaning of homeland and host country.

These inherent contradictions prompt readers to reevaluate gender dynamics and Oriental patriarchy in Wafa Faith Hallam's autobiography, challenging the simplistic frameworks of Western feminist theory. They also deconstruct the binary view of the American diaspora as a space of liberation for migrant women and the Islamic Middle East as merely a realm of patriarchal oppression and sexual tyranny.

In her autobiography and interviews, Hallam keeps explaining that she always wanted to tell the story of her mother. Saadia married against her will at the age of 13, to a thirty-three-year-old man in an arranged marriage:

"All her life," writes Hallam, "my mother had repeated, at every opportunity, and to everyone that would listen, that she had been forced into marriage when she was just thirteen to a man twenty years older than her, forever outraged by the revolting immorality and injustice of it" (Hallam, 2011, p. 5).

Wafa Hallam wrote *The Road from Morocco* essentially to celebrate her mother's quest for freedom, self-identity, and self-realization, adorning the cover of her memoir with a portrait of her mother, Saadia. However, another story unfolds from within the interstices of the major narrative plot; it is that of the oppression and persecution of the immigrant mother and her daughter by their white husbands in America. The plot of white men's abusive violence against vulnerable, immigrant "brown women" questions and disorients in a deconstructive way Hallam's intended plot and recharts the boundaries of the geography of gender emancipation and gender despotism.

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