

A Mediterranean Woman Writer from Naples to Tangier: Female Storytelling as Resistance in Elisa Chimenti

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In her book entitled *Accidental Orientalists: Modern Italian Travelers in Ottoman Lands*, Barbara Spackman identifies a tradition of Italian travelers—mostly women, including Amalia Nizzoli and Cristina Trivulzio di Belgiojoso—whose travel narratives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal perspectives that are rather different from those of their British and French counterparts studied by Edward Said. This is because Italians, especially southern Italians, were themselves subject to Orientalization on the part of Northern Europeans, and often traveled without the backing of “state power or imperial ambition.”¹ Both Nizzoli and Belgiojoso wrote about “penetrating” the harem, a site of gender segregation as well as a familiar, privileged topos of European Orientalist discourse deemed to be the deeper core of the feminized Orient.² Although Nizzoli’s narrative according to Spackman configures an interesting and perennially unstable vision of Italy as a problematical home, Nizzoli plays up the Orientalist mystique of the harem, while Belgiojoso debunks it and refashions it in her own personal, Orientalist way. The latter, writing in French, is therefore arguably a direct predecessor to Elisa Chimenti, who put the North African harem at the center of her only published, highly original novel, *Au cœur du harem: Roman marocain* (1958). Chimenti too was, in a sense, an accidental Orientalist, for she traveled to Morocco as a child with her Neapolitan father and Sardinian mother, who initially went there as exiles in the nineteenth century. But, as we shall see, Chimenti did not just travel to Morocco; she eventually made Morocco her Mediterranean home, and she turned herself into the opposite of an Orientalist, purposefully making the real women of Morocco, rather than the imaginary ones of the Orientalist harem, the subject of her research and writing, and—unlike Belgiojoso, whose narrative self-portrait conveys a distinct, self-assured sense of class and racial difference—all but removing herself from the picture.

The North African harem at the center of Chimenti’s writing is as much a historical construction as it is a sociological system and a physical space. The traditional domestic (as opposed to imperial) harem is a polygamist arrangement in which a sole man acts as the head of the household and the sexual master of multiple women—his wives, slaves, or concubines, each with varying degrees of agency following a strict hierarchy of rights.³ In Morocco as elsewhere, these women would conventionally be gathered (even sequestered) in a single household.

¹ Barbara Spackman, *Accidental Orientalists: Modern Italian Travelers in Ottoman Lands* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 2. On the Italian variant of Orientalism, see Fabrizio De Donno, “Routes to Modernity: Orientalism and Mediterraneanism in Italian Culture, 1810-1910,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/920809th>. A less accidental and more typically “European” Orientalist vision may be found for example in the work of Edmondo De Amicis, who traveled to Morocco as a journalist with an official Italian diplomatic mission and published his reportage entitled *Morocco* in 1876. The book was a best-seller and was republished many times throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 1879 edition was illustrated by Orientalist painters Stefano Ussi and Cesare Biseo. See Valentina Bezzi, *De Amicis in Marocco: l’esotismo dimidiato. Scrittura e avventura in un reportage di fine Ottocento* (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2001).

² Emily Apter, “Female Trouble in the Colonial Harem,” *Differences* 4, no. 1 (1992): 203-24.

³ Donna Lee Bowen, “Muslim Juridical Opinions Concerning the Status of Women as Demonstrated by the Case of ‘azl,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (1981): 324.

Following the constitutional reforms of the 1990s that restricted polygamy, the harem—and polygamy in general—is now a marginal phenomenon in Morocco,⁴ though it remains a persistent topos in Occidental representations of the Maghreb. This European notion of North African domestic space, which has origins in colonial travel writing and Orientalist painting and photography, ties a voyeuristic and highly sexualized notion of North African women with the idea of domestic confinement.⁵ Thus, in the Western imaginary, as Ziad Bentahar explains in “Beyond Harem Walls,” “the women who live in harems are understood to be definitely tied to the space in which they reside.”⁶ This inscription of woman within the domestic space—akin in many ways to Western concepts that idealize the woman at the hearth—has historically resulted in totalizing narratives that are often blind to differences in the personal experiences of women living in harems, favoring instead a monolithic portrait of the oppressed Arab woman as an anonymous victim, as Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman explains: “Individuality disappears in the use of collective pronouns (‘all,’ ‘nobody,’ ‘some’) to be replaced by a universal experience of ‘suppressed sighs and unuttered sobs.’”⁷ In light of this, the choice of prominent contemporary women authors, including Assia Djebar and Fatima Mernissi, to create female characters who live in harems and who recount their own variegated and unique stories, constitutes an act of literary resistance to such narratives. Bernhardt Steadman sees this process at work in Djebar’s *Fantasia* (1985), explaining: “Djebar [presents] a complicated portrait of individual women’s experiences that makes room for women’s agency, even in the harem. By presenting the experiences of individual women living in domestic harems, Djebar [...] replaces exoticized renderings of cloistered women with a journey into forbidden female space in non-Orientalist terms.”⁸

Though she belongs to a different generation, Chimenti enacts an analogous form of resistance in *Au cœur du harem*. Under her pen the Moroccan harem becomes the nexus of a unique system of female dialogue and exchange. Women’s storytelling and song are central to both the poetic rhythm and the plot of the novel, which is a polyphonic tour de force that captures the oral quality of Chimenti’s diverse transnational influences with an effect of remarkable poetic dexterity. In this essay, we examine how Chimenti presents female storytelling and community as a means of resisting two interrelated forms of violence: domestic abuse within the Moroccan harem at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as the historical silencing of Moroccan women through the exclusion of their voices from public discourse and their stories from official history. By setting her novel within a domestic harem, Chimenti also works on a symbolic level to demystify this female topos, where systems of colonial and gender domination have historically coalesced into an Orientalist, voyeuristic narrative. In *Au cœur du harem*, women are agents and their voices are individuated and unconfined, resounding from the social margins and across the borders of otherwise disparate cultures and religious traditions.⁹

⁴ C.R. Pennell, *Morocco Since 1830: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 388.

⁵ Ziad Bentahar, “Beyond Harem Walls: Redefining Women’s Space in Works by Assia Djebar, Malek Alloula, and Fatima Mernissi,” *Hawwa* 7, no. 1 (2009): 25-38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman, “A Global Feminist Travels: Assia Djebar and *Fantasia*,” *Meridians* 4, no. 1 (2003): 191.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Mohamed-Saâd Zemmouri, “À la redécouverte d’Elisa Chimenti, écrivaine humaniste,” in *Langue française et contacts langagiers: Actes de l’Université d’Été–Tanger 17-21 July 2006*, ed. Abdellah Baïda (Rabat: Bouregreg, 2007), 145: “Chimenti croyait beaucoup en effet à un dialogue possible entre l’Occident et l’Orient et elle s’est

Chimenti's desire to create an inclusive space for transnational dialogue is not only evident in her novel, but was also central to the author's life and greater œuvre. This desire to facilitate transnational dialogue, specifically though not exclusively among women, has origins in Chimenti's unique upbringing and education at the intersection of several diverse Mediterranean cultures and value systems. Due perhaps to her transnational profile that defies essentialist and national categorizations and hierarchies, and in spite of her conspicuous, pioneering body of writing about Morocco and its women, Chimenti has for the most part fallen through the cracks.¹⁰ She does not appear in studies of Moroccan or North African and Arab women writers,¹¹ nor in most literary and cultural studies of Tangier,¹² and her name is hardly ever mentioned in either Italian or French studies of twentieth-century cultural and literary history.

A Transnational Childhood and a Hybrid, Polyphonic Language

Elisa Chimenti devoted much of her life's work to recording and translating the oral traditions of the people, particularly the women, of Morocco, the country where she spent most of her life. Born in Naples in 1883 to Rosario Chimenti, a medical doctor, Neapolitan dialect poet, and *garibaldino*, and Maria Luisa Ruggio Conti, his Sardinian wife, little Elisa arrived in Tunis in 1884 when she was just one year old.¹³ While the precise motivation behind the family's relocation is unknown, it is very likely that their flight was forced. Emanuela Benini, for instance, who edited the Italian version of Chimenti's novel, *Al cuore dell'harem*, has posited that the Neapolitans sought to pose as a Jewish family in order to escape detection abroad, citing

efforcée d'y œuvrer, comme en témoigne son œuvre." ("Indeed, Chimenti really believed in the possibility of dialogue between the West and the East, and she strove to work towards that, as evidenced by her body of work").

¹⁰ Through the initiative of Emanuela Benini and Maria Pia Tamburlini, both based in Italy, and a team of scholars, enthusiasts and devotees in Morocco, a foundation in her name—Fondation Méditerranéenne Elisa Chimenti with her extensive library and archive—was established in Tangier in 2010 with the goal of promoting solidarity and understanding across the Mediterranean. See <https://www.elisachimenti.org/>.

¹¹ See for example Suellen Diaconoff, *The Myth of the Silent Woman: Moroccan Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), and Brinda J. Mehta, *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices against Violence* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014). The importance of Chimenti's novel is acknowledged only in passing in Abdelkader Cheref's *Gender and Identity in North Africa: Postcolonialism and Feminism in Maghrebi Women's Literature* (London; New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010). Chimenti's novel is also mentioned, with no analysis, in Laura Chakravarty Box, *Strategies of Resistance in the Dramatic Texts of North African Women: A Body of Words* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 69.

¹² See Ralph M. Koury and R. Kevin Lacey, eds., *Writing Tangier* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), which focuses on Paul Bowles, Mohamed Choukri, and the circle of French and English-language expatriates, and Michael K. Walonen, *Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition: Space and Power in North African and Expatriate Literature* (London: Routledge, 2016). In addition to expatriate writers, Walonen discusses native Moroccan authors such as Mohammed Choukri, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Anouar Majid. The only woman writer discussed in these volumes, however, is Jane Bowles. Chimenti is mentioned briefly in Claudio Minca and Lauren Wagner, *Moroccan Dreams: Oriental Myth, Colonial Legacy* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 270-71.

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical information comes from the research of Maria Pia Tamburlini, Mirella Menon, and Emanuela Benini, published on the Fondation Méditerranéenne Elisa Chimenti website and in the Foundation's printed anthology of Chimenti's works: Elisa Chimenti, *Anthologie* (Morocco: Éditions du Sirocco-Senso Unico Éditions, 2009). See also Emanuela Benini, "Elisa Chimenti: una donna mediterranea," in *Donne mediterranee, Atti dei Seminari di Bologna/Forlì, 27-28 novembre 1998, Napoli, 10 febbraio 1999, Roma, 19 maggio 1999* (Bologna: Futura Press, 1999), 50-60; Roberta Yasmine Catalano, *Éclats de Mémoire: Les Italiens du Maroc* (Mohammedia, Morocco: Senso Unico Editions, 2009), 105-08; and Maddalena Marchetti, "Elisa Chimenti: un ponte tra Europa e Mediterraneo," in *Scrittrici, scrittori e intellettuali itineranti negli anni venti e trenta del Novecento*, ed. Marco Severini (Venice: Marsilio, 2017), 139-50.

Rosario's addition of a Jewish first name (Ruben) and the Jewish names given to the Chimenti children born in North Africa (Maria Esther and Maria Dinah). Rosario, who had been a supporter of Garibaldi and was reputed to be a radical or "free thinker," may have been wanted by the Italian authorities for political reasons or in connection with a purportedly illicit liaison and pregnancy by Maria Girardi, whom he wished to protect from a forced marriage.¹⁴ Whatever the impetus, Rosario was effectively an exile.¹⁵ Following their emigration, Elisa and her siblings (including the illegitimate child who was adopted and became her brother)¹⁶ were raised in a profoundly multicultural, multilingual, and interfaith environment. In Tunisia, young Elisa attended a Franciscan school and studied the Torah under Rabbi Eliezer, a family friend.¹⁷ Later, in Morocco, she attended both Jewish¹⁸ and Koranic schools, and her first languages were Italian, French, and Arabic, though she would eventually master Spanish, English, and German¹⁹—teaching courses in all three at the German and Italian schools in Tangier—as well as Hebrew, in addition to a number of Arab and Berber dialects of the Maghreb. She also studied Russian and Portuguese. Chimenti and her mother founded the Italian school in Tangier in 1914 and Elisa, who always thought of herself as Italian,²⁰ albeit Mediterranean-Italian, taught there for over forty years, though, as we shall see, the school eventually became a political and economic liability for her due to the interference of the Fascist regime and her unwillingness to comply with the regime's demands. In 1957, Giovanni Gronchi, then President of Italy, awarded Elisa the highest honor of the Italian Republic, making her "Cavaliere" (Knight) of the "Ordine Al Merito della Repubblica Italiana," because—the official statement reads—as "creatrice della prima istituzione scolastica italiana ha validamente contribuito, attraverso relazioni personali e una feconda attività di scrittrice, all'affermazione dei valori spirituali italiani a Tangeri" ("creator of the first Italian school, she made a valid contribution, through personal relations and her prolific activity as a writer, to the dissemination of Italian spiritual values in Tangier").²¹ Nonetheless, her attempts to publish in Italy failed and, in spite of repeated appeals on her behalf by various Italian consuls and by President Antonio Segni (who met her during a visit in Tangier in 1962 when he was still Minister of Foreign Affairs and had the opportunity to discuss their common Sardinian roots with her), she was never granted a pension or a subsidy by the Italian state.²² One of Chimenti's last, albeit unpublished, efforts was an Arabic language textbook for

¹⁴ Marchetti, "Elisa Chimenti," 140.

¹⁵ Tangier hosted a series of illustrious Italian exiles, including Giuseppe Garibaldi himself in 1849-50, following the fall of the revolutionary Roman Republic.

¹⁶ The child's mother, who had fled Naples along with the Chimentis in order to give birth abroad, apparently died in childbirth.

¹⁷ Marchetti, "Elisa Chimenti," 140.

¹⁸ Chimenti attended The Alliance Israélite Universelle in Tangier, which had a largely secular curriculum; about half of the students were non-Jews, and included Muslims and Christians. Teachers at the school were as diverse as the students.

¹⁹ According to the Chimenti Foundation's website's biographical entry compiled by Tamburlini, Chimenti spent at least two years studying in Germany, where she also appears to have published her first works, written in German: *Meine Lieder* (1911) and *Taitouma* (1913). In 1912, Chimenti married a Polish man, Fritz Dombrowski—a naturalized German expatriate—in the Purísima Concepción Catholic Church of Tangiers, but the couple separated almost immediately and eventually divorced.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Maria Pia Tamburlini, "Elisa Chimenti," in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 874 (our translation).

²² Marchetti, "Elisa Chimenti," 145. However, according to Marchetti, *ibid.*, she was assigned an "indennizzo" (indemnity) in 1969, shortly before her death.

Italian grade-school children. Though some scholars have reductively identified her as Jewish,²³ Chimenti would also become a *fqui*, or scholar of the Koran, and the only European scholar (and woman) of her time to teach at the Abdellah Guennoun Koranic School in Morocco.²⁴ Her linguistic abilities and mastery of various religious texts laid the framework for much of her later scholarship, including collections of translated indigenous folktales, songs, and oral poetry: *Èves marocaines* (1934), *Chants de femmes arabes* (1942), and *Légendes marocaines* (1959).²⁵ The volume *Le sortilège (et autres contes séphardites)* (1964) is a collection of exemplary tales—parables of sorts—set in the early twentieth century, written in the plain, colloquial style of an inveterate storyteller, infused with Moroccan, Spanish, and Haketia phrases and references to popular folk and religious beliefs, about inter-faith, inter-ethnic, and inter-class conflict and dialogue between the poor Moroccan Jews of the *mellahs* (Jewish quarters) and their Muslim and Christian neighbors and countrymen, as well as the layered and intricate connections of their shared, more remote history and overlapping cultural roots in Al-Andalus and across the Mediterranean.²⁶

As a Mediterranean-Italian who was also deeply *Tangeroise*, one of Chimenti’s deepest desires—even in the period in which she lived of colonial conflict, totalitarianism, poverty, and global wars (including the Cold War)—was to promote better reciprocal understanding and intercultural and interfaith connections across the Mediterranean. She published primarily in French, a choice that not only allowed her works to reach a greater readership, but that also reflects the author’s perennial focus—similarly evident in her pedagogical, ethnographic, and journalistic endeavors—on facilitating transcultural dialogue within the Mediterranean and beyond. Chimenti often used language strategically to these ends, or, in the words of Sicilian author Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, language becomes for Chimenti a “strumento conoscitivo delle esperienze altre” (“a cognitive tool to investigate experiences that are ‘other’”).²⁷ Myriad explanatory footnotes and a glossary of terms in Darija, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic, accompany each of Chimenti’s texts, in which numerous North African regional dialects figure prominently. While Chimenti translates and explains some terms in her notes,²⁸ many are undefined. Often, idioms that do not exist in French are translated literally from Arabic, such as the expression that Allah has “rempli,”²⁹ or filled, a home, which indicates that a child has been born there. In the 2000 Italian translation, the editors chose to maintain this *creolizzazione*

²³ Yvette Bénayoun-Szmidt makes this claim in her analysis of Chimenti’s representations of Judeo-Moroccan traditions. Yvette Bénayoun-Szmidt, “De la contiguïté à l’espace, de la fusion au schisme: Traversées interculturelles chez Elisa Chimenti et Sapho,” in *Colonizer and Colonized*, ed. Theo d’Haen and Patricia Krüs, vol. 2 (Atlanta, GA: Éditions Rodopi, 2000), 451.

²⁴ Chimenti was invited to teach classical Arabic at the school in 1936. In addition to the Koran, several languages, history, geography, and philosophy were taught at the school, which had a nationalist orientation and was therefore barely tolerated by the colonial French administration. See Marchetti, “Elisa Chimenti,” 148.

²⁵ The only volume available in English is a translation of *Légendes marocaines*: Elisa Chimenti, *Tales and Legends of Morocco*, trans. Arnon Benamy (New York: Ovolnsky, 1965).

²⁶ See Yvette Bénayoun-Szmidt, “Mémoire culturelle judéo-marocaine en miroir dans *Le sortilège (et autres contes séphardites)* d’Elisa Chimenti,” in *Femmes écrivains en Méditerranée*, ed. Vassiliki Lalagianni (Paris: Publisud 1999), 77-93.

²⁷ Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, “Elisa Chimenti vista dall’Italia,” in Elisa Chimenti, *Al cuore dell’harem*, ed. Emanuela Benini (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2000), 276.

²⁸ In the Italian translation, *Al cuore dell’harem* underwent a significant transformation: Chimenti’s notes were removed. This might reflect the publisher’s desire to market the book as a novel. We are grateful to Anas Rkha Chaham for his help with translations from Moroccan Arabic and invaluable cultural insights during the research for this study.

²⁹ Chimenti, *Au cœur du harem*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 198.

(creolization) as outlined in the editor's note, which explains, "un figlio che nasce *riempie la casa dei genitori*" ("a child when born *fills the house* of her parents").³⁰ Such linguistic hybridity lends a certain intentional strangeness to Chimenti's texts, interrupting the process of reading in French, the language of colonial rule in Morocco, and effectively reminding readers of their immersion in a universe that may not be their own.

Chimenti's predilection for French does not, however, constitute an attempt to appropriate Moroccan oral traditions; it is rather a practical necessity, as many North African dialects are unwritten. In her survey of Moroccan women's literature, Suellen Diaconoff argues convincingly that all written languages (modern standard and classical Arabic included) are non-native for Moroccan authors, and thus equally valid, or invalid, choices for publication.³¹ Writing in Arabic for a Moroccan audience, or, for that matter, in a hybrid mode that captures the flavor of the Moroccan-Arabic diglossia but is comprehensible for Arabic-speaking readers the world over, requires considerable skill and a willingness to innovate. Nevertheless, in recent years a growing pool of Moroccan women authors have been up to the task. Leila Abouzeid's novella, *Am Al Fil*, which originally appeared in installments in the *Al Mithaq* newspaper in Rabat in 1983,³² combines narration in modern standard literary Arabic with dialogue written in a modified Moroccan vernacular.³³ Moroccan poet and critic Ahmed Abdeslam Al Bakkali notes Abouzeid's novel use of language, declaring, "I think she has come out with a new style, a mosaic of expression to describe her old and yet new world."³⁴ For the trilingual Abouzeid, writing in Arabic was both a deeply personal choice and a strategic decision, as Elizabeth Fernea explains in her 1989 introduction to the novella: "[Leila Abouzeid] learned both French and Arabic but decided to write in Arabic, not only because she believes it is the proper language of her religious faith and therefore her country, but because the audience she wishes to reach lives in the wider Arabo-Islamic world, where Arabic, not French or English, is the lingua franca of the majority of the people."³⁵

Writing Moroccan literature in French entails similar challenges, and can be controversial, compelling many Moroccan authors to defend their choice of idiom as a legitimate means of expression that does not detract from their Moroccan-ness.³⁶ For many, writing in French does not actually represent a choice. This is the case for Moroccan author Siham Benchekroun, who, like many Moroccans, considers herself illiterate in Arabic. She explains in her essay, "Être une femme, être marocaine, écrire":

Je me souviens d'avoir eu à justifier plusieurs fois le choix d'écrire en langue française, notamment à l'occasion de signatures de mes livres [...] En réalité, il ne s'agit pas d'un véritable choix puisque je me considère analphabète pour l'arabe,

³⁰ Chimenti, *Al cuore dell'harem*, 9.

³¹ Diaconoff, *The Myth of the Silent Woman*, 9-11.

³² Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant*, trans. Barbara Parmenter (Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 1989), ix.

³³ Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "Introduction," in *ibid.*, xxvi.

³⁴ Qtd in *ibid.*, xxii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxi.

³⁶ The complex and fraught relationship of language, literature, gender, and nation is apparent in the debate surrounding the various appellatives in French for Moroccan women's literature, described variously as "Littérature marocaine féminine de langue française, les écrivaines de langue française au Maroc, auteurs femmes au Maroc, écrivaines marocaines, littérature marocaine féminine francophone, roman féminin au Maroc, romancières marocaines" or even "écriture féminine au Maroc." (Najib Redouane, *Écritures féminines au Maroc: Continuité et évolution* [Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006], 34).

et que je suis parfaitement incapable de rédiger quoique ce soit dans cette langue pour laquelle j'ai par ailleurs la plus grande fascination.

Tout en cultivant une vraie passion pour le français que je parle et lis, comme d'autres marocains, depuis la plus tendre enfance, et tout en le considérant comme ma langue, je ne me sens évidemment pas moins marocaine que quiconque mais j'avoue avoir le sentiment d'être privée d'une richesse qui pourtant m'appartient.³⁷

(I remember having to justify my choice to write in French multiple times, notably during book signings [...] In reality it was not truly a choice, as I consider myself illiterate in Arabic, and I am perfectly incapable of drafting anything at all in that language, for which I otherwise hold the greatest fascination.

Though I have cultivated a genuine passion for French, which I have spoken and read, like other Moroccans, since my early childhood, and though I consider French my language, I obviously do not feel less Moroccan than anyone else, though I must admit that I feel deprived of a wealth which, nevertheless, belongs to me.)

Indeed, many renowned North African women authors such as Fatima Mernissi and Assia Djebar write in a hybrid form of French, folding terms and expressions in Darija and other Moroccan dialects directly into a French matrix, in the same way that many Moroccans speak. This choice not only imparts an effect of realism and an oral quality to their texts, but it also provides a literary space for diverse linguistic systems (and their cultural baggage) to interact. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes in "Discourse in the Novel," hybridization "is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the area of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor."³⁸ Such linguistic hybridity corresponds to the discursive hybridity of many Mediterranean and North African women's texts, which frequently treat issues at the intersection of hierarchical structures governing race, class, religious, and gender inequalities. Chimenti enacts these encounters textually through both language and subject matter, confirming the transnational and feminist scope of her work. It is in this spirit that Cutrufelli describes Chimenti's writing as "scrittura di confine" ("border writing"), by which she means, "non la linea che separa e distingue ma, viceversa, il termine comune di più territori. Un punto di confluenza, insomma" ("not the line that separates and distinguishes but, on the contrary, the shared terminus of multiple territories. In other words, a point of confluence").³⁹ As an intellectual Mediterranean woman, Chimenti is in some ways also comparable to the writer, art historian, and cultural critic Toni Maraini, who lived, conducted research and taught in Morocco from 1964 to 1987, and wrote fiction, poetry, memoirs and essays in both French and Italian, and engaged like Chimenti in intercultural research that sought to maintain a Mediterranean perspective transcending national and religious borders and to defuse the

³⁷ Siham Benchekroun, "Être une femme, être marocaine, écrire," in *Le récit féminin au Maroc*, ed. Marc Gontard (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 21.

³⁸ Michail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 358.

³⁹ Cutrufelli, "Elisa Chimenti vista dall'Italia," 275.

contemporary rhetoric of the so-called clash of civilizations.⁴⁰ In *Au cœur du harem*, as in her non-fiction and anthropological texts, Chimenti blends influences from Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and pre-Muslim North African beliefs and folklore, all of which were present in her adopted hometown, Tangier.

Chimenti's Tangier

Located at the entrance to the Mediterranean across from Gibraltar, Tangier was first settled by the ancient Greeks and Phoenicians as a base for Mediterranean trade, and named for the goddess Tinge, who according to legend pulled Europe apart from Africa to form the Strait of Gibraltar. In “La légende à Tanger,” a text stylistically between poetry and prose that dates from 1932 but was only published in 1959 in the volume *Légendes Marocaines*, in which it functions as a kind of introduction, Chimenti refers to Tinge’s legend as part of a veritable tapestry or—rather—a palimpsest, layered with traces of myths, folklore, stories, and memories from multiple traditions and interconnected and overlapping histories and presences: Arab, Berber, Greek, Phoenician, Roman, Latin, African, European, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, British, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, Mediterranean and Atlantic, Occidental and Oriental. Tangier is cast by Chimenti as a city that with each era integrated a new layer of itself and incorporated multiple, overlapping, metamorphic stories and legends into its rich body of oral narratives in which “les pays et les siècles se confondent” (“countries and centuries blend”).⁴¹

⁴⁰ See Toni Maraini, *Ballando con Averroè. Racconti di viaggio in un mondo musulmano che non fa paura* (Alberobello: Poiesis, 2015), and id., “L’Italia, è ancora un paese mediterraneo?,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/99r9m42v>.

⁴¹ Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 36. Tangier’s colonial history is a long and ancient one. Tangier became a Roman colony under Claudius. Successive waves of invaders and colonizers subsequently left their mark on the city and contributed to its famed cosmopolitanism. The Vandals came from Spain in AD 429 but eventually lost control of the area after a wave of Berber uprisings. Tangier was then conquered by Belisarius for the Byzantine empire, and then by the Arabs, who invaded around 705 and quelled the Berber tribes before launching the Muslim invasion of Spain. Although Berber revolts never ceased, Tangier was dominated by various Arab dynasties and sultans before finally coming in 1147 under the Almohad Caliphate rule, during which the port city thrived. A long period of political and economic decline followed. Piracy from Tangier flourished from around the end of the fourteenth century in the Strait of Gibraltar, spilling into the North Atlantic until the beginning of the Portuguese colonial expansion. The Portuguese repeatedly laid siege to Tangier and eventually captured the city in 1471, proceeding to turn the main Mosque into a Cathedral and starting the Catholicizing process to be continued by the Spanish under Iberian rule through 1661. The city was handed to the British as a wedding gift for Charles II in 1662 as a dowry of the Portuguese Infanta, and British troops took over the city, starting a period of unwelcome and ruinous occupation and prompting a mass exodus not only of the city’s Portuguese residents but also of the many Jewish residents, suspected of being disloyal. Sultan Moulay Ismail of Morocco gained control of the devastated city only in 1679. The city was repopulated with Berbers from the surrounding areas and, under a series of powerful governors, remained relatively independent even from the sultan of Morocco until the nineteenth century, when Tangier was effectively still under British dominance (they were seen as allies against Spanish and French aggressors) and North Africa and Morocco once again became an area “of interest” to European colonial powers, including Germany and eventually Italy. Although there is no single scholarly source on the topic of Tangier’s long colonial history, a brief account may be found in Marian Aguiar, “Tangier,” in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, ed. Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119-20. See also Rom Landau, *Portrait of Tangier* (London: Hale, 1952), and Lawdom Vaidon, *Tangier: A Different Way* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977).

To Edmondo De Amicis, Tangier had appeared as a site on the edge of a separate, entirely other world, and Gibraltar the final frontier of the civilized, i.e. European world.⁴² For Chimenti, instead, Tangier always wavers in between, in a kind of rich liminal zone comparable in some ways to the Arabic *barzakh*, a concept of in-betweenness with roots in Sufi Islam.⁴³ Many well-known writers, such as William Burroughs (who wrote parts of the 1959 novel *The Naked Lunch* while living in Tangier) and Paul Bowles (who first stayed in Tangier in 1931 with Aaron Copland, and eventually settled there in the medina in 1947 with his wife Jane—though both were publicly known to have same-sex partners), contributed to Tangier’s image as a dangerous, seedy border zone, a frontier at the end of civilization. This vision was based mostly on the reputation of Tangier after the creation of the International Zone in 1923. But, as pointed out by Claudio Minca and Lauren Wagner, and implied in Chimenti’s texts, Tangier’s cosmopolitan nature is not the product of the French occupation or of the later creation of the International zone. It was always somehow already there; its origins are “spectral.”⁴⁴ Unlike the better known protagonists of literary Tangier, Chimenti’s writing neither reflects “an orientalist fetishization of Moroccan life and practices” (as has been claimed of Paul Bowles’ writing), nor does it bemoan the inability for “Westerners to connect to Moroccans on their terms,” as has been stated of Jane Bowles’.⁴⁵ While Jane Bowles tried and failed to become a part of the social life of other women in the town she made her own, for her husband, the distance between Arabs and Westerners was impenetrable and any desire to overcome it futile.⁴⁶ Chimenti, on the other hand, due in part to her prodigious linguistic and communicative skills, became *Tangeroise* while still retaining her Mediterranean Italian-ness.⁴⁷

⁴² Edmondo De Amicis, *Marocco* (1876; repr. Milan: Treves, 1915), 1-2: “Lo stretto di Gibilterra è [...] di tutti gli stretti quello che separa più nettamente due paesi più diversi [...]. In Gibilterra [...] ferve ancora la vita affrettata, rumorosa e splendida della città europea; e un viaggiatore di qualunque parte d’Europa sente l’aria della sua patria nella comunanza di un’infinità d’aspetti e di consuetudini. A tre ore di là, il nome del nostro continente suona quasi come un nome favoloso; cristiano significa nemico, la nostra civiltà è ignorata o temuta o derisa [...] scomparso finanche ogni indizio della vicinanza dell’Europa. S’è in un paese sconosciuto, al quale nulla ci lega e dove tutto resta da imparare. Dalla spiaggia [di Tangeri] si vede la costa europea, ma il cuore se ne sente già smisuratamente lontano, come se quel breve tratto di mare fosse un oceano e quei monti azzurri un’illusione” (“The Strait of Gibraltar [...] of all the straits is the one that most neatly separates two very different countries [...] In Gibraltar [...] the hurried, noisy, and splendid life of the European city still hums; and travelers from any part of Europe sense the air of their homeland in an untold number of shared aspects and customs. Three hours from there, the name of our continent sounds almost out of a fairy-tale; ‘Christian’ means enemy, our civilization is unknown, feared, or derided [...] any hint of Europe’s proximity, vanished. One is in an unknown country, with which we have no ties and where everything remains to be learned. From the beach [of Tangier] one can see the European coast, but already one’s heart feels disproportionately distant, as if that short stretch of sea were an ocean and those blue mountains an illusion”).

⁴³ Referring back to Ibn Al ’Arabi, William Chittick describes it as follows in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989: 117-18): “A *barzakh* is something that separates [...] two other things while never going to one side [...] as for example the line that separates shadow from sunlight [...] Any two adjacent things are in need of a *barzakh* which is neither one nor the other but which possesses the power [...] of both.” See also Minca and Wagner, *Moroccan Dreams*, 244, to whom we refer for their astute cultural reading of Tangier as a *barzakh* of sorts.

⁴⁴ Minca and Wagner, *Moroccan Dreams*, 252.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 268-69. See in particular Jane Bowles’ story entitled “East Side: North Africa,” *Mademoiselle*, April 1951, 125, 159-63.

⁴⁷ Minca and Wagner, *Moroccan Dreams*, 271, acknowledge that Chimenti’s 1942 collection, *Chants de femmes arabes (Rennaiat Ennessa)*, “come[s] from a collective Mediterranean history that is located in Tangier,” unlike

Like her characters in *Au coeur du harem*, Chimenti's own freedom of expression was in many ways limited by her environment and historical context. In 1890, the Chimenti family had moved from Tunis to Tangier after Rosario accepted the invitation of Moroccan Sultan Moulay el Hassan (Hassan I) to become his personal physician. They arrived in a Morocco that, despite the sultan's best efforts to increase international commerce and grow the economy, was rapidly losing land, power, and autonomy to the dominant European powers—namely Spain, England, and France.⁴⁸ After the French occupation of Tunisia in 1881, Italy had also become particularly concerned with “the Moroccan question,” though its imperial fantasies all but vanished for a while after the defeat at Adowa, only to be resurrected with vigor in 1911-12, with the conquest of Libya.⁴⁹ An agreement in December 1900 had set aside this modest prize in return for Italy's recognition of future French preponderance in Morocco.⁵⁰ Tangier's location made it particularly desirable and a center of commercial and political rivalry. Under European rule, the population suffered previously unknown levels of poverty and hunger, and criminality rose, with murders, riots, and attacks against Europeans. When Rosario Ruben Chimenti became the personal physician of Hassan I, Elisa's father also began volunteering his medical services to the poor. Thereafter, young Elisa had the opportunity to travel widely in the mountainous Rif region of Morocco, serving as her father's translator and medical assistant and often lodging with local women during these journeys. Her biographers seem to agree that it was at this juncture that the future scholar first cultivated an interest in what would become a lifelong passion: Moroccan women's social practices, oral poetry, songs, folklore, and traditional wisdom, all of which are examined in *Au cœur du harem*. This is not to posit a biographical reading of Chimenti's novel, but instead to speak to the richness of her sources and the extent of her personal experience with Moroccan oral traditions.⁵¹

Using the excuse that it needed to defend its own citizens, France had occupied Oujda and then Casablanca in 1907, and four years later Fez, regardless of the protests of Germany, which reaffirmed its commitment to sovereignty over Morocco. Frequent tribal disputes across a vast and rugged terrain only further loosened the sultan's grasp, and with the signing of the Treaty of Fez on March 13, 1912, the French Protectorate was established, stripping Hassan I of all but nominal power.⁵² The rest of Morocco was partitioned between France and Spain, and World War I put an end to any German interest in the future of Tangier; native resistance in Morocco was entirely wiped out.⁵³ After 1923, Tangier was turned into an “International Zone” of which

Bowles' adaptations of Mohammed Mrabet's story-telling, which are presented as “exotic kernels stolen from an inexplicable other culture.”

⁴⁸ Pennell, *Morocco Since 1830*, 146-52.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87-88, 118.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵¹ Henri Duquaire, in his 1942 introduction to *Chants de femmes arabes (Rennaïat ennessa)*, claims to have sent copies of Chimenti's translated songs to a “government official” in Tangier in order to evaluate their authenticity, where “there was an investigation and [the official] responded that the translations were absolutely faithful” (“Je les envoyai à Tanger au Commissaire du Gouvernement auprès du Mendoub: il fit une enquête et me répondit que ces traductions étaient d'une sincérité absolue”). Henri Duquaire, “Introduction,” in Elisa Chimenti, *Chants de femmes arabes (Rennaïat ennessa)* (1942), as reprinted in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 784. The introduction by Duquaire, himself an author of books on Morocco and Moroccan literature, manages to be decidedly Orientalist in tone and content, as well as condescending and misogynistic.

⁵² Pennell, *Morocco Since 1830*, 129-36.

⁵³ There was constant resistance to foreign rule, most notably in the five-year rebellion of Abd-al-Karim. Abd-al-Karim won a sensational victory at Anwal in 1921, over a Spanish army of vastly superior size. He won control of

initially France, Spain, and Britain, and later Portugal, Sweden, Holland, Belgium, Italy, and the USA all got a piece. Mussolini had revived Italian resentment at the European carve-up, and he kept up the pressure to have Italy's presence as a Mediterranean power officially recognized in Tangier's new Statute until he succeeded in July 1928, after sending the Italian fleet to parade off the coast of the city.⁵⁴ Although the Italian community in Tangier was small, Mussolini strove to make Italian prestige felt there, in view of possible future growth of the Italian presence and influence in the area, through a number of new official institutions, including a post office, a telegraph and radio station, religious institutions, a clinic, schools, and even an airport.⁵⁵

After the death of Rosario, Elisa and her mother dedicated much of their lives to teaching language, founding the first Scuola italiana di Tangeri in 1914,⁵⁶ where Elisa would teach Italian, German, Arabic, French, and English.⁵⁷ In 1919, the Chimentis' school became a public school officially administered by the Società Dante Alighieri, though still housed in their home, and was financed through private donations. The Chimentis eventually received a small, regular salary from the Italian Government. A memorandum about the new school dated February 13, 1919 describes Elisa as “una maestra italiana trovata sul posto, che, con una retribuzione di 100 franchi mensili, si è assunta l'obbligo di impartire le lezioni per i corsi elementari prestando anche i locali occorrenti” (“an Italian teacher found on the spot, who, with a monthly salary of 100 francs, assumed the responsibility of giving lessons for the elementary courses and even provided the necessary classroom space”).⁵⁸ While the role of school teacher was commonly accepted as appropriate for women in Liberal and then Fascist Italy, Elisa's Mediterranean-Italian and Tangerois cosmopolitanism was unreconcilable with Mussolini's vision of Italian power in the Mediterranean. The Chimentis' school was relocated to the Palais des Institutions Italiennes, which was sold by the Moroccan sultan in 1927 to the Associazione Nazionale Italiana per i Missionari all'Estero—which was acting on behalf of the Italian Fascist government—and renamed Palazzo Littorio. Shortly after Mussolini sent the navy to parade off the coast of Tangier, the Chimentis refused to cooperate with the agenda and the new teaching programs of Mussolini's fascist regime, and the Italian government expelled the two women, leaving them unemployed and nearly destitute.⁵⁹ This would have lasting economic consequences for Elisa Chimenti, who would struggle to make ends meet for the rest of her life, despite partially returning to her teaching position in the Italian school—but only as a substitute teacher—in 1945, after a long legal battle with the Italian state.⁶⁰

Starting around 1928 and continuing until 1943, in spite of their poverty and the harassment she and her mother suffered because of the Fascist regime, Elisa held a weekly gathering at her

the Rif until his final defeat in 1926 by a massive joint French and Spanish force headed by Philippe Pétain. See Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 104-10.

⁵⁴ Pennell, *Morocco Since 1830*, 196.

⁵⁵ Francesco Tamburini, “Le istituzioni italiane di Tangeri (1926-1956): ‘quattro noci in una scatola’, ovvero, mancati strumenti al servizio della diplomazia,” *Africa, Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 61, no. 3-4 (2006): 396-434.

⁵⁶ Benini, “Elisa Chimenti: una donna mediterranea,” 56.

⁵⁷ Tamburlini, “Elisa Chimenti,” in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 876.

⁵⁸ Tamburini, “Le istituzioni italiane di Algeri,” 399.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 413.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 413, and Tamburini, “Elisa Chimenti,” in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 875. The Chimentis finally won a small settlement from the Italian state, which had previously been condemned by the Tangier mixed tribunals to pay reparations to them, though only in 1944. It was finally paid only in 1950 (at a greatly reduced value due to inflation). The school still functions today in Tangier, run by the Chimenti foundation in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute.

home on Rue Benchimol in Tangier, attended by Moroccans and Europeans, Russian exiles, scholars, novelists and journalists, historians and clergymen, rabbis, Jewish community leaders, and Franciscan friars. She also held a weekly reception in her home for simpler people from the community, and was very active in charity, undertaking various initiatives for the relief of poverty and hunger in the Rif region. After the war and through the 1950s, younger friends who often visited Chimenti included Lalla Fatima Zohra, daughter of Moulay Abdelazi (Sultan Mohammed V) and his first wife. Zohra had attended the Italian school in Tangier and later, in 1969, became an advocate of Moroccan women, a feminist, and founder of the Union nationale des femmes marocaines.⁶¹

Chimenti built on her father's collection and accumulated a huge library over the years, keeping up with the works of Italian women writers and intellectuals, among other authors. According to her close friend, confidante, secretary, and later her literary executor, Ahmed Benchekroun, Chimenti was a tireless writer and conversationalist.⁶² In the 1930s, Chimenti also started writing for newspapers and journals, and her articles appeared in *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Maroc Monde*, *Mauritania*, *La Dépêche Marocaine*, *La Vita dell'Africa* and *Il Giornale di Tangeri*. She also wrote a series of seventy-nine stories about "Les petits blancs marocains," the European, mostly working-class immigrants—many of them socialists or anarchists—and pioneering entrepreneurs who lived and worked in Tangier during the early twentieth century and the international period, gathering regularly at Sorbier's pharmacy in Tangier where Chimenti herself had been a regular.⁶³ The stories were published in *Le Journal de Tanger* and *Maroc Monde* in the 1950s and 1960s, but never collected in a single volume.

Tangier between the two World Wars was in many ways a city of unregulated freedoms—it was, among other things, a free port where it was extremely advantageous to conduct business. About 30,000 Muslims, 12,000 Jews, and 8,000-odd Europeans resided in the city. In June 1940, Spanish troops occupied Tangier while the Nazis were taking Paris. In 1944, the Istiqlal (Independence) party was formed, with the sultan of Morocco giving tacit support. In 1952, France finally attempted decisive action against the independence movement and the Istiqlal leaders were arrested. In 1953, the French Protectorate authorities deposed Sultan Mohammed V and sent him into exile, first to Corsica, then to Madagascar, but Mohammed V continued to militate for independence via broadcasts on Radio Tangier. The installation of a puppet sultan inflamed nationalist passions, and there was an increase in terrorism followed by an armed uprising in 1955, which coincided with France's greater crisis in Algeria; Mohammed V was allowed to return in 1955, and in 1957 he officially became the first King of Morocco.

Although in 1945 Tangier had been restored to its pre-war international status, in 1956, shortly after Moroccan independence, the city was reunited with the rest of the country, losing its "international zone" status. It was immediately placed under military occupation by the Moroccan army, while a moralizing campaign was launched to shut down the city's nightlife and to arrest Muslims suspected of straying from the faith. During the Interzone period, the city had been characterized by great cultural diversity and freedom. Some of the Americans who resided or turned up in Tangier from the 1930s on were escaping a repressive, homophobic society.

⁶¹ "Lalla Fatima Zohra, la princesse des humbles," Bladi.net, May 22, 2002, <https://www.bladi.net/lalla-fatima-zohra-la-princesse-des-humbles.html>.

⁶² Ahmed Benchekroun, "Préface," in Chimenti, *Anthologie*. The foundation's archive still holds a treasure trove of unpublished manuscripts, listed on the foundation's website.

⁶³ The pharmacy had been an informal literary circle where—among other activities—multilingual poetry readings were held.

Expatriates formed nearly half the population. Exiles, socialites, artists, currency speculators, drug addicts, spies, and eccentrics from a variety of nations were able to live and thrive in Tangier without valid identification documents.⁶⁴ When the Interzone period ended, Tangier entered a long period of economic decline, though its famed cosmopolitan and countercultural atmosphere lived on at least until Moroccan independence. But King Hassan II (Mohammed V's son) despised the city and starved it of funding. Unemployment soared and street hustlers multiplied; the number of expats dwindled. After Tangier was annexed by Morocco, the number of Jews also fell rapidly, from about 17,000 to 4,000 in 1968.⁶⁵

The creation of the *Mudawana* (Moroccan family code) in Moroccan law in the 1950s represented a major step in the political and legal unification of Morocco after it gained independence. Written by a group of male religious scholars working under the auspices of the monarchy, it drew heavily on classical *Maliki* law (part of the *Shari'a*, Islamic law). Whereas the French had ruled Morocco with a policy of legal pluralism (maintaining, for example, the existence of Berber customary law for Berber communities), the new *Mudawana* was intended to signify the nation's Islamic identity. Relying primarily on Islamic sources, it codified the system of existing and purportedly immutable patriarchal, kin-based social structures, including polygamy, and thus contributed to the subordination of women. Gender equality advocates point out its particular significance for women, as the *Mudawana* governs the age at which women may be married, issues of divorce and child custody, and their right to work and travel outside the home.⁶⁶ The *Mudawana* enshrined many negative societal attitudes towards women, including hostility towards women's singing for a diverse audience.⁶⁷

Musical Languages and Musicality in Chimenti

In *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, Iain Chambers remarks that in the Mediterranean, “musical languages invariably signify and sound the composite realization of a differentiated communality; they give *voice* to the invisible.”⁶⁸ Many of Chimenti's texts share a recurrent theme: a focus on women's voices and songs that resonate across the boundaries of varied origins, ethnicities, and faiths. Published the year of the ratification of the *Mudawana* (1958), Chimenti's *Au cœur du harem* narrates the lives of a dynamic and diverse group of women living in sexual servitude with unprecedented depth, nuance, and subtle humor. Aided by her research and extensive personal contact with Maghrebi women in their homes, Chimenti develops female characters that are complex and realistic, bearing little likeness to the portraits of odalisques lounging to music popularized by Orientalist artists such as Eugène Delacroix,⁶⁹ Ingres, or later Italian Orientalists such as Francesco Bellesio

⁶⁴ Boubkeour El Kouche, *Regarde, voici Tanger: Mémoire écrite de Tanger, depuis 1800* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 11-12.

⁶⁵ Michael M. Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco: 1862-1962* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983).

⁶⁶ Leila Hanafi, “Moudawana and Women's Rights in Morocco: Balancing National and International Law,” *Journal of International & Comparative Law* 18, no. 2 (2012): 516-29.

⁶⁷ See Rachel Newcomb, *Women of Fes. Ambiguities of Urban Life in Morocco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 52-78; 152-85.

⁶⁸ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 42.

⁶⁹ See for example the painting “Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement” (1834).

and Eugenio Zampighi.⁷⁰ Songs, poems, and prayers from Mediterranean traditions are transcribed directly into her novel, contributing to its musical lyricism while punctuating and defining its cadence. As Benini explains, “Nel libro si intuisce l’importanza fondamentale che hanno per l’autrice le cadenze—melodie, rumori, odori, luci, preghiere, stagioni—incastonate nella struttura del romanzo come in una *qasida* araba” (“In the book one senses the fundamental importance the author gives to cadences—melodies, sounds, odors, lights, prayers, seasons—nestled in the structure of the novel as in an arab *qasida*”).⁷¹ Anissa Benzakour Charmi goes a step further, lauding Chimenti’s poetic innovation and its significance for Moroccan literature: “Piena di aforismi e di poesie, la scrittura di Elisa Chimenti ha inaugurato un nuovo genere in questa letteratura: il romanzo-poema. Vari romanzi maghrebini entreranno, come i suoi, in questo spazio intermedio, distinguendosi in tal modo dal romanzo classico” (“Replete with aphorisms and with poetry, Elisa Chimenti’s writing inaugurated a new genre of this literature: the novel-poem. Various Maghrebi novels would enter, like hers, into this intermediate space, distinguished as such from the classic novel”).⁷²

Such discursive, musical hybridity has textual antecedents in Chimenti’s work. Prior to the publication of her novel, the author experimented with a text that similarly blends narrative fiction with anthropological and musicological study. *Chants de femmes arabes (Rennaiat ennessa)*, first published in 1942, begins with a scene in which a woman reads a work by the medieval Andalusian poet Ibn Sahl, transcribed directly into the text, while waiting to receive female neighbors in her home. The women sing both traditional and improvised songs, laugh, bicker, play instruments, and exchange gossip as they sew, paint, and weave, in a manner that recalls similar scenes in the later *Au cœur du harem*. While making music, the women comment on the art of oral poetry, music, and songs, and a number of technical clarifications are provided in the explanatory footnotes. Prose narration describes the women’s interactions between the songs, which are transcribed into the text:

– Une réunion sans musique ne saurait être parfaite dans le contentement, dit Madame Macnin qui a une jolie voix et tient à la faire admirer.

– Par Dieu, tu as raison, approuvent ses amies.

Forte de cette approbation, la jeune femme se lève, va chercher un luth dans la “chambre des hôtes,” se laisse tomber sur le tapis et compose sur un mode de *griha*, un poème léger: *la baladi*, ô mon pays!

Mais Messaouda qui, des vingt-quatre *noubas* venues d’Andalousie dont s’enrichit la musique marocaine, n’aime que le *zidan* aux harmonies suaves qu’admire tout l’Orient, Messaouda déclare que cette *qacida* manque de douleur et de larmes, qu’elle est “incomplète dans les regrets.”

Madame Macnin, offensée, se tait et passe l’instrument à Madame Étoile qui le caresse de ses doigts que teinte la pourpre du henné et “met chaque corde à l’épreuve” en lui faisant rendre le son qui lui est propre. “*Moual* (do), *remel* (ré), *hasin* (mi) *mesmum* (fa), *dil* (sol); *maia* (la), *sika* (si); *moual*, *sik*, *maia*, *dil*, *mesmum*, *hasin*, *remel*, *moual*,” disent les cordes, “*maia*,” répète-t-elle encore...

⁷⁰ See Rossana Bossaglia, ed., *Gli orientalisti italiani: cento anni di esotismo, 1830-1940* (Venice: Marsilio, 1998).

⁷¹ Benini, “Elisa Chimenti, donna mediterranea,” in Chimenti, *Al cuore dell’harem*, 267.

⁷² Anissa Benzakour Chami, “Elisa Chimenti vista dal Marocco,” in Elisa Chimenti, *Al cuore dell’harem* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 1999), 272-73.

“*Moual, remel, hasin, mesmum, dil, maia, sika, moual,*” dit la chanteuse qui commence sur le mode noble et inspire du “*rmel maia,*” la “prière du *Maghrib*”:

Prière du Maghrib,
Prières des prières.
Pluie de cendres

Prière du Maghrib,
Prières des prières.
Pluies de roses pâlies.⁷³

(“A gathering without music would not be perfectly satisfying,” says Madame Macnin, who has a pretty voice and likes having it admired.

“By God, you are right,” say her girlfriends approvingly.

Bolstered by their approval, the young woman gets up, goes to look for a lute in the “guestroom,” drops to the carpet and composes a little poem in the *griha* style: *la baladi*, O my country!

But Messaouda who, of all the twenty-four Andalusian *noubas* with which Moroccan music has been enriched, only likes the *zidan*, with its sweet harmonies admired in all the Orient, Messaouda declares that the *qacida* is lacking in pain and tears; that it is “incomplete in regret.”

Madame Macnin, offended, quiets down and passes the instrument to Madame Étoile, who caresses it with her fingers, tinted crimson with henna, and “puts each chord to the test” by making it play its own unique sound: “*Moual* (do), *remel* (ré), *hasin* (mi) *mesmum* (fa), *dil* (sol); *maia* (la), *sika* (si); *moual, sik, maia, dil, mesmum, hasin, remel, moual,*” say the cords, “*maia,*” she repeats once more...

“*Moual, remel, hasin, mesmum, dil, maia, sika, moual,*” says the songstress, who begins in the noble style inspired by “*rmel maia,*” the “prayer of the *Maghrib*”:

Prayer of the Maghrib,
Prayer of prayers.
Rain of ashes

Prayer of the Maghrib,
Prayer of prayers.
Rain of pale roses.)

In this brief but complex exchange, prose narration brushes with character dialogue; musical terminology in numerous languages abuts with an apparent French translation of the Arabic musical scale and of song lyrics, all punctuated by Chimenti’s didactic footnotes. It is often difficult to determine the source of the rich and varied enunciations, and translation occurs in different forms: sometimes spontaneously, as in the example of “*la baladi*” which is followed directly by the translation “ô mon pays,” and sometimes formally, as in the translation of the syllables representing the musical scale (themselves a transcription of musical notes into onomatopoeia), which are provided in parentheses. Even Chimenti’s personal opinion is intimated at the end of her explanatory note to “*rmel maia,*” which reads:

Mode caractérisé par un demi-ton dans les deux tétracordes de sa gamme entre la deuxième et la troisième note. *Moual, remel, hasin, mesmum, dil, maia, sika*: noms arabes des sept notes de la gamme tels que les a donnés Mohammed Ben Ali Sfinja et que **peu de musiciens marocains paraissent connaître.**⁷⁴

⁷³ *Chantes de femmes arabes*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 796-97.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 797, our emphasis.

(Style characterized by a half-tone in the two tetrachords of the range between the second and third note. *Moual, remel, hasin, mesmum, dil, maia, sika*: Arabic names for the seven notes of the range as they were given by Mohammed Ben Ali Sfinja, and which **few Moroccan musicians seem to know**.)

This dense anthropological, historical, poetic, and musicological exchange is inserted into a compact fictional frame story that is no less detailed: in a few lines, we learn that proud Madame Macnin has a pretty voice that she is eager to showcase, a petty squabble ensues between her and Messaouda, who has particular musical taste, and the fancifully named Madame Étoile, a gifted musician with henna on her hands, puts a stop to the argument with her song.

This clamorous exchange continues for several pages. Significantly, as the women leave, the narrator describes the songs that the women have improvised, “ignorées des hommes” (“unbeknownst to men”),⁷⁵ as a sort of universal experience for Moroccan women. This female “communauté des joies et des douleurs, des espoirs et des rêves” (“community of joys and pains, of wishes and dreams”)⁷⁶ is a space of creative expression, providing solidarity as well as a reprieve from the drudgeries of monotonous domestic lives. This notion would later become central to *Au cœur du harem*. As the fictional frame draws to a close, Chimenti elaborates a brief academic typology of popular women’s music. She differentiates popular Moroccan women’s music from several European musical traditions, including the Neapolitan *canzonetta*, Spanish *malagueñas*, and Germanic *Volkslieder*. Interestingly, the first-person plural is used in many possessives, indicating Chimenti’s own sense of Moroccan and collective Mediterranean belonging through terms such as “nos campagnes” (“our countryside”) and “notre sol” (“our soil”).⁷⁷ Chimenti’s introduction is immediately succeeded by transcriptions of the songs in a hybrid French, each presented with a title and occupying its own page, much like a collection of poetry. Some, such as “Matin de plaine” and “Nocturne,” are translated in rhymed verse, while others, like “Couchant” are in free verse. The meter, titles, punctuation, spacing, and order of the songs reflect Chimenti’s own artistic choices, demonstrating her perpetual willingness to mix prose fiction, anthropological study, song, and poetry in her work.

At the Heart of Chimenti’s Novel

With a similarly hybrid narrative structure, *Au cœur du harem* often reads like a compendium of Moroccan women’s wisdom: on adjoining rooftop terraces,⁷⁸ or over tea in the shadows of the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 800.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 803.

⁷⁸ These rooftop terraces—described in the novel as “la partie la plus importante de la maison pour une femme marocaine” (“the most important part of the house for a Moroccan woman”) (Chimenti, *Au cœur du harem*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 189) and “refuge inviolable des femmes marocaines aux heures de crise” (“inviolable refuge of Moroccan women in times of crisis”) (ibid., 367)—are hybrid themselves, in that they are exterior spaces that nonetheless belong to the domestic space of the interior. The terraces of adjoining *riyadhs* communicate, creating an important aboveground network of interconnecting feminine meeting spaces that are at once communal and private. Below, the labyrinth of alleyways constitutes a male-dominated public space that is off-limits to unaccompanied women. Interestingly, the cover image chosen for Chimenti’s *Anthologie*—a painting by Émile Deckers entitled *Le Café à la terrasse* (1934)—depicts four women taking their afternoon coffee together in precisely this space. The lounging women’s brightly colored garments reveal bare arms and feet in a tableau of intimate feminine community that is hidden in plain sight. On the evolution of the gendered organization of space in Morocco, and the development of feminist ideas, see Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, “Feminization of Public Space: Women’s

central courtyard, female characters construct their own microcosm through the flow and exchange of information, ideas, gossip, and songs. They share practical information about childbearing, becoming a wife, and keeping husbands faithful. Recipes for everything from beauty products to anti-aging serums, magic potions, and medical cures are swapped freely alongside cautionary tales of monsters, genies, and malicious spirits. Gossip is exchanged ruthlessly and menfolk are often dressed down, their bad behavior mocked and dissected in minute detail by the entire clan. Advice in these matters, solemn warnings, and life lessons are often relayed through songs and poetry.

Such oral exchanges are embedded in the main arc of the narrative, which follows the trials and tribulations of Lalla Sakina as her husband Si Bou-Djemaa, the French ambassador's bumbling Moroccan lackey, attempts to acquire a younger lover. Though Sakina, like many of the "épouses" ("wives")—as female characters are often called in the novel—is not permitted to leave the house unaccompanied and is entirely subject to her husband's will, she manages to construct a vibrant, alternative female community in her own living room. Her domestic confinement becomes an aperture to the world as the nexus of a female system of exchange develops in her home, where wives of diverse backgrounds come to seek refuge and respite from trying lives in the company of other women. Indeed, Sakina's most frequent guests come from far-flung regions of the Maghreb:

Madame Habiba, la fille du notaire, Lalla Rehimou,⁷⁹ Mennana l'*Aarbia*,⁸⁰ Zoubeida, la femme du professeur coranique, Hadidja, fille de Moha, une Rifaine, Mammât de la tribu des Tensamani, une Rifaine aussi, Kheira l'Algérienne, Zouleija, originaire de Tunis la Verte et beaucoup d'autres *Fassiat*⁸¹ ou Tétounaises.⁸²

(Madame Habiba, the daughter of the notary; Lalla Rehimou; Mennana the *Aarbia*; Zoubeida, the Koranic professor's wife; Hadidja, daughter of Moha, a woman from the Rif; Mammât of the Tensamani tribe, also from the Rif; Kheira the Algerian; Zouleija, originally from Tunis the Green; and many other *Fassiat* or Tétouan women.)

Sakina's foyer is also host to considerable domestic drama, as Si Bou-Djemaa brings home a series of slaves and concubines, to his wife's humiliation and dismay. Nearly all the newcomers are rejected by Sakina and her loyal maidservant Mennouch, with one notable exception: an ill-fated but strongminded young slave girl who refuses to sleep with the master, thereby earning the respect of the other women. In fact, Si Bou-Djemaa is eventually obligated to return each of the unlucky girls to the slave market. It is here that the power of the two women becomes manifest, as it is clear that, despite his best efforts, Sakina's husband is unable to exert total control over their community. Thus, the significance of the "harem" referenced in the title is multiple: it represents not only the congregation of multiple wives and concubines in one man's foyer, but

Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no. 2 (2006): 86-114.

⁷⁹ Elsewhere her name is spelled "Rhimou."

⁸⁰ (Ar) Berber woman.

⁸¹ (Ar) Women from Fez.

⁸² Chimenti, *Au cœur du harem*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 197.

also the female community that Sakina is able to build from the confinement of her own home, in spite of her husband's unwelcome intrusions.

Au cœur du harem is set sometime just before French colonization, as a number of European powers loom large in the background of the novel, though the French have not yet definitively seized control. The Tangier of Chimenti's text thus exists "agli albori del cosmopolitismo esogeno di Tangeri" ("at the dawn of exogenous cosmopolitanism in Tangier"),⁸³ as a multicultural crossroads of the Mediterranean on the eve of drastic change. Though it is set decades earlier, the novel was published in Paris in 1958, following the two World Wars and in a very different—even opposing—geopolitical context. *Au cœur du harem* was printed just two years after Moroccan independence, in the midst of the bloody Algerian war that would lead to Algeria's own independence from France, during the tumultuous revolutionary period that witnessed the end of French rule in North Africa. Written with the clarity of hindsight, Si Bou Djemaa's naive loyalty to "li Français" thus becomes an ironic commentary on the *chaouch's* lack of judgement, while his attempts to forcibly and violently subdue various women reproduce the very mechanisms of colonial dominance that would soon institutionalize foreign control over him and his countrymen. In Chimenti's novel, as in the real world, these two systems of violent control are interrelated: it was during the historical moment in which Arab nationalists were clamoring for independence from foreign control that Chimenti chose to write a novel about female resistance to patriarchal oppression.

As a woman resistant herself, Chimenti's choice of subject matter is a logical fit, but why the historical setting? This choice likely afforded her the necessary historical distance to critique her contemporary environment without danger or risk of censure. The newly independent Morocco was a chaotic and even perilous environment for those with dissenting opinions, and authoring a book seen as critical of the social situation under the ruling dynasty could have devastating consequences, especially for a woman. As Moroccan anthropologist Nadia Gessous explains in her study of the gendered dimension of state-sanctioned violence, *Women and Political Violence during the Years of Lead in Morocco*:

In Morocco, which experienced political repression and state-sponsored violence between 1956 and 1999, women suffered in large numbers. Whether as political activists who were punished by the state for their role in oppositional movements; as relatives (mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters but also aunts, nieces, and grand-daughters) of political activists and prisoners and thus considered guilty by association; or as members of communities that were collectively punished by the state; women from all backgrounds and regions of Morocco were victims of state sponsored violence. During this period known as the years of lead, it was not uncommon for the state to target women relatives of men who were arrested or disappeared for their political affiliations. Women were arbitrarily arrested, illegally detained in secret locations, interrogated, tortured, harassed, humiliated and degraded. They were kept under constant police surveillance and their freedom of movement was severely restricted.⁸⁴

⁸³ Benini, "Prefazione," in Chimenti, *Al cuore dell'harem*, 7.

⁸⁴ Nadia Gessous, *Women and Political Violence during the Years of Lead in Morocco*, Advisory Council on Human Rights, 2013, 15-16, <https://www.ccdh.org.ma/sites/default/files/documents/GUIDang.pdf>.

By setting her novel during a different but closely related historical period, Chimenti could recount the story of a group of rebellious women practicing creative resistance to the patriarchal power structures that confine them without risking reprisal.

Singing and Storytelling as Resistance

Sakina's home is a space defined by women's voices, where hostess and friends engage in an ephemeral exchange of ideas and artistic creation rivaling that of any European salon. Thus, *Au cœur du harem* is literally a choral novel, with women's stories and songs figuring prominently in its structure and firmly associated with female community. Sakina begins singing shortly after she is introduced, and when she finishes her song, the reader learns that, "comme la plupart des Marocaines, Sakina n'eût jamais fréquenté l'école coranique" ("like most Moroccan women, Sakina had never gone to Koranic school") but that she nonetheless knows some *hadiths* and parts of the Koran as well as many legends thanks to the lessons of her father and brothers.⁸⁵ Sakina's knowledge of orthodox religion and mythology has thus passed through her male relatives, while the history of her own sub-Saharan origins (perhaps "Guinéenne[s]" ["Guinean"] or "Soudanaise[s]" ["Sudanese"]) was passed down by Sakina's mother, through stories "peuplés de sorciers et de génies, résonnant du bruit des lances entrechoquées, traversés de cries de fauves et de sifflements de reptiles ou de flèches empoisonnées" ("peopled with sorcerers and genies, resonating with clashing spears, traversed by the cries of wild beasts, the hissing of reptiles or of poisoned arrows").⁸⁶ Both traditions are conferred orally, as, unlike her brothers, Sakina is illiterate, but this episode establishes a dialectic of male and female knowledge transmission and storytelling nonetheless: official History and the canon, studied in school, are the provenances of her father, while the history of her ancestors was her mother's and is guarded only in Sakina's memory. A shrewd woman of mixed origins with a prodigious memory, Sakina grasps both traditions, which are a source of inspiration for her and from which she draws indiscriminately when advising friends. Unsurprisingly, the recollections of Sakina's mother are colored by violence (we might even surmise that war or unrest motivated her migration), which is a common denominator in many of the stories of Chimenti's female characters. Domestic abuse is a regular complaint, as the novel reveals that many of Sakina's guests are subject to violence of all kinds at the hands of their husbands, ranging from human trafficking to beatings, rape, sequestration, monetary restrictions, emotional maltreatment, and the forced introduction of new wives, slaves, or concubines into their homes. They are not, however, complacent victims; listening to the advice of their friends, the women strategize and scheme, finding small means to resist their partners' violence—even a simple joke at a husband's expense can become a way of reclaiming agency—and carve out lives for themselves and their children. This is an important aspect of Chimenti's novel, and of women's histories in general, as pioneering author and women's historian Gerda Lerner explains: "Essentially, treating women as victims of oppression once again places them in a male-defined conceptual framework: oppressed, victimized by standards and values established by men. The true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in that male-defined world, *on their own terms*."⁸⁷ Though Lerner, a Jewish American Holocaust survivor, speaks from a different historical context, the same principals are

⁸⁵ Chimenti, *Au cœur du harem*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 191.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1-2 (1975): 6; original emphasis.

present in North African women's literature. Bernhardt Steadman sees them at work in Djébar's fiction in the Algerian context:

In her descriptions of all-female gatherings, Djébar provides another example of strategies secluded women use for survival and could adapt for revolutionary change. Sharing stories of their experiences, women break their imposed silence to express suffering and find solidarity with other women [...] The process is partial, limited by decorum and social constraints, but within these limits, the women break the silence that surrounds their experience. "Merriment or happiness" are also alluded to by the women in the group, providing a hint to the complexity of women's lives lived behind the veil that contradicts formulations of unceasing oppression and victimization.⁸⁸

In fact, the novel does not frame women merely as victims. Recounting personal experiences to friends, many of whom have similar stories to share, not only allows Sakina and her friends to narrate their histories as protagonists and make sense of their lives *together*, but it also functions practically as a means of relaying useful information for improving the women's conditions and resisting domestic abuse. Take for example the unfortunate story of Madame Rhimou, Sakina's best friend and "une épouse parfaite et une bonne mère" ("a perfect wife and good mother")⁸⁹: much to her chagrin, her husband forces her to accept a much younger sister-wife. After having four children, the new wife abandons the family for a lover, leaving Madame Rhimou to care for the younger woman's children and settle her debts. Though she has suffered immensely, Madame Rhimou ultimately expresses contentment with her situation because her husband is once again faithful to her. She concludes that it is useless to reflect on the years he caused her misery, affirming, "Il faut oublier pour pardonner et pardonner pour vivre" ("One must forget in order to forgive and forgive in order to live").⁹⁰ Her tale is followed by analogous stories from various women, each concluding with a (more or less) instructive moral: Habiba from Fez, married to an Algerian at the age of fifteen and later forced to accept a younger second wife with violent children, concludes that her mistake was giving her heart entirely to her husband, while now-deceased sister-wife Batoul was more desirable to him because she never let herself be "entièrement conquise" ("wholly conquered").⁹¹ When the unfaithful husband of beautiful Kheira the Algerian falls ill at the end of her tale, she concludes, "il vaut mieux pleurer un époux mort que de verser des larmes sur un époux vivant" ("it is better to mourn a dead husband than to shed tears for a living husband").⁹² Not only do the women find solace and diversion in this storytelling, but it also becomes an interpretive tool:

– Chose étrange, disait Sakina, lorsqu'elle parlait de ses amies, les maris de Rhimou, de Habiba, de Kheira et de toutes celles dont la fidélité et l'amour sont éprouvés, les négligent et se plaisent à les faire souffrir, cependant que *Si Omar*

⁸⁸ Bernhardt Steadman, "A Global Feminist Travels," 192-93.

⁸⁹ Chimenti, *Au cœur du harem*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 197.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 201.

l'époux de Mennana, celui de Zoulima l'indifférente et de tant d'autres qui ne valent pas un *dirhem*⁹³ leur demeurent attachés comme le lierre au mur.

– C'est, répondait la sage Tamo, parce que l'homme n'a que faire de la soumission et de la tendresse de l'épouse, un instinct est en lui pareil à celui du chasseur qui le pousse à suivre celle qui le fuit.⁹⁴

("Strangest thing," Sakina would say when she spoke of her friends, "the husbands of Rhimou, Habiba, Kheira, and of all those women whose fidelity and love are proven, neglect them and enjoy making them suffer, while *Si Omar*, Mennana's husband, the husband of Zoulima the indifferent, and those of many other women not worth a *dirhem* stay glued to them like ivy to a wall.")

"It's because," wise Tamo would respond, "men care little for wives' submission and tenderness. There's an instinct in them like that of a hunter, which pushes them to chase the woman who flees.")

Their understanding of and relation to their environment and partners evolves constantly, filtered through the prism of other women's experiences; nevertheless, the women's agency is often quite limited. In cases of extreme violence, the act of storytelling and of witnessing are often their sole consolation, as is the case with young Ambeur, the last slave girl the *Sidi* attempts to bring home. Unlike the other girls, who proved hostile, conniving, condescending, or unhelpful towards Sakina and friends, Ambeur introduces herself to the other women with a declaration of solidarity, entreating them to hear her words:

Madame, dit-elle à la femme du cavalier lorsqu'elle lui eut baisé la main, je ne veux pas rester chez toi, je ne veux pas être l'amie du maître... Celui-là seul qui a été cautérisé avec la braise en connaît la douleur. J'ai souffert une peine cruelle et ma joie s'est enfuie à jamais, comment pourrai-je causer le malheur d'une autre femme? Écoute ma parole et plains-moi, car ma tristesse est de celles qui ne connaissent pas la consolation et mon âme a pris en dégoût la vie.⁹⁵

("Madame," she said to the cavalier's wife once she had kissed her hand, "I do not want to remain in your home, I do not want to be the master's girlfriend... Only those who have been burned know the pain. I have suffered cruel punishment and my joy is forever lost, how could I be the cause of another woman's unhappiness? Listen to my words and mourn for me, because my sadness is that of the inconsolable and my soul has lost its taste for life.")

Ambeur begins her story immediately, recounting how she was raised in the countryside but sold, at five years old, into slavery by her father when famine threatened to starve their family. Her heart-wrenching account of the slave market, where Ambeur comes to the jarring realization that she is to be auctioned off alongside other women and girls, comes to a somewhat encouraging conclusion when she is sold to a benevolent and pious old woman, *Lalla Fathia*. The *Lalla* teaches her about Islam, showing Ambeur how to cook, sew, embroider, and make

⁹³ Moroccan currency.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

perfumes. She reflects, “J’étais sa compagne et sa confidente, elle me traitait comme une mère traite sa fille et moi je l’aimais comme l’enfant aime sa mère” (“I was her companion and her confidante. She treated me like a mother treats her daughter and I loved her like a child loves her mother”).⁹⁶ Though the maternal *Lalla* Fathia promises to free Ambeur, after the aged woman’s sudden death the girl is sold to a rich lord from Tangier, *Si* Driss Echarfi, whose wife detests the beautiful young slave. The description of the cruel wife’s marriage contract becomes the first opportunity for group reflection:

Sa femme, une *Fassia*,⁹⁷ était jeune et belle, mais violente et jalouse. Lors de son mariage, ses parents avaient stipulé dans le contrat dressé par les *adoul*⁹⁸ qu’elle serait seule maîtresse des choses et que son mari ne lui donnerait pas de coépouses, car c’est de la multiplicité des femmes dans un harem que naissent les rivalités et les haines qui peuvent engendrer la fureur et même le crime.

– Tu dis la vérité, Ambeur, soupira Sakina, et il faut convenir que les Chrétiens sont sages de n’avoir qu’une seule femme chez eux.

– Ils en ont d’autres au dehors, dit Mennouch, qui n’aimait pas les Chrétiens.⁹⁹

(His wife, a *Fassia*, was young and beautiful, but violent and jealous. At their marriage, her parents had stipulated in the contract drawn up by the *adoul* that she would be sole mistress and that her husband would not give her any sister-wives, because it is from the multiplicity of women in a harem that the rivalries and hatred that can engender fury, even crime, are born.

“You are right, Ambeur,” sighed Sakina, “and we must admit that the Christians are wise to have only one woman at home.”

“They have others outside,” said Mennouch, who did not like Christians.)

In this exchange, Ambeur ingratiates herself with the group, expressing a shared distaste for polygamy and the animosity it engenders among women. Thus, even in the face of the abhorrent violence that follows, Ambeur lays the primary responsibility for woman-on-woman violence on the oppressive social structures that prescribe their behavior and relations. At the same time, Mennouch’s quip expands the criticism to include Christian marital relations, leaving no space for patronizing images of the victimized Arab woman. Ambeur continues, describing how her new mistress forbade her from using musical instruments and from writing (which she had ostensibly learned from *Lalla* Fathia), forcing her instead to work in the kitchen. There, she quickly forms a community with the other slaves by telling fantastic stories and by preparing beauty products for them, eventually winning over even the mistress. Ambeur shares bits of these stories and several beauty recipes with Sakina’s circle as well, undoubtedly with the same intention. She explains how the slave women and their neighbors became her connection to the outside world: they would climb onto the rooftop terrace at dusk, “pour bavarder un moment avec les voisines et apprendre les nouvelles de la ville et du pays” (“to chat for a minute with the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁹⁷ (Ar) Woman from Fez

⁹⁸ (Ar) Notaries

⁹⁹ Ibid., 258.

neighbor women and hear the local and national news”).¹⁰⁰ On the same rooftop, caged canaries sing in the master’s room, reinforcing the image of imprisoned female voices.

One day, when the mistress is away and the other servants have gone to pray, *Si Driss Echarfi* rapes Ambeur, throwing her violently to the ground, “malgré ses cries et ses pleurs” (“despite her screams and cries”).¹⁰¹ He orders her to stay quiet and Ambeur obeys, until the day she is racked by labor pains. When the mistress interrogates her, Ambeur describes the rape, but the woman is unmoved. She tells the other slaves that Ambeur is possessed and dangerous to approach, ordering them to bring her a kiln filled with embers and incense to perform a sort of exorcism. After Ambeur gives birth to a son, the mistress gives her “une tisane au goût âcre” (“a sour-tasting herbal tea”)¹⁰²—ostensibly drug-laced—and the girl falls asleep. A weak groaning awakens her, and at Ambeur’s question, the mistress coldly confirms that the cries are coming from the newborn. The mistress holds Ambeur down, preventing her from approaching the ash-filled kiln until the next day, when the groaning has ceased and the house stinks of burnt flesh. Ambeur concludes her tragic account when she is sent again to the slave market. Her mistress’ brutal act of infanticide is met with cries and curses by Sakina’s circle, who immediately give Ambeur new clothing to wear and promise to keep her as long as she wishes. Sakina, who has herself lost an infant son, is empathetic, and during Ambeur’s short stay, she and numerous other women attempt to comfort the mourning young mother by suggesting alternative endings to her story, in which, for example, the mistress misled her to make her suffer but the boy is, in fact, alive. For two months, Ambeur refuses to sleep with *Si Bou-Djemaa*, who eventually capitulates and sells her at auction. A few months later, the women learn with dismay that Ambeur has ended her life by throwing herself into a well. Though Ambeur’s suicide is in many ways the consequence of trauma resulting from physical and psychological abuse, it is also an act of resistance: though she has likely been sold to another master against her will, she asserts active control over her own existence through auto-annihilation, honoring her solemn vow to never cause another woman’s suffering. She is ultimately able to craft her own subjectivity by telling her life story, which is kept alive by Sakina and friends, and concluding it on her own terms.

Storytelling plays a central role in this episode. First, it functions as a means for the young slave to ingratiate herself with unfamiliar women, solidifying the bonds of a new female community in both the tale she recounts and in the framing narrative. This bond is extended to neighboring networks of similarly confined women by the transmission of news and gossip from adjoining rooftop terraces, forming a sort of lifeline to the outside world. Ambeur’s stories are also the vehicle that conveys practical beauty recipes and potions: invaluable tools in the informal economy of the harem, in which youth and physical beauty can afford substantial advantages. Finally, her survivor testimony becomes the only consolation for the unfortunate girl, whose experiences of slavery, sequestration, abuse, rape, and infanticide ultimately drive her to suicide. The reader is left to wonder if such a tragic end might have been avoided had she remained in the supportive *enceinte* of Sakina’s micro-community.

In happier circumstances, the women can be more than just witnesses to violence; rather, their storytelling facilitates direct, corrective action, as in the following example, which touches on child marriage, economic abuse, and infidelity, but also provides models for avoiding or resisting these maltreatments. On a typical afternoon at Sakina’s, one woman bemoans the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 260.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 261.

¹⁰² Ibid., 262.

avarice of husbands, claiming that only old men with much younger wives are generous.¹⁰³ At the behest of an unnamed speaker, another woman responds by singing a song, composed by this third woman's sister, describing the sister's terrible experience as a young bride with a much older husband. The first two lines of this cautionary tale are sung and transcribed directly into the text. A fourth woman, Zoubeida, who can write, unlike the others, is busy transcribing a letter dictated to her by Sakina. Zoubeida explains that she cannot concentrate because of the song (though she is hushed by the others and told to continue writing the letter), and thus cuts off the songstress, who stops singing but nonetheless continues to talk. Numerous other women add to the conversation as well, and the resulting dialogue is composed of bits and pieces of conversation: insults, general chatter, and Zoubeida's supplications for quiet are interspersed with the lines Sakina wishes her friend to transcribe, which are then confirmed back to Sakina by Zoubeida.

The subject matter of Sakina's dictated letter is important: the topic of conversation that inspired the initial complaint about miserly husbands was the idea that wives should exaggerate their monetary needs to avoid finding themselves with an inadequate allowance. Sakina enacts this strategy during the women's exchange by asking her husband for more money than she needs and by requesting a laughably long list of unnecessary items in her letter. Fittingly, bits of gossip about the disdainful romantic pursuits of Sakina's husband are interjected into the cacophony of voices. By the end of this fluid group dialogue, the level of Zoubeida's literacy is called into question by the manner in which she pronounces the address she has just transcribed (to the "Bachadour" in "Baris"—presumably the "Ambassador" in "Paris").¹⁰⁴ In the end, the songstress is allowed to finish singing. A copy of the letter is not provided, leaving readers to guess at its dubious quality from what has been "heard" from Zoubeida, while the song is transcribed in its entirety.

In this exchange, as elsewhere in the novel, the lines between individual women's utterances are blurred by Chimenti's sparse use of punctuation. Quotation marks are rare, often employed only for reported speech or when special phrases are invoked. Frequently, the only indication of a change in speaker comes in the form of a dash, and it is not always apparent if an idea is coming from a character or from the omniscient narrator, who is thus put into dialogue with the characters.

The very dense, animated, polyphonic structure of the exchange imparts an oral quality to the narrative in an episode that once again contrasts two diverse methods of communication: here, women's song and choral dialogue transmit personal stories and hard-won advice, while the written word, which is inaccessible to most of the women, proves unreliable and is used to mislead and distort. In this instance, writing is utilized by the women to push back against the economic abuse that makes them entirely dependent on their husbands' wills and that might otherwise leave them with insignificant means. The episode highlights the problem of female illiteracy, which not only excludes these female characters and their real-world correlates from quotidian affairs, but has historically silenced Moroccan women by excluding them from official history and from public discourse. Indeed, as late as 1984, a UNESCO study estimated that an astonishing 90.2% of Moroccan women (in contrast to 66.4% of Moroccan men) were

¹⁰³ Ibid., 308.

¹⁰⁴ Chimenti, *Au cœur du harem*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 310.

illiterate.¹⁰⁵ This stunning figure accounts, at least partially, for the tardy emergence of Moroccan women's written literature.

Diaconoff's study of literature by a vanguard of Moroccan women authors, appropriately entitled *The Myth of the Silent Woman*, investigates this phenomenon, situating her analyses of this "first wave" of female literary expression within its broader religious, linguistic, social, and political context. Through textual and historical evidence, Diaconoff demonstrates that there is indeed "a long tradition of women's speech" in Morocco,¹⁰⁶ but that Moroccan feminist literatures could only begin to surface during the 1980s, when greater access to education and social resistance to the violent censorship that characterized King Hassan II's rule (1956-99) had opened the door for freer expression of dissenting opinions in subsequent decades. In the relatively short period since, female authors have overwhelmingly used their literary self-expression as a means of resistance to creatively challenge the status quo. Through writing, they have carved out a discursive space previously denied to them, "engag[ing] in literary writing so as to become protagonists *in* and not simply the spectators *of* history."¹⁰⁷ Though Chimenti's novel was published in 1958, the character of Sakina uses language in much the same way: when asked why she pretends not to understand French and Spanish when her husband is present, she responds, "il est bon que l'époux, qui souvent devient l'adversaire, ignore de quelles armes la femme pourrait un jour se servir contre lui" ("it is best if the husband, who often becomes an adversary, is ignorant of the weapons his wife might use against him one day"),¹⁰⁸ demonstrating her keen awareness of the power of language and her ability to actively deploy this tool against those who might wish to oppress her.

Diaconoff examines the sexual and formal transgressions in women's texts, and how the authors give voice to marginalized or taboo subjects and experiences, thereby challenging social mores and expanding the possibilities for women's discourse. Chimenti enacts a similar transgression by situating her narrative in a harem that is not sexualized; instead, her female characters use the space to recount and bear witness to stories of horrifying violence, transforming a space traditionally regarded in terms of female objectification into a place of female subjectivity, and breaking the pernicious silence surrounding domestic abuse. The similarities between Chimenti's depiction of the harem space and key concepts found in later Moroccan feminist literature do not end there: Diaconoff identifies a tendency in Moroccan women's writing to associate the harem with a society-wide conceptual framework structuring women's oppression and the social exclusion of the marginalized, rather than with a physical space. This argument is made by Chimenti's Mennouch, when she alludes to the "hidden polygamy" present in Western societies where men's extramarital philandering is the tacit norm. This totalizing form of "harem-think" is opposed in Arab women's literature through the autobiographical storytelling of female characters, as in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass—Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1995), as Zohra Mezgueldi explains:

En effet dans ce harem-là, les femmes dialoguent entre elles [...] La transgression principale nous paraît résider essentiellement dans le désir incessant et pressant de narrer. De ce point de vue, on peut dire que le don de la narration apparaît comme

¹⁰⁵ Zakya Daoud, *Féminisme et politique au Maghreb: Sept décennies de lutte* (Casablanca: Éditions Eddif, 1996), 329.

¹⁰⁶ Diaconoff, *The Myth of the Silent Woman*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4; original emphasis.

¹⁰⁸ Chimenti, *Au cœur du harem*, in Chimenti, *Anthologie*, 190.

une spécificité féminine—chaque personnage faisant l’objet d’un récit étant lui-même porteur de récit—va de pair avec la joie de vivre et l’esprit de résistance qui prévaut dans l’espace clos du harem décrit ici.¹⁰⁹

(Indeed, in this harem, the women are in dialogue with one another [...] The principal transgression seems to reside essentially in the incessant, pressing desire to narrate. From this point of view we can say that the gift of narration appears to have a female specificity—each character who is the object of a tale is, herself, the carrier of the tale—that goes hand in hand with the *joie de vivre* and the spirit of resistance that prevails in the closed space of the harem described here.)

This strategy of resistance is also present in Chimenti’s novel, where individual female identities are legitimized in Sakina’s foyer.

The vibrant female community solidified inside this domestic harem shares aspects with transnational feminist literatures as well, as the women’s personal stories intersect and inform one another dynamically. As fictional characters, Sakina and friends cannot write autobiography. Nonetheless, their relational self-narration is autobiographical in nature, and it is impossible to deny the similarities between Chimenti’s portrayal of fictional Moroccan women engaged in active identity-construction and resistance through storytelling, and the later works by Moroccan women authors. As Diaconoff argues,

Though women’s writing is often dismissed as telling only “small stories” or being too autobiographical [...] in fact neither charge accurately describes the work of Moroccan women writers, first, because the ostensibly “small stories” of a single woman stand for many women negatively impacted by cultural or societal factors, and second, because Moroccan women tend not to write autobiography as much as they write autobiographically, in the collective sense of women in the body politic. Therefore, if all writing is an act of resistance, such acts by women simultaneously bespeak a quality of resistance that is at once personal, political, and, dare I say, feminist.¹¹⁰

Mernissi’s collection of interviews with Moroccan women, *Le Maroc raconté par ses femmes* (1984), is the premier example of these “small stories” used to argue for real, nationwide change. Through her conversations with twelve Moroccan women of differing ages and social classes, Mernissi demonstrates the gap between the perception of the Moroccan family promulgated in the “pervasive discourse”¹¹¹ of the time and the daily experiences of Moroccan women, thereby debunking the myth that the man is the pillar of the Moroccan family. First asserting in her introduction that Moroccan fathers and brothers are unable to protect female relatives from economic precarity and perilous working conditions—claims that are subsequently supported by the women’s testimony—Mernissi demonstrates that economic policies focused on increasing

¹⁰⁹ Zohra Mezgueldi, “Les Voix du récit féminin,” in *Le Récit féminin au Maroc*, ed. Marc Gontard (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 32.

¹¹⁰ Diaconoff, *The Myth of the Silent Woman*, 4-5.

¹¹¹ Fatima Mernissi, *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 4.

job opportunities for men are destined to be ineffective, and that significant development cannot occur without the full participation and inclusion of Moroccan women and the poor.

It is evident from the full title of her novel, *Au cœur du harem: Roman marocain*, that Chimenti meant for the accounts of Sakina and friends to transcend the personal: instead, they represent a social critique with important implications for Morocco as a whole, showcasing a fluid and dialogic understanding of history that resists monolithic social forces. The “small stories” of these female characters denounce the mistreatment of women and the marginalized, giving their voices a platform that extends beyond the physical confines of the harem space. It goes without saying that the voices of her characters are fictional, and that, regardless of her first-hand experiences and direct encounters, Chimenti cannot speak “for” Moroccan women, though she writes about them in persuasive and moving ways that are largely unprecedented.

Neither “Moroccan” nor “Italian” and yet both, Chimenti belonged to an educated cosmopolitan elite that was markedly different from the milieu of most of her characters, and from the working-class North Africans with whom she had daily contact in her capacity as a medical assistant, educator, volunteer, and ethnographer. Those women, however, could not write their own stories. This is not to imply that they were passive or voiceless: on the contrary, Chimenti’s work is testament to the constant, dynamic process of dialogic identity construction in which the women who inspired her characters were engaged. In *Au cœur du harem*, Chimenti gives us a literary image of how their personal accounts may have sounded, though it is filtered through written language and historical distance. The novel therefore is not only a compelling literary achievement, but it also provides a valuable glimpse of how Moroccan women in the twentieth century told stories about themselves and their communities, and how they might have used oral narrative and dialogue as a form of resistance to the oppressive, violent social forces that threatened to silence them. These forces have not prevailed, as the growing achievements of successive generations of Moroccan women authors have shown. Many women writers across the Mediterranean share Chimenti’s vision, choosing to foreground the richness of women’s lives, oral literature, and storytelling traditions in their writing. Like Chimenti, they are aware of the immense potential inherent in these small stories, which can become vehicles for wider reflection and big political change.