Book Review

Fatima Sadiqi

Moroccan Feminist Discourses is a personal, political, and historical journey by Fatima Sadiqi who uses her own Amazigh identity to deconstruct the feminist discourses of Morocco. In Sadiqi’s own words, the book is an avenue for articulating the idea that “Berber has indeed demonstrated its significance in the Moroccan discourse market, in the political realm, in academic discussion, mass media, and it is high time it entered the feminist discourse” (p. 9). Sadiqi accomplishes this task by interweaving self-reflective essays as introductions to more scholarly chapters. The timeliness of the book’s publication in a post-Arab Spring Morocco, which has seen both women and Amazigh politics take center stage in the social trajectory of the nation-state, should awaken the minds of scholars in disparate fields.

Before getting to the wonderful insights of the book I have to address a nagging issue on terminology. In the introduction Sadiqi states, “As this book is written in English, the term ‘Berber’ (admittedly a nonindigenous term) is used instead of the more politically correct term ‘Amazigh’ because unlike in Arabic and French, ‘Berber’ is not a pejorative term in the Anglo-Saxon literature” (p. 9). Based on my personal experience with Amazigh culture at Al Akhawayn University (an English speaking Moroccan University), I have to disagree. One particular conversation stands out to me where an Amazigh friend told me, along with an entire class, that saying “Berber” in English is the equivalent of saying the N-word. Therefore, for my friend, who is both a speaker of Tamazight (the “Berber” language) and English, “Berber” was most certainly a pejorative term, and it seems to me Anglo-Saxon literature can handle replacing the non-indigenous term “Berber” with something more appropriate like Amazigh or Imazighen. I will try to do just that throughout this review, even though I feel odd, as a white-male American, challenging Fatima Sadiqi who is perhaps the most brilliant Moroccan scholar writing these days.

Chapter One charts the waves of the Amazigh movement within Morocco, citing its differences from its Algerian counterpart, along with its challenges to
the State, Islamist Movements, and Feminist Movements. The waves are presented historically as the first wave (the inception), the second wave (the 1990s), and the third wave (the 21st century). Particularly moving in this section, was the presentation of Article Five of the new Moroccan constitution, which was passed by referendum in 2011 in the aftermath of Morocco’s version of the Arab Spring. The article states: “Amazigh constitutes an official language of the state; as a common heritage of all Moroccans without exception” (p. 20). This is the first time Amazigh has been recognized as an official language of Morocco, and, according to Sadiqi, is also unprecedented historically within the region.

The second chapter traces Imazighen women’s agency from the origins of the Imazighen to the Greek and Phoenician Eras, to the Roman Era, to the Islamic Era, to present day. Sadiqi highlights specific Imazighen women that advanced agency in political and religious realms, such as: Tanit (a pre-Islamic goddess), pagan priestesses from the Phoenician era, Saint Perpetua, Saint Crispian, Saint Marcienne, Saint Monique, and Saint Olive from the Christian era. She also places emphasis on Amazigh woman Sufi sainthood and Maraboutic sainthood. Sadiqi argues women like these have preserved agency through “the preservation of the Berber language and culture, religious authority, military leadership, and sainthood” (p. 64). Amazigh researchers should pick up on these threads and follow them up with broader research that strengthens the historicity of Amazigh women’s agency.

Sadiqi next elaborates on four primary sources of authority in Moroccan culture, and four secondary sources of Moroccan culture. The primary sources are patriarchy, religion, language, the urban/modernity nexus, and monarchy; while each has a secondary source that sustains the former: the family, the mosque, school, street/workplace, and Makhzen/Parliament/Court of Justice. Sadiqi’s ideas about how space is utilized by patriarchy in order to manipulate and control are particularly strong, while being brief. Indeed, a whole book could be devoted to each of these sources of authority along with the secondary sources that sustain them. This chapter leaves the reader wanting more, in a good way.

In the next essay, “Secular and Islamic Feminist Discourses,” Sadiqi charts secular and Islamist paths of feminism within Morocco. She presents this information historically and then as critique, opening the door for the final chapter, which will introduce Amazigh feminism. The main critique of secular feminism is that it relies too heavily on issues of material empowerment, which in turn has not been able to incorporate Amazigh identity issues “as a clear demand at the discursive level” (p. 143). Far less attention is paid to Islamic feminism. It is covered in roughly one-third of the pages taken to tackle secular feminism, partly due to the author’s own proclivities. This is high-