February 2021

Naima Zitane’s Revolutionary Play, Dialy: Using the Vagina Trope to “Talk Back” to the Islamist Party’s Calls for ‘Halal’ Art in Morocco

Maha Tazi
Concordia University

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws

Part of the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Naima Zitane’s Revolutionary Play, Dialy: Using the Vagina Trope to “Talk Back” to the Islamist Party’s Calls for ‘Halal’ Art in Morocco

By Maha Tazi

Abstract

In 2012, at the outset of the “Moroccan Spring” and the election of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) to power, Naima Zitane, a Moroccan feminist playwright and founder of the Aquarium Theatre, directed and released her controversial play Dialy (“Mine” in English) inspired by Ensler’s text The Vagina Monologues and drawing on the real-life testimonies of 150 Moroccan women. In a context where the recently elected Islamist party was calling for ‘clean’ and ‘halal’ art, the play tackled the topic of female sexuality and one of the biggest taboos of the Moroccan society- the vagina. Combining a textual analysis of the play’s script with an interview I conducted with Naima Zitane, my analysis revealed that Dialy aims to “talk back” not only to a hegemonic political discourse that restrains Moroccan artists’ creativity and freedom of expression, but also to the dominant social norms that alienate female sexuality by depicting the vagina as the ultimate social taboo. While it was initially banned from being performed in Morocco, Dialy managed to create a nationwide controversy around issues of (female) sexuality and artistic freedom; it remains, undoubtedly until today, one of the most famous plays in the history of Moroccan theatre.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Artivism, (Women’s) Creative disobedience, Talking back, Subaltern counterpublics, Suppressed knowledges, The Vagina Monologues

Introduction

In November 2018, a new hashtag stirred controversy around the arts in Morocco- #FreelFenn, which mixes the English and Arabic language and translates into “Free Art”. It was the new watchword for a protest movement born in Casablanca, after the arrest of two street artists, who, earlier on the same month, failed to perform in the square of the United Nations, the preferred address for improvised shows. The artists were accused of outrage at the authorities in the exercise of their functions. While they were under arrest, the mobilization of the civil society was immediately felt: "What did they do wrong?"; “Did they steal anything?”, as many supporters of street art deplored on Facebook. "Free our children... Free Art!", many others protested (Ansamed 2018). This unfortunate event was the continuity of earlier restrictive interventions in

1 Maha Tazi is a Ph.D. candidate in the Communication Studies Program at Concordia University. She is interested in women’s creative disobedience in post-Arab Spring North Africa as her research focuses on women’s visual arts, theatre political cartoons, graffiti, slam poetry and RAPtivism in contemporary Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia. Maha also actively engages in feminist research-creation. She has previously published an art photography project in Feminist Media Studies to raise awareness about the backlash against women’s rights in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Maha is currently working on an audiovisual production, called “103-13”, to raise awareness on the extent of gender-based violence in Morocco and create a conscious feminist call for action.
Contact: maha.tazi91@gmail.com
the field of arts in Morocco, which find their origins in the election of the Islamist Justice and Development Party to power in 2011 following the events of the “Moroccan Spring” …

In December 2010, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor who was repeatedly harassed by the local authorities in his local hometown of Sidi Bouzid, was at the origin of a series of protests now known as the “Arab Spring”. Starting in Tunisia, the uprisings sparked across the Middle East and North African (MENA) region as a transnational revolution for “bread, human rights and social justice” to contest several autocratic regimes through violent and non-violent coups and demonstrations (Badran 2014, 2). Whereas the Jasmine (i.e., Tunisian) revolution led to an effective toppling of former president Ben Ali’s regime in February 2011, Morocco did not experience a proper “Arab Spring” per se. The 20th February Movement (MV20F) for freedom and individual liberties was quickly co-opted by the Moroccan regime with the adoption of a new constitution to contain and stifle the enthusiasm of the protesters in June 2011 (Daadaoui 2017). Although the reformed constitution restricted some of the King’s political prerogatives and reaffirmed the social rights of other marginalized social groups, such as women and the Native peoples of Morocco- the Amazigh, it did however fail to bring about effective social and political change on the long run (Ennaji 2016; Daadaoui 2017; Yachoulti 2015).

Another major development and political outcome of the “Moroccan Spring” was the rise to power of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) following the national parliamentary elections in November 2011. Subsequent to the PJD’s victory, one of the leaders of the party, Najib Boulif, made a public statement announcing the party’s vision on the role of art in the society and their overall position on Moroccan artists’ creativity. In his statement, Boulif underscored that the PJD will only tolerate and promote “clean art”, referring to morally acceptable forms of art- or “halal” art so to speak. “Halal” is a term commonly used in the Qu’ran and other Islamic religious laws to designate the categories of lawful or allowed conduct (Lowry 2006). In his statement, Boulif mentioned a specific incident, when one of the major figures of Moroccan cinema, Latefa Ahrrare, walked at the national 11th International Film Festival that was held in Marrakech in 2011 with a dress showing one naked leg, and underscored that the party will not allow the rendition of what he hyperbolically characterized as “nude scenes” in any discipline or genre of artistic expression (Ait Akdim 2012). The statement created a public outcry among the Moroccan art and activist community, who saw it as a direct violation of their freedom of creativity and expression.

In the context of the protest movements unfolding in the Arab world and Morocco, Naima Zitane, a famous Moroccan activist and feminist playwright and founder of the Aquarium Theatre, wanted to contribute, through art, to the wave of social and political awakenings in the region by pointing out the vulnerable situation of women in these countries. In fact, directly following the election of the PJD, the party appointed of only one female minister of Social and Family Affairs in the first Islamist-led government, compared to 6 women before the outbreak of the MV20F, and showed a strong reluctancy of the Islamists to implement the provisions of the new constitution, namely on the issue of gender parity (Yachoulti 2015; Ennaji 2016). These were two alarming developments that have severely disappointed Moroccan women in the direct aftermath of the uprising. It is, therefore, in these highly tense and sensitive socio-political circumstances that the famous piece Dialy (“Mine” in English), was released in 2012 (Racines Association 2017). As Naima told me during our interview (2019): “My overall mission is the implementation of gender equality and the dissemination of gender culture through the use of art in general and theatre in particular” (Zitane 2019). In fact, only a few months after the PJD’s election, and perhaps as a response to the party’s persistent calls for “halal” art, Naima Zitane released her play Dialy inspired
by Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, a seminal text that tackles several controversial feminist topics such as consensual and nonconsensual sexual experiences, body image, genital mutilation, vaginal care and sex work through the eyes of women of various ages, races and sexual orientations. In *Dialy*, Naima addresses the topic of female sexuality which is still widely considered taboo in a predominantly conservative and religious society such as Morocco; the play also tackles one of the top taboos of the Moroccan society—the vagina. The title of the play itself *Daily*, indirectly refers to the genital organ of the vagina in the Moroccan Arabic dialect of Darija. Inspired by Ensler’s (1996) text but drawing primarily on real life testimonies of 150 Moroccan women from all social walks, *Daily*, I argue, constitutes one of the most transgressive and resonating responses from the Moroccan *artivist* (a portmanteau term combining artist and activist) community to “talk back” to (and, by extension, to subvert) not only the (hegemonic) PJD’s political discourse on ‘halal’ art but also the (dominant) traditional norms of the Moroccan society, especially when it comes to female sexuality.

I situate my analysis of this work in the context of the continuing (gender and cultural) revolution in post-Arab Spring North African States (i.e., 2011 onwards), where women artists and activists are increasingly resorting to creativity as a revolutionary tool to protest the ongoing social and political injustices in their countries (Badran 2014; Badran 2016). Therefore, in this article, I use intersectionality as an informative paradigm to situate Arab women’s creative activism at the intersection of both sexism and political oppression. The concept of intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw (1991) to theorize such interlocking axes of oppression - including race, gender but also sexual orientation, ableism etc.—for women from marginalized groups which tend to increase their systemic vulnerability.

Given that the existing literature on women’s art activism and the continuing revolution focuses primarily on Egypt (and to a lesser extent on Tunisia), my objective is to investigate the existence of women's subaltern counterpublics in Morocco today. I focus on theatre as an artistic discipline because from Greek Antiquity to today, theatre has always existed as a tool for the weak, poor and marginalized to denounce power abuses and advocate for social justice (Rankine 2013). Levine (2015) also notes that theatre has a deeply affective power across the [Arab] region where the language of drama is much stronger than that of poetry or written texts alone (1291). I take Naima Zitane’s play *Daily*, especially, as a case study as it was one of the most daring interventions that succeeded in creating a nationwide debate and controversy in Morocco back in 2012.

I begin my discussion with a quick review of the literature on women’s creative disobedience and subaltern counterpublics in the context of the Arab Spring and its direct aftermath, with a special focus on Egypt and women’s revolutionary feminist theatre (Badran 2016; Levin 2015; Nossery 2016; Wahba, 2016). I then discuss my theoretical framework where I ground my analysis of *Dialy* in theories of countercultural art and artivism, as well as postcolonial feminist theory, in addition to hooks’ (1989) famous concept of *talking back* and Foucault’s (1972) notion of suppressed knowledges. I argue that the play presents a counter-hegemonic discourse that breaks several social and political taboos epistemologically, hermeneutically and symbolically in order to foreground women’s alienated and suppressed knowledges about their sexuality and call for sexual liberation and emancipation, while “talking back” to and contesting the PJD’s conservative position on women’s rights and artistic creativity, as well as the overall conservative norms of the Moroccan society.
Literature Review

Creative Disobedience and Art Activism in the Context of the Arab Spring

Marwan Kraidy (2016, 2017) coins the concepts of creative insurgency and revolutionary creative labor to characterize the various forms of resistance practices that activists and journalists mobilized in the context of the Arab uprisings. He highlights, for example, the highly inventive character of various forms of street art—such as hip hop, graffiti, digital memes and mash ups - to denounce regime abuse and corruption in this context. Similarly, Mark Levine (2015) notes that the region has witnessed a real explosion of creative talent and energy since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. He discusses the prevalence of poetry, as well as music, theatre, photography, installation art and graffiti to denounce social and political injustices in the context of the uprisings and their direct aftermath. Levine (2015) also uses strong and evocative imagery such as a “theater of immediacy” and a “festivisation of dissent” to characterize this artistic profusion in terms of both the spaces and the activities that took place inside them. He provides the example of the Revolutionary Artists Union space inside Tahrir Square, where dozens of cartoonists, caricaturists, painters, poets, rappers, musicians and other artists gathered night and day to put up their artwork and share poetry or songs. In the aftermath of the revolutions, Levine notes that many city squares epitomizing the uprisings, which he describes as “highly anesthetized and affective spaces” (2015, 1298), have actually become large-scale installation spaces today to commemorate and continue pressing for social change—such as Tahrir Square, the Pearl Square in Bahrain, and Change Square, the heart of Yemen’s creative revolution.

Image 1: “Half Mubarak, Half Tantawy”
Mural by Omar Fathi. Cairo’s Tahrir Square. March 2012. Photo by Jonathan Rashad
The Continuing (Gender) Revolution: Women's Creative Disobedience and Subaltern Counterpublics in Post-Revolutionary North African States

Margot Badran (2016) talks about creative disobedience characterize the nature of women’s activist dissent in contemporary North African States. She underscores how creativity is increasingly becoming a revolutionary tool for women today to denounce systemic violence and interlocking systems of oppression. Taking Egypt as a case study, she characterizes women’s activism in post-revolutionary North African states as a “continuing revolution” (Badran 2014). In fact, Badran contends that the end of the political [Arab] revolution only constitutes the beginning of the (continuing) gender revolution whereby women are carrying out the revolutionary spirit of the Arab Spring to advocate for social justice alongside gender equality:

“Of the three types of revolution, the ongoing 2011 revolution has been most beleaguered as a political revolution which by now has been effectively stalled. Meanwhile, the culture revolution and the feminist/gender revolution proceed, and it is in this sense that the 2011 revolution continues” (2016, 47).

Badran (2016) derives her understanding of revolutions as “continuous” from Arendt’s (1990) notion that (political) revolutions usually constitute new beginnings. The revolutions of the
Arab Spring could, therefore, constitute a new chapter for Arab women’s activism to reclaim their place in the public space.

In this context, drawing on Fraser’s (1991) concept, Dina Wahba (2016) uses the term *subaltern counterpublics* to characterize the new spheres that are currently being created and inhabited by North African women to continue advocating for social justice, alongside gender equality, in post-revolutionary states. Taking Egypt as a case study, she argues that Egyptian women’s contemporary (creative) activism in the public sphere aims to produce alternative narratives that promote and trigger social transformation: “As film directors, journalists, publishers, magazine editors, and members of organizations and research groups, women are producing alternative narratives that challenge gender norms in their societies” (66). For instance, the *Women on Walls (Wow)* movement is an enlightening case of women’s *subaltern counterpublics* in post-revolutionary Arab countries, where female graffiti artists have been painting Cairo’s walls to share and raise awareness about their painful stories of the revolution in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, lack of equal opportunities, female genital mutilation, and the necessity to *carry on* the feminist revolution today (Wahba, 2016). As Nevine El Nossery (2016) observes, in this context, women’s creative expressions are another means to promote struggle, denounce oppression, mobilize people and raise consciousness. Women, as she puts it, are “leading a parallel artistic revolution that unfolded underground via a rhizomatic machinery—clandestine and often anonymous and yet everywhere—and created what Deleuze and Guattari have dubbed ‘strange new becomings’, ‘new polyvocalities’” (145).

**Image 3: “Blue Bra” graffiti, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, off Tahrir Square, Cairo.**

Photo by Mona Abaza (Captured 16 March 2013)
Image 4: Courtesy Women on Walls
Source: El Sayed, 2014

Image 5: Courtesy Women on Walls
Source: El Sayed, 2014
Women’s Revolutionary Theatre in Post-Revolutionary Egypt

Levine (2015) notes that theatre has enjoyed a period of intense renewed productivity in the context of the Arab uprisings, in particular theatre geared towards the stories and narratives of women. In this context, El Nossery (2016) discusses Dalia Bassiouny’s project, The Sabeel Group for the Arts, which researches ways of integrating theatre and video to promote women’s rights by creating non-traditional plays and performances, including in their most recent project Tahrir Stories that re-tells women’s stories of the revolution.

El Nossery (2016) also underscores the potential of revolutionary theatre in addressing wider issues of human rights and social justice. She discusses playwright Rania Refaat Shaheen’s initiative, El Pergola Puppet Theater, which she founded in 2012 to increase political awareness about the new constitution, human and citizenship rights in the country in order to generate nationwide debates on these issues. Further, El Nossery refers to curator Aida al-Kashef’s initiative, the Wonder Box, a giant, Islamic-patterned disco ball and an ice-cream-cart lookalike which travelled many Egyptian cities in 2013 to raise awareness and promote social justice and democracy through a storytelling genre that had flourished in Egypt many centuries ago. Finally, Sara El Kamel (2012) discusses the Tahrir Monologues theatrical project, which aims to preserve the memory of Tahrir Square by telling folktales about the experiences shared by millions of Egyptians in the Square, including women, during the 18 days of “popular disobedience”, thereby re-affirming the vital role of art in revolutionary practice.

Image 6: Tahrir Monologues Set Design
Symbolic graphical material merged with an environmentally iconic fabric - layered to envelop the performance and project its message. https://t.co/fig75IN. Tahrir Monologues:
www.tahrirmonologues.com
Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial Arabo-Muslim Feminism

Drawing on postcolonial theory, Arab and Muslim feminist scholars, or what I characterize as postcolonial Arabo-Muslim feminists, have denounced the narrative of powerlessness that is usually ascribed to Arab women by dominant Western powers and media which perpetuates the stereotype that Muslim women are helpless victims in need of Western imperial liberation due to their double-minority status—as an Arab minority vis-a-vis the white dominant majority and as a female minority within the Arab male-dominated community. Further, postcolonial Arabo-Muslim feminism also denounces the Orientalist Western assumptions that Arab women are complicit in their own oppression. In fact, Western imperialism has instrumentalized such a narrative of Muslim and Arab women’s alleged powerlessness and victimization as a rationale for military intervention under the pretext of “liberating” them where women have actually been used merely as ideological tools rather than the actual cause or motivation, such as in the case of the 2001 US intervention in Afghanistan (Abu Lughod 2002). In this context, Spivak (1993, 93) ironically characterizes such a colonial project of alleged ‘women’s emancipation’ as “white men saving brown women from brown men”. Drawing on feminist accounts of women’s agency and a decolonizing theoretical framework, my study constitutes a part of this oppositional discourse in challenging this reductionist and dichotomic view which fails to capture the complexity of the social realities in the region and the extent to which women are able to mobilize and organize themselves in order to create effective social and political debates, raise awareness on issues usually considered taboo and promote sustainable social change.

On Countercultural Art and Artivism

Mesías-Lema (2018) defines artivism as a neologism that is derived from “art” and “activism” to describe artists who are committed to creative processes of an activist nature to sensitize people towards collectively shared concerns in order to influence politics and promote social transformation in a given context (22). For him, artivism is conditioned by a cultural positioning of thought through art that utilizes “guerrilla” methodologies similar to civil disobedience strategies—such as street performances, flash-mobs and street tags. Felshin (2001) traces back the origins of artivism to the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States during the period of high political, cultural and artistic turmoil that was marked by the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the increasing challenges to racism, sexism and gender inequalities. Lippard (2001) observes that the main tools used by artistivists are alternative images, combining metaphors, humor, irony, indignation and compassion “with the aim of making those previously invisible and powerless voices and faces heard and seen” (57). Hence, Kuang (2004) theorizes artivism as a bottom up-approach that sheds light on community concerns to promote societal change through creative and constructive tools.

In this article, I draw specifically on feminist art theory which focuses on a particular aspect of such oppositional art—that is art as a medium to reflect on women’s lives and experiences, using such self-organizing tactics as the consciousness-raising group, in order to change the foundations for both the production and the reception of contemporary art (Kennedy, 2017). In fact, Mesías-Lema (2018) argues that artivism was also influenced by the success of performance, feminism and queer theory which “demanded more efficient communication strategies within the field of contemporary art, capable of demanding and institutionalizing the non-existent rights of those groups in a situation of risk and social exclusion” (21). In this sense, Kuang (2004) underscores the potential of art, over public discussions and calculated actions, to strengthen
community identity and induce social transformation by giving marginalized populations a public platform and a way to express themselves in a funny, motivating and liberating way (154).

On “Talking back” to Hegemonic Discourses and Foregrounding “Suppressed Knowledges”

In order to ground my analysis of such forms of women’s creative disobedience, I also draw on Foucault (1972)’s concept of suppressed knowledges and on bell hooks’ concept of “talking back” as a way of foregrounding a knowledge [and an experience] that has previously been suppressed and evacuated by the dominant power.

In his analysis of the carceral and clinical environment, Foucault (1972) defines suppressed knowledges as a knowledge that has been locked up by dominant disciplinary institutions that are endorsed and legitimized by the established history of ideas or regimes of truth. He posits that for an effective criticism of existing power relations, the insurrection of these low-ranking knowledges is necessary against the scientific discourse and the Western canon of knowledge-production. Therefore, Foucault (1980) advocates for the return of popular subjugated knowledges—that is “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (p.82). Such a view informs my approach in this article as I focus on Arab women’s creative disobedience forms and continued activism for social justice and gender equality in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings.

In fact, hooks (1989) defines “talking back” as an oppositional stance and a counter-hegemonic discourse that contests, challenges and responds to structures of dominance. In her seminal work Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, she elaborates on the meaning and implications of the concept:

“Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back’, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice” (hooks 1989, 9).

Drawing on a decolonizing framework, “talking back” becomes not only a way to counter some (dominant) representations or provocations, acts of injustice, physical and moral assaults but also a way to free oneself from the shackles of injustice and oppression. Therefore, in order to analyze the potential of North African women’s artworks in constituting a counter-hegemonic discourse that “talks back” to dominant social norms and socio-political realities, I draw on Foucault’s notion of suppressed knowledges to investigate women’s continued activism as an attempt to re-foreground their evacuated experiences as a first step towards their emancipation and equal access to the public sphere in contemporary post-revolutionary Arab States.

Methodology

Naima Zitane, the Aquarium Theatre and the Daily Case Study

Born in the Moroccan northern city of Chefchaouen in 1967, Naima Zitane is a female icon of modern Moroccan theatre. Driven by her great passion for the arts and culture, she joined the local Chefchaouen Theatre very early at the age of 13, and later went on to the Higher Institute of
Dramatic Art and Cultural Animation (ISADAC) in the capital Rabat. As a fierce feminist activist, playwright and director of several committed plays, Naïma Zitane is behind one of the major projects of social theater in the country, the Aquarium Theatre, which she founded back in 1994 to promote gender equality and defend the cause of women in Morocco through the role of culture. The Aquarium Theatre regularly conducts communication and awareness campaigns throughout Morocco to improve the condition of women and implement their universal rights. Naima Zitane chose the name Aquarium for her theatre to suggest that “audiences could watch real life from a fishbowl”, in reference to the stage (Zitane 2019).

**Mixed Qualitative Research Methodology**

My methodology in this paper is essentially qualitative and consists of a mixed research methodology combining a textual analysis of Dialy’s script with a content analysis of a semi-structured interview I conducted online with Naima Zitane.

Because of the scarcity of other media materials to analyze Dialy—such as online videos, video recordings or excerpts of the performance given that the play was consistently censored and prohibited from being performed in Morocco—I reached out directly to Naima Zitane who kindly and generously shared the play’s script with me. The rationale behind doing a textual analysis of the written text of the play was to retrieve patterns in terms of the ideas and themes tackled, the vocabulary used, the word repetitions that expressed and reflected Naima’s creative disobedience project—i.e., her attempt to “talk back”, through theatre, to a hegemonic political discourse (the PJD’s) and dominant social representations. I paid particular attention to the verbal cues, but also to the hints on the scenography, the actors’ body language, and their interactions with one another. While the twenty-three pages long script was originally written in the Moroccan dialect of Darija, I did my content analysis in English and took care of translating, into English, all the direct quotations that I use in the analysis section of this article.

My textual analysis of the script is complemented with a content analysis of an online interview I conducted with Naima Zitane. Due to time constraints, Naima could only accommodate a virtual interview by answering a questionnaire that I had previously administered by email. The interview was semi-structured in nature in order to allow Naima some flexibility to respond to some of my questions and offer additional insights that she judged would be valuable to my research. The objective behind conducting a feminist interview with the playwright was to find out more about the overall mission and social vision of Naima’s Aquarium theatre, the motivations and purpose behind her 2012 Dialy play and the socio-political context in which it was produced and performed. I also wanted to get additional insights on aspects I may have missed in my textual analysis from not being able to attend a performance of Dialy or watch it online. Hesse-Biber (2013) defines the practice of feminist interviewing as the retrieval of the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated, by focusing on issues of social change for women and other oppressed groups. Hence, the structured interview included questions such as:

- “What is the overall objective of your art?”
- “Why did you choose theatre specifically as an art genre?”
- “How is it appropriate to the message(s) you aim to convey to your audience(s)?”
- “What is the main message of Daily, and which audience does it target primarily?”
- “What were some of the main reactions to the play, including both from the audience and the Moroccan establishment?”

Hesse-Biber (2013) defines the practice of feminist interviewing as the retrieval of the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated, by focusing on issues of social change for women and other oppressed groups. Hence, the structured interview included questions such as:

- “What is the overall objective of your art?”
- “Why did you choose theatre specifically as an art genre?”
- “How is it appropriate to the message(s) you aim to convey to your audience(s)?”
- “What is the main message of Daily, and which audience does it target primarily?”
- “What were some of the main reactions to the play, including both from the audience and the Moroccan establishment?”

Journal of International Women’s Studies Vol. 22, No. 1 February 2021
Analysis

In 2012, only a few months after the events of the so-called “Moroccan Spring” and the accession to power of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) in the country, Naima Zitane directed and released her famous piece Daily, inspired by The Vagina Monologues by Eve Ensler. Foregrounding the female genital organ and female sexuality, Daily draws primarily on 150 real-life testimonies of Moroccan women. These testimonies were collected based on listening sessions with Moroccan women from all social walks and backgrounds, and followed by focus groups with academics, workers and souk traders. On stage, far from the platitudinous Orientalist tropes of the harems, the hammams and the Ottoman Sultans’ palaces, three Moroccan actors, Nouria Benbrahim, Farida Bouazzaoui and Amal Benhaddou, tell the everyday real-life stories of Moroccan women as the play crisscrosses the memories of these women on a journey into the very heart of their intimacy and their painful, touching and hilarious human stories. By staging one of the biggest taboos of the Moroccan society—the vagina, Naima aims to break several taboos and silences anchored in people’s mentalities in relation to women’s sexuality, the way it is lived, perceived, endured, and talked about.

The Dialy performance which lasts for about fifty minutes begins with a question to the public: "What is the female sexual organ in Darija?". In the play, Dialy refers in the Moroccan Arabic dialect of Darija to the genital organ of the vagina. Dialy was used as a euphemism for the actual hyper-taboo word “Tabboun” that could hardly be put on the flyers to promote the play—thereby alluding to the ever presence of both political and moral censorship in the country. In the play, the taboos are first broken epistemologically and hermeneutically, then verbally, visually, psychologically and symbolically. Subsequently, several verbal cues foreground Naima's strategy to use the sexual organ to underscore the actresses’ re-appropriation of their bodies and sexualities through the trope of the vagina, thereby revealing Naima’s strategy of using the female sexual organ as a symbol and an allegory to celebrate women’s sexuality and advocate for women’s sexual and social liberation.

The Vagina Trope: Breaking Social Taboos Epistemologically & Hermeneutically

In this paper, I draw mainly on feminist epistemology which aims to understand the effects of the dominant norms of the patriarchal system on the production of knowledge (or lack thereof), by examining the “influences of norms and conceptions of gender and gendered interests and experiences” on our evidence and rational constraints (Anderson 1995, 1). In addition, feminist hermeneutics is the theory, art and practice of interpretation in the interest of women; it addresses a broad realm of social realities and endeavors to challenge and correct the effects of patriarchy on women by foregrounding women’s varied experiences as the major resource for interpretation in a conversation that is “unconstrained by relations of power or ideology in which all nonexclusionary interpretive voices can be educated by one another” (Warnke 1993, 1). Therefore, in my analysis of Dialy, I am interested in how the play breaks the taboos epistemologically (i.e., the limits and constraints) around what we usually know about sexuality in Morocco, the conditions of the possibility and permissibility (‘halal’) of such a knowledge, as well as the enforced limits of what is commonly allowed to know and talk about in relation to (female) sexuality. I am also interested in the way the play offers an alternative reading and interpretation of women’s sexual experiences that rejects the dominant narrative (of denial, disavowal and victim-shaming) and focuses, instead, on the implications and repercussions of those experiences on women’s psychological and physiological well-being, thereby also breaking the taboos hermeneutically.
From the outset, Dialy addresses several societal issues usually deemed taboo and not talked about nor effectively dealt with in Morocco. Based on the real-life stories of the women she interviewed and the focus groups she animated, Naima Zitane first tackles the issue of marital rape in Morocco. One of the actresses begins with deploring an emotionally challenging experience with her husband: “I once fought with my husband over my underpants ... he really wanted to take them by force...” (Dialy 2012, 3) and a woman’s reaction to her experience: “The man you are married to can’t rape you! It’s your husband for God’s sake!” (Dialy 2012, 11). Therefore, drawing on feminist epistemology, Naima Zitane underscores the enduring societal black-out around the issue of marital rape and the denial of its implications for women’s physical and mental well-being, including from other women who themselves adhere to the dominant patriarchal narrative on the issue—a narrative of denial and disavowal. She also deplores the role of the law in contributing to women’s sexual and moral alienation. During our interview, Naima observed: “Let’s take for example: Women’s reproductive and bodily rights. How can this be achieved without changing the laws knowing that these laws are passed by the elected government?” (Zitane 2019). In fact, because marital rape has not yet been criminalized in Morocco, Naima Zitane uses theatre as a tool for both raising societal awareness and political lobbying to deplore the law’s—and by extension the State’s—absence in this arena. Elaborating on this point, Naima also added: "Because the traditional methods—such as round tables, seminars, conferences—are not sufficient or effective, and even less so political discourses, I use the theatrical approach to address the current metamorphoses and contradictions of within our society" (Zitane 2019).

Later in the play, Naima Zitane moves on to address another highly taboo issue in the Moroccan society, i.e., honor killings. Drawing on the real-life testimonies of the Moroccan women that Naima interviewed, one of the actresses reports a death threat by a husband to his wife: “If your daughter brings dishonor to this home, I will put one bullet in your head, one in hers and the last one in mine!” (Dialy 2012, 3). Subsequently, the play tackles several social realities linked to the theme of dishonor such as premarital sex, unwanted pregnancy and rape, as the actresses continue telling the painful life stories of the women interviewed: “You remember the one whose father was going to murder her because she came back home pregnant?”; “and the one whose father dismissed her from the house after she lost her virginity...?”; “and yet the other one who had to marry a very old man to save her family’s honor...?” (Dialy 2012, 4). Then, a repetition of the phrases “Is she virgin?”, “She can’t be a virgin!” “She must be a virgin!”, “Is she a virgin, or isn’t she?” (Dialy 2012, 12) reflects the Moroccan’s society’s insane obsession with virginity, the only standard against which a woman’s worth, honor and acceptability are evaluated in the society—that is regardless of whether the woman lost her virginity willingly (love) or unwillingly (rape).

Later on, more traumatizing real-life experiences of rape are also brought in the play: “It happened to me while I was leaving school [...] they were four men. They locked me up in a house near the cemetery, a dirty and disgusting house, even the mattress they threw me on was stinky...” (Dialy 2012, 9). One of the actresses, telling an experience of a date rape, sheds light on another bitter social reality in Morocco: “The law won’t have mercy on you... they will say you went home with him on your own feet [willingly]” (Dialy 2012, 5). Therefore, in Dialy, Zitane tells these stories back-to-back highlighting all the forms of physical, emotional and psychological abuses that women are subjected to on a daily basis in Morocco and that the law doesn’t punish the perpetrators or protect (the victims) from. In fact, women’s voices are commonly silenced in order to prevent them from seeking justice or compensation. As Cain (1994) defines feminist historiography as the re-telling of history and social reality from a woman’s perspective to
illuminate female experiences and recover the significance of women's voices, Naima’s play enfolds as a sort of feminist historiography to bring to life the alienated and suppressed knowledges (Foucault 1972) of the 150 women she interviewed—stories that can be generalized to the average Moroccan woman and her everyday struggles that we hardly hear or read about in more traditional and dominant Media.

The play continues to address other social taboos such as women’s menstrual cycle. While acknowledging that women’s first menstruation can be the subject of both worry and celebration, Zitane underscores the overall shame, guilt and humiliation that is commonly associated with women's periods in the Moroccan society. For example, one of the actresses deplores a highly sexist comment she received: “Once a man told me you women can’t be trusted ... You bleed every month, and yet you don’t die” (Dialy 2012, 16), while another one calls out her brother whom she had asked to buy her a pad: “Give it to me just like that ... no need to hide it in a journal and inside a black plastic bag ... As if we are buying a gun or something!” (Dialy 2012, 9). It is true that even today in Morocco, buying pads at the local supermarket can be a challenging experience, as the vendor, who is usually a man, will wrap the pad in the same way as the actress’ brother without looking into the woman’s eyes as if he wants to conceal an object [of public shame] from the entire society, including from himself. Hence, in Dialy, Naima Zitane sheds light on another issue that the society usually censors, represses and suppresses (Foucault 1972) which reflects her feminist project of unveiling all social taboos, especially those in relation to women’s sexual and reproductive lives. In fact, the last taboo tackled by Naima Zitane in the play is women’s pregnancy and all the hardships and challenges that women usually go through from the moment of impregnation to childbirth; using both humor and irony, she discusses several taboos related to pregnancy and the public space such as women’s uncontrollable farting in public transportation, their water breaking compulsively in the office or at relatives’ places and people’s negative and often condemning reactions to those experiences.

Therefore, all the stories that Naima Zitane chooses to tell in Dialy tell out loud and quite daringly several issues and social realities usually kept silenced and under the radar in the Moroccan society. A similar study by Bhatia (2012) on women’s revolutionary theatre in Northern India also reveals how theatre provides avenues for women to perform their womanhood and challenge dominant representations. Women in Northern India use theatre to contest (i.e. “talk back to”) dominant middle-class codes of female propriety, where women playwrights and actresses resort to theatre to address several taboos and commonly suppressed women's topics such as women’s dowry to sexual harassment, custodial rape, and women workers’ rights, thereby foregrounding women’s social realities (i.e. epistemologies) and their “making sense” or interpretations of those experiences and implications for their physical, mental and economic well-being (i.e. hermeneutics).

Hence, in Dialy, several taboos in women’s sexual lives are first broken in relation to the nature and implications (i.e., meanings) of the topics tackled. The play addresses many topics commonly considered taboo in Moroccan women’s everyday lives, ranging from women’s first menstrual cycle to pre-marital sex and forced marriages, as well as virginity, pregnancy, childbirth, date rape and marital rape. As these issues are not usually the subjects of public debates in Morocco, Naima Zitane transgresses the epistemological boundaries of what is usually considered decent, appropriate and permissible to talk about in the public space in a society that is still predominantly conservative. She foregrounds a knowledge around female sexuality that is not usually made available and topics that are not commonly talked about but rather denied and repressed such as the different forms of violence inflicted upon women and the total absence of
the law in regulating such abuses. As Naima Zitane told the Racines Associations in Morocco, the purpose behind *Dialy* is to convey the idea that female sexuality in Morocco suffers from what she characterizes as a “cultural excision” of words and expressions—meaning that it is not possible to talk about certain topics, such as an experience of rape or pre-marital pregnancy, without bringing shame, dishonor, disgrace or embarrassment to oneself [and, by extension, to one’s family] (Racines Association 2017).

This echoes Foucault’s (1972) idea on suppressed knowledges whereby the dominant power forces marginalized groups repress certain experiences, life stories and other social realities for the interest of the hegemonic narrative. Here, the dominant interests are those of the patriarchal system that refuses to give women a voice in order to prevent them from seeking justice or compensation, as well as the Islamist party (PJD) whose agenda seeks to further women’s exclusion and ostracization in the private sphere. It is worth pointing out again here that upon its election in 2011, the PJD was reluctant to implement the provisions of the new constitution on the issue of gender parity (Yachoulti 2015), thereby revealing its conservative position on Moroccan women’s role in the society.

However, because Naima Zitane presents precisely a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges the dominant narrative, as the actresses deplore the implications of these social realities and injustices for women’s lives and well-being such as their physical, emotional and psychological repercussions, the taboos are also broken hermeneutically. In fact, Naima does not hold the moralizing and patronizing positions that are widely held on these issues by other conservative factions of the society but rather a progressive and emancipatory stance as she calls for women’s re-appropriation of their bodies and the celebration of female sexuality, thereby providing an alternative interpretation, reading and position on women’s sexual freedom. The purpose of *Dialy* in providing an alternative reading will be further discussed in the following section.

*The Vagina Trope: Denouncing the Society’s Toxic Relationship to the Female Sexual Organ & Celebrating Women’s Sexuality*

Besides epistemologically and hermeneutically breaking most of the social taboos related to women’s sexuality in Morocco, Naima Zitane also breaks the verbal, visual, psychological and symbolic barriers around the biggest social taboo in the society—the vagina. On stage, the young actresses first refer indirectly (i.e., symbolically) to the vagina to address the relationship of the society to the taboo of sexuality and reflect on the way the Moroccan society perceives and talks about the vagina— that is mainly in a demeaning and derogatory way. One of the actresses sadly observes: “Everybody says eww about it... dirty, disgusting, shameful!” (*Dialy* 2012, 16/21) while another one reminisces: “My mother used to tell me to cover my worry” (*Dialy* 2012, 5). By doing this, Naima Zitane deplores the most common verbal and symbolic ways used to refer to women’s vagina in Morocco: disgusting, unclean, a burden. Therefore, throughout the play, the three actresses reminisce several instances when their relatives (mothers, grandmothers, fathers) told them to either sit properly, cross their legs, lower down their skirt, cover up, act modestly ... only to conceal their vagina. One of the actresses even deplored an experience of physical abuse by her grandmother aiming at conditioning her to hide her vagina in public spaces: “My grandmother used to pinch me between the legs whenever they were open ... At the beginning I did not understand anything but with time... I eventually got it” (*Dialy* 2012, 3). In addition, those relatives would also never name the girls’ vaginas directly, but always use indirect cues to refer to it such as: “the thing” “your thing”, “it”, “that”. There are also references to the fact that the vagina is
always concealed, hidden, disavowed, and denied as one of the actresses pointed out: “My mother once told me I had nothing in there [between my legs]! (Dialy 2012, 4), thereby alluding once again to Foucault’s (1972) idea of suppressed knowledges which in this case applies directly to the female sexual organ to deny not only its existence and the knowledge about it (i.e., epistemology) but also its social implications in terms of female sexuality and freedom (i.e., hermeneutics). Therefore, as the play enfolds, the spectator gradually understands that the vagina is truly the biggest taboo in the Moroccan society.

The actresses also refer directly to the vagina to break the taboo around the female sexual organ verbally. Throughout the play, the actresses speak freely and without the usually enforced epistemological barriers about the woman’s sexual organ. In a sort of linguistic re-appropriation of the word “vagina” and a symbolic re-appropriation of women’s sexuality, the three actresses enumerate playfully the different names and words commonly used to refer to the sexual female organ in the Moroccan dialect of Darija. These verbal cues range from the cute invented names that mothers usually use to refer to their little girls’ vaginas to the vulgar words and appellations used, primarily, by men on the streets to either stalk or call out women by referring to their sexual organ (Dialy 2012, 8). When one of the actresses pronounces the forbidden name for the vagina “Tabboun”—which is the most vulgar and insulting name but also the most commonly used idiom to refer to the vagina in Morocco—she says that she feels she had actually “gotten rid of a stress” (Dialy 2012, 8). In fact, hooks (1989) defines the concept of “talking back” as “a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible […] the liberated voice” (9). Therefore, in response to the societal denigration of the vagina, the actresses also utter the same (dominant) derogatory terms in a symbolic move of re-appropriation, catharsis and celebration of women’s sexuality.

Throughout the play, the names used to refer to the vagina are also repeated in sequence, and back-to-back, by the three actresses. For instance, the word Dialy, a euphemism for the vagina, is repeatedly used and referred to by the three young actresses on stage: “It is mine, mine and mine...” (Dialy 2012, 21). In fact, the repetition of the words referring to the vagina aims to reach the audience’s subconscious and, therefore, to also break the taboo psychologically. The play also uses humor as an ice/taboo-breaker as one of the actresses gladly claims: “I'm a woman and my vagina accompanies me wherever I go. At the market, at the school, at the hammam, so it's mine...” (Dialy 2012, 21) while another one confesses jokingly and ironically: “I tighten my legs because no one should see it. Nobody should guess it is right here... between my legs” (Dialy 2012, 3). Here, the playwright uses irony and sarcasm to work around and subvert the dominant narrative of shame, disavowal, guilt and embarrassment that is usually associated with the vagina and foreground, instead, a narrative of fun and humor—thereby celebrating female sexuality and freedom. Ultimately, the play closes on the following words: “I even take it with me to the mosque” is particularly revealing. As the mosque is commonly considered the purest and holiest place in Islamic culture, the fact that women are allowed to enter and pray in a mosque [i.e., the image of carrying their vagina with them there] means that it is not as improper, dirty and disgusting as it exists in Moroccan people's common imagination. In this sense, Naima underscores some social contradictions around the vagina in order to subvert the dominant (patriarchal narrative) which depicts the vagina, and by extension women’s sexuality, as a symbol of sacrilege and profanity. The play conveys women’s re-appropriation of their bodies through the trope of the vagina as they celebrate their sexual organ that they carry everywhere with them while enumerating all its names, from the gentle and funniest to the most insulting. In fact, the actresses’ utterances of the words referring to the vagina marks their sexual emancipation and what hooks (1989) characterizes as
their “movement from object to subject” (Ibid.)—that is in a move of re-appropriation of their bodies, sexualities and, more importantly, human dignity.

Finally, the play’s simple but ingenious scenography is also aligned with the idea of breaking the taboo around the female sexual organ, only this time visually, as it consists of a rope where the spectators can see women’s underpants of all kinds, shapes and colors. The underpants indirectly and symbolically refer to the organ they usually hide, but this time uncover and make very visible on stage—the vagina. The scenography is also an attempt to foreground a previously and widely suppressed knowledge and reality about women’s sexual organ and, therefore, to celebrate female sexuality and promote sexual emancipation (Foucault 1972). Hence, in Dialy Naima foregrounds the symbol of the vagina for emancipatory purposes, that is to denounce the endless toxic social taboos around it which alienate women’s sexuality and advocate for women’s re-appropriation of their bodies. Naima’s daringness in dealing with such a disavowed topic in Morocco underscores the potential of creative disobedience and revolutionary feminist theatre to advocate for a more egalitarian society by questioning and defying the commonly held beliefs around a given societal taboo (epistemology) and providing alternative readings and interpretations (hermeneutics).

“Talking Back” to the PJD’s Calls for ‘Halal’ Art: Media Buzz and Socio-political Implications of Dialy

As discussed previously, upon the election of the Moroccan Islamist PJD party in November 2011, Najib Boulif, one of the leaders of the party and former Minister of Economic and General Affairs dropped two unfortunate words—“clean art”—to announce the party’s vision on the future of art in the country. He only elaborated on his statement to underscore that, from now on, the party will not allow the rendition of ‘nude scenes’ in any discipline or genre of artistic expression. Hence, without clearly defining what he meant by “clean art”, Boulif was referring to a sort of morally acceptable art that abides by the Islamic rulings of morality, appropriateness and acceptability—or “halal” so to speak.

Following the Minister’s statement, a Facebook page under the name "Killing Latifa Ahrar is saving a people" was created by an unknown user, calling to end the life of the actress who walked with a dress showing one naked leg at the national 11th International Film Festival in 2011. The page, although clearly inciting for murder, was only deleted by Facebook about ten days following its creation (Ait Akdim 2012). Boulif’s statement and its social implications, therefore, sent a strong warning signal to the Moroccan artivist community, who saw it as a direct violation to their creativity, and freedom of thought and expression. Hence, starting 2011, the stage was set—impetuous Islamists against unruly artists. For years, verbal attacks by Moroccan Islamist leaders on a culture deemed immoral have been on the rise. In return, most of the Moroccan women artivists (i.e., artist activists) I interviewed have also “talked back” to the PJD’s calls for ‘clean’ and ‘halal’ art by challenging and rejecting not only their vision on the future of artistic expressions in the country but also their wider conservative social, political and ideological stances, especially on the issue of women’s rights. Such interventions and expressions of creative disobedience definitely include this article’s case study—Naima Zitane’s 2012 play Dialy.

Given that it was produced and directed only a few months following the party’s national election and Boulif’s controversial statement, Naima’s play aimed to “talk back” not only the Islamist party’s political discourse on ‘halal’ art which strongly undermines Moroccan artists’ creative freedom but also, and perhaps more importantly, to their conservative position on the issue of women’s rights as evident in Boulif’s controversial statement about Moroccan actress Latefa
Aherar’s dress which he described as a ‘nude scene’ and the PJD’s clear reluctance to implement the gender parity provisions of the reformed constitution, namely Article 19 which foregrounds gender equality (Yachoulti 2015). As a consequence, the play was severely censored and prohibited from being performed on many occasions. As hooks (1989) observes, acts of ‘talking back’ can be severely punished, contained, and co-opted—thereby serving as strategies of intimidation to impede, neutralize or block any forms of disobedience and opposition.

As a matter of fact, a few days (even) before its release, the play was the subject of a huge media buzz; the reviews ranged from highly negative to quite positive and enthusiastic with more than 150 published articles in both national and foreign media (Jardonnet 2015). The audience reception was as much divided too, though primarily negative in a conservative society like Morocco. Elaborating on the reality of co-optation of artivist expressions in Morocco, Naima Zitane told a journalist from The Guardian: “We received insults and threats on social media. In particular, there were calls to murder us, on a Facebook page, which got 5,000 ‘likes’” (Ibid.). Naima added that even in the art world some people disapproved of this subject, with acquaintances advising her to stop in order to avoid getting into trouble. Finally, from the establishment’s end, the-then in power PJD Islamist party vehemently attacked and denounced the play as a violation to the codes of decency and, even, as an incitement to public debauchery. As a consequence, following its release in 2012, Dialy was only allowed to be played in private or independent institutions in Morocco, such as the French Institute in Rabat. Later on, the play was performed abroad, in public structures, such as the Institute of the Arab World in Paris.

Naima’s play reflects her agency as an artist and an activist in disobeying and subverting the party’s directives to shed light on a key issue around female sexuality in Morocco. In fact, Boulif’s condemnation was seen as an attempt to undermine Moroccan artists’ freedom and creativity to deal with issues doomed crucial and important in the Moroccan society, a view that was also strongly shared by Naima who told me during our interview: “Art in Morocco is not a luxury; there are many issues that we need to question and debate publicly” (Zitane 2019). As mentioned previously, “talking back” is a concept initially coined by hooks to refer to the process of moving, in defiance, from silence into speech for marginalized and oppressed people which also marks their trajectory of moving from object to subject (1989, 9). In this sense, Dialy aimed to “talk back” to the elected (i.e. hegemonic) Islamist party’s political discourse which advocates for moral and “halal” forms of art, thereby allowing the artist (here Naima Zitane) to move from a position of marginalized and oppressed (whereby her creativity and freedom of expression as an artist was undermined by Boulif’s statement) as well as from object (of the party’s directives and vision) to an actual subject—as a woman playwright and director doing political lobbying and raising awareness on suppressed knowledges around women’s lives and some of the biggest taboos of the Moroccan society- i.e. female sexuality and the vagina. Naima’s play Dialy, therefore, emerges as a counter-hegemonic discourse that subverts and deconstructs the dominant party’s discourse and vision on the arts and vindicates precisely the artist it aims to marginalize and oppress. In fact, Levine (2015) underscores that the profusion of creative and artistic revolutionary forms in the context of the Arab uprisings helped shape a counter-cultural and a revolutionary counter-hegemonic discourse which allowed marginalized populations to overcome fear of repression and persecution, as well as to redefine, in their own terms, important notions of citizenship, political participation and civic (dis)obedience.
Dialy and the Continuing Gender Revolution in Post-Revolutionary North African States

Dialy also created a major public controversy in Morocco by reflecting key aspects of creative disobedience, thereby inscribing the play in what Badran (2014, 1) has characterized as a “continuing cultural and gender revolution” in post-revolutionary North African States. Badran defines women’s creative disobedience as a revolutionary tool that allows women to denounce systemic violence and interlocking systems of oppression, such as sexism, authoritarian rule and (neo)colonialism. In fact, Naima Zitane remarked that her plays, in general but perhaps more particularly in Dialy, aim to advocate against “women’s cultural excision” i.e., against their marginalization from the cultural, artistic and educational scenes over time in Morocco in order to question the place of women in the society (Racines Association 2017). During our interview, Naima elaborated more on the concept of “cultural excision”, observing that:

“Morocco is currently witnessing a significant decline in terms of rights and freedoms and especially those of women, with the spread of Salafi-Wahhabi ideology, on the one hand, and the problems facing Morocco, such as illiteracy, despite state-made efforts in this area. Young people, on the other hand, are very reluctant about reading, and the arts. By working on these issues, we are creating a theatre focused on citizenship” (Zitane 2019).

Therefore, Naima’s plays aim to tackle varied issues in contemporary Morocco such as women’s limited access the public sphere, the rise of political Islam, the pitfalls of the educational system and the lack of youth employability. This could potentially inscribe the playwright’s work, and especially Dialy, in what Badran (2016) theorizes as the continuing gender and cultural revolution in contemporary North African States where women artists resort to creativity to protest various forms of social injustice— that is not only gender inequality.

During our interview, Naima also clearly identified with Badran’s idea of the continuing gender and cultural revolution in the region today and the possibility for her work to be inscribed within this socio-political context (Zitane 2019). Elaborating on the meaning and implications of such a social and political revolution in Morocco, she told me:

“We must recognize that the Arab reality is very different from that of Europe, and that the public space here is not at all an area of freedom, and for women even less, it is a space of oppression and a source of fear where the feeling of lack of security is very present. We can therefore describe this revolution as a way to free ourselves from this fear, to free speech, an attempt to share public space with men, an attempt to express ideas and dreams, through dance, painting, singing...” (Zitane 2019).

Here, Naima’s statement clashes directly with the PJD’s vision not only on ‘clean’ art but also on a society that abides by conservative Islamist values and principles such as gender segregation, the codes of modesty, the absence of gender parity in politics, employment, education etc. As such, Naima’s art can be described as revolutionary feminist theatre. Bhatia (2012) argues that Northern Indian women's presence on stage and their involvement in theatre—as actors, playwrights, directors, organizers, and characters—made important contributions to the debates on gender and nationalism at key moments of India’s colonial and postcolonial history. Similarly, with her 2012 play Dialy, Naima contributes to an important debate around issues of artists’ freedom of expression and women’s bodies and sexuality in the context of the election of the
Islamist party which restrains artistic expressions to ‘clean’ forms only and holds conservative views on Moroccan women’s role and status in the society. Therefore, in an article published in *The Guardian*, Naima underscored the potential of her creative disobedience and revolutionary feminist theatre in effectively triggering societal change, as she observed: “Something has happened with this play. Moroccan audiences are dying to see something genuine for a change” (Jardonnet 2015). She also raised this point during our interview: “My art is all that, feminist, social and political and I will also add artistic because they cannot be separated. […] I strongly believe that theatre can be used as a vehicle for social change and reflection on the difficulties we encounter on a daily basis” (Zitane 2019).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Moroccan feminist activist and playwright Naima Zitane directed and released her famous play *Daily*, inspired by Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* as a response to the election of the Moroccan Islamists to power in 2011 and their increasing calls for ‘halal’ art and morally acceptable forms of creativity. In this context, the play foregrounded the biggest taboo of the Moroccan society—the vagina—to denounce the toxic relationship of the society to the female sexual organ, deplore women’s painful stories and suppressed knowledges about their sexual lives, and, therefore to bring about concrete social change by impacting a change in people's mentalities and encouraging women’s re-appropriation of their bodies and sexual emancipation through the trope of the vagina.

*Dialy* also aimed to “talk back” to the PJD’s political discourse on ‘moral art’ by providing the ultimate ‘unclean’ form of art—one that deals with a vagina. Such a move of defiance is not only cathartic in nature as hooks (1989) points out—in fact, the actresses on stage underscore, on several occasions, the healing process of talking about their repressed sexualities, but also deeply political. In fact, Naima’s “talking back” also allows her to emerge as a thinking subject and as an artist capable of reflecting on crucial issues touching upon her society and instigating social change by contesting and subverting not only the PJD’s hegemonic discourse on ‘clean’ art, which deeply limits Moroccan artists’ freedom of expression, but also their conservative views on women’s role in the society which undermine both their freedom and agency. *Dialy* provides a counter-hegemonic narrative to the PJD’s that deconstructs the Islamist’s discourse and allows to vindicate the marginalized and the oppressed—i.e., the artist and the women’s stories she conveys in the play.

Therefore, cultural interventions like *Dialy* hint at the continuing cultural revolution in contemporary North African States, namely through the arts, and the potential of art activism, alongside civil society efforts, in continuing to advocate for socio-political liberties in post-revolutionary North Africa. Art activism does have a potential to ask fundamental questions that challenge and impact dominant and hegemonic systems and institutions; artists should, therefore, continue fighting for their freedom of expression and their right to make meaningful interventions in their societies to advocate for social justice, alongside human rights and gender equality.

Finally, by tackling issues of women’s sexual liberation which are still considered top taboos in the Moroccan society, and breaking the verbal, symbolic, visual and psychological taboos associated with the vagina; by transgressing the elected party’s sustained calls for a clean and moral art in which issues of sexual liberation are seen as a violation of decency and a public incitement to debauchery, the play also exemplified several aspects of what Badran’s (2014, 1) theorizes as the “continuing gender revolution” in contemporary post-revolutionary North Africa.
today. While it was initially banned from being performed in Morocco, the play still managed to create a nationwide controversy around issues of artistic freedom and creativity, (female) sexuality and the role of dogmas and tradition in regulating women’s lives. It remains, undoubtedly until today, one of the most pertinent interventions in the history of Moroccan theatre.
References


