

Challenging Colonial Constructs: Gendered Agency in Benson and Dawson's Short Travel Narratives

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Abstract

*This study examines the issues of rescue, oppression, and agency in reclaiming Moroccan gendered identities through a comparative reading of S. Benson's *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez* (1874), Alec Dawson's *Out Past the City Gates* (1900), and *A Moorish Hero and Juanita* (1900). My aim is to investigate how these colonial tropes intertwine to frame women, during colonial Morocco, within the structure of oppression while offering insights into resistance and agency. This article also highlights the thematic resonance and divergence of the short stories under scrutiny, exposing how the interplay of gender, power, and identity is constructed, contested, and re-imagined. These out-of-print travel narratives elucidate the multilayered socio-historical realities of colonial Morocco, revealing the ways in which local patriarchal practices intersect with colonial ideologies to marginalize women. Benson and Dawson's portrayals of female characters mirror Orientalist tendencies, though they also offer moments of resistance and agency, in which women reclaim their voices. By exerting their agency and recasting themselves from the pressurized roles of victim and savior, these female characters challenge and subvert oversimplified readings of domination through acts of resistance. Through its combination of feminist and postcolonial theories, this paper places these narratives within the discourse of identity, power dynamics, and representation. Furthermore, this article adds to the body of literature that foregrounds the complex roles of women as active agents and shows how these out-of-print short narratives remain vital to reshaping historical and literary understandings of gendered identities.*

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Female Identity, Gendered Agency, Colonial Narratives, Power Dynamics.

Introduction

The colonial encounter between Morocco and Anglo-American narratives has been a rich terrain for examining identity reconstruction and cultural representation. S. Benson's *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez* (1874), and Alec Dawson's *Out Past the City Gates* (1900) and *A Moorish Hero and Juanita* (1900), present a wide array of interconnecting depictions of women living in colonial Morocco. These travel writings (i.e., short stories) resonate with one another in their implementation of orientalist tropes which render colonial women both as symbols of oppression and exoticism, while also exposing contrary moments of agency that undermine these simplistic narratives.

Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism examines the way in which the West constructs the East, through Manichean binaries, as an exoticized and inferior Other offers a frame through which to interrogate these fictional texts. In addition, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) claim that the subaltern can "speak" by reinterpretation and Homi Bhabha's (1994, 1996) idea of "Third Space" with respect to hybridity and negotiation of identity in the liminal space, constitute the main argument of this paper. In this sense, the article argues that situating these stories, in their historical and cultural contexts, allows for an exploration of how these three short stories share themes of rescue, oppression and agency which complicate the power dynamics within the colonial mindset and the resilience of Moroccan gendered identities.

The three short stories analyzed here serve as a microcosm of colonial Morocco where characters and circumstances can be varied to interrogate the power dynamics. Each story engages with a different aspect of the Moroccan experience: *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez* foregrounds the intersection of gender and religion; *A Moorish Hero and Juanita* examines cross-cultural relationships and indigenous resistance; and *Out Past the City Gates* tackles colonial incursion and its effects on women identities. This holistic vision departs from individual interplays and instead seeks to understand how they all come together to reveal Moroccan

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gendered identities during the colonial period. Moreover, these stories offer invaluable insight onto the ways in which gendered agency emerges at the intersections of cultural, political and spatial oppression.

In order to contextualize this analysis, we consider some of the socio-historical conditions of the narratives. Al-Aroui points out that the structure of the state disintegrated, agriculture declined, internal trade movements ceased, and mountainous regions became isolated. The country appeared as if it was exposing itself to invasion and occupation. Consequently, the achievements of civic life vanished one after another. Power was divided among the commanders of mercenary soldiers, who initially turned into feudal lords exploiting the land and its people. However, as production decreased and famines followed one another, they merely became tribal chiefs, whose primary and ultimate concern was ensuring sustenance for themselves and their followers (Al-Aroui, 2018, pp. 423-424)

In brief, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Morocco was facing growing colonial encroachment, as various western powers vied for control over its trade routes, urban centers, and cultural life. Against this background of colonial tension, this period encapsulated highly complex dynamics of power, resistance and identity that these stories represent. Framing the narratives, this research acknowledges their importance as literary mediums and symbolic representations negotiating between both colonizer and colonized.

Paternalistic Narratives of Rescue and Their Implications

In Benson's *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez*, the theme of rescue operates within a framework of colonial paternalism. The narrator's intervention to exempt Thamar from the demeaning practice of removing her slippers near mosques and her promised engagement to Benhadi exemplifies a savior complex: "'For the future,' said I, 'I only breathe to serve you,' and drew back respectfully. 'Confide yourself fearlessly to my honour, and I promise you the means of escape.'" (Benson, 1874, p. 21). While this act of perceived benevolence underscores the narrator's position of power, it simultaneously reflects Gayatri Spivak's (1988) critique of the colonial savior's role in reinforcing dependency. As Spivak notes, such interventions often silence the subaltern by framing them as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents of change.

However, Thamar's resistance to both the Rabbi and the narrator's advances subverts this narrative. When she asserts, "but remember, I am yet mistress of myself!" (Benson, 1874, p. 24), she reclaims her agency within an oppressive structure. This resistance aligns with Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "Third Space," wherein hybrid identities challenge colonial binaries of domination and submission. Thamar's story thus transitions from one of passive victimhood to active defiance, illustrating the complexities of agency within patriarchal and colonial frameworks. Her defiance is further reinforced by her rejection of the power dynamics embedded in the narrator's protective gesture, signaling her refusal to be defined by the external forces seeking to control her destiny.

In Dawson's *A Moorish Hero and Juanita*, the narrative of rescue becomes a site of cultural negotiation. Juanita's entanglement with Cassim Abd el Kareem reflects the interplay of gendered vulnerability and indigenous resistance. Cassim's dual role as protector and participant in oppressive structures complicates the portrayal of rescue. His attempts to shield Juanita from societal judgment position him as a figure of resistance against colonial norms, yet his actions also perpetuate paternalistic tropes. Dawson's vivid description of the Kasbah: "The Kasbah fills one with as much shame as pity" (Dawson, 1900, p. 44-45), serves as a metaphor for the entrapment experienced by women within colonial spaces, where rescue often entails new forms of confinement. This paradox illustrates how acts of protection can inadvertently reinforce the very structures of control they seek to subvert, creating a dynamic of dependency even within resistance.

Juanita's response to this dynamic, however, reveals her own agency within constrained circumstances. Her ability to navigate the conflicting demands of Cassim's protection and her own survival highlights the nuanced ways in which women resist their objectification. Dawson's text offers subtle moments where Juanita reclaims her autonomy, as when she defies the expectations placed upon her by both colonial and local patriarchal forces. This complexity underscores Spivak's argument that even in apparent passivity, the subaltern can assert their presence and challenge dominant narratives.

In *Out Past the City Gates*, the theme of rescue is more implicit, woven into the protagonist's journey through the harsh landscapes of Morocco. Mrs. Denbigh's resilience, characterized by her "pliant steel wire" strength (Dawson, 1900, p. 57), highlights the subtle ways in which colonial subjects negotiate their agency. Her ability to maintain autonomy despite her constrained circumstances, spatial and by her husband Garda, reflects the nuanced dynamics of resistance within systems of oppression. The physical landscape of *Tẓenah* becomes a symbolic battleground where the boundaries of power and autonomy are contested. The stark description of the journey mirrors the emotional and psychological challenges faced by Mrs. Denbigh, emphasizing the resilience required to navigate these oppressive terrains.

By framing Mrs. Denbigh as both vulnerable and strong, Dawson critiques the colonial gaze that often infantilizes women under the guise of rescue. Her character resists this gaze through her endurance and quiet defiance, embodying a form of agency that operates within, rather than outside, the constraints of her environment. This tension between fragility and fortitude complicates the narrative of rescue, presenting it as both a site of control and a potential catalyst for empowerment.

By examining these narratives collectively, it becomes evident that rescue is never a neutral act. Instead, it is laden with ideological undertones that reflect the power dynamics between colonizer and colonized. The notion of rescue, particularly when framed through a paternalistic lens, serves as a means of reinforcing colonial authority while simultaneously creating spaces for resistance. This duality underscores the complex interplay of power and agency within these narratives and the heterogeneity rather than homogeneity of western discourse. Each story challenges the traditional binaries of savior and victim, revealing the layered and contested nature of rescue as a mechanism of control and subversion. This intricate dynamic highlights the transformative potential of agency, even within the constraints of oppression, reshaping our understanding of gendered identities in colonial contexts.

Thematic Cohesion in Depicting Oppression

Oppression serves as a central theme uniting the three narratives, portraying the systematic marginalization of Moroccan women within intersecting cultural and colonial frameworks. In *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez*, Thamar's experiences reflect the compounded oppression of being both Jewish and female in a patriarchal society. Her forced betrothal and the Rabbi's betrayal underscore her vulnerability within religious and societal hierarchies. Benson's portrayal of this oppression resonates with Edward Said's (1978) critique of Orientalist narratives that exoticize and dehumanize the "Other." According to Anqar, *Oriental Imagery: Writing about the Orient means engaging in a covert act of exposure, often presented through selected images from texts or insisting on an image of the Orient that persists over time.* Victor Hugo, in his preface to *Les Orientales*, discusses the East as either a "picture" or an "idea" that symbolizes, on one hand, the "Oriental preoccupation" and, on the other hand, a symbol of general concern. In legal terms, as Cromer and Belfour present it, the East is depicted in the form of something to be judged (as in a court of law), something to be studied (as in an educational system), something to be imprisoned (as in a penal system), something to be tamed (as in animal science). In all these instances, the Oriental is contained within a hegemonic framework (Anqar, 2016, p.103 [My translation]).

Thus, Thamar's story exemplifies how colonial literature often romanticizes oppression while obscuring its systemic roots.

Thamar's predicament also illustrates how colonial systems perpetuate cultural hierarchies by exploiting existing societal structures. Her inability to escape the imposed marriage reflects a broader pattern in which women's identities are shaped through their subjugation. As Spivak (1988) notes, colonial narratives often position women as the symbolic bearers of tradition, yet they strip them of the agency to redefine those traditions. Benson's text amplifies this paradox, wherein Thamar is simultaneously a victim of patriarchal oppression and a figure through which colonial ideologies assert moral superiority.

In Dawson's *Out Past the City Gates*, the motif of oppression extends beyond individual experiences to encompass spatial and cultural dimensions. The crumbling walls of *Tẓenah*, described as "struggling for a footing" (Dawson, 1900, p. 54), symbolize the fragility of Moroccan cultural identity under colonial

intrusion. The description of these walls also mirrors the precarious position of women, whose lives are shaped by both restrictive traditions and the external pressures of colonialism. Mrs. Denbigh's existence within "shadowy [...] stone-walled rooms" (Dawson, 1900, p. 54-55) underscores the confinement imposed upon women within these layered systems of control.

Dawson's depiction of Moroccan spaces further reveals how cultural oppression operates through both physical and symbolic means. The oppressive architecture of *Tzenah*, with its exotic landscape and deteriorating structures, serves as a metaphor for the entangled constraints faced by women. As Clifford (1988) observes, cultural representations often oscillate between fascination and dehumanization. In *Out Past the City Gates*, this oscillation is evident in the juxtaposition of the exotic allure of Moroccan spaces with the harsh realities of confinement and erasure experienced by its women.

The shared theme of oppression in *A Moorish Hero and Juanita* further complicates this dynamic by incorporating the perspective of a foreign woman navigating Moroccan society. Juanita's status as an outsider subjects her to heightened scrutiny, yet it also grants her unique insights into the intersecting forces of patriarchy and colonialism. Her endurance in the face of societal expectations and her influence on Cassim's redemption highlight the potential for agency within oppressive systems. Dawson describes Juanita as possessing the strength of will and persistence: "there she has been during one hour of every day since; and there she will be during one hour of every day, until, by the sweat of her brow, she hath earned enough, maybe, to buy the honourable Cassim his freedom" (Dawson, 1900, p. 51), a characterization that underscores her resilience amid layers of marginalization.

Juanita's experience also reflects the broader colonial gaze, which often romanticizes the resilience of women while ignoring the structural inequalities that necessitate such resilience. By situating Juanita within the oppressive confines of Moroccan society, Dawson offers a nuanced critique of both local traditions and colonial interventions. This dual critique aligns with Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, as Juanita navigates the "third space" between oppression and agency.

These narratives collectively reveal how oppression operates as both a unifying force and a site of resistance, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual and cultural struggles. By foregrounding the lived experiences of women within these intersecting systems, Benson and Dawson challenge the reductive binaries of victimhood and agency, offering a more complex portrayal of Moroccan gendered identities.

Resilience and Agency: Reclaiming Moroccan Identities

The theme of resilience and agency in the face of oppression offers a transformative perspective in the narratives of *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez*, *Out Past the City Gates*, and *A Moorish Hero and Juanita*. Rather than solely depicting Moroccan women as passive victims, these stories highlight their active roles in navigating and resisting systems of colonial and patriarchal control. In *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez*, Thamar's ultimate decision to escape her circumstances reflects a subversion of the patriarchal and colonial narratives that seek to confine her. Her assertion of agency, as articulated through defiant statements like being a mistress of herself and her refusal to her engagement to Benhadi, and the "machinations" of Rabi Benatar, disrupts the dominant discourse of victimhood and positions her as an active participant in reclaiming her autonomy. What demonstrates her agency vividly is her uncompromised travel to Europe, which thwarts the narrator's plans towards Thamar.

Similarly, in Dawson's *A Moorish Hero and Juanita*, Juanita's resilience is expressed through her ability to navigate the complex dynamics of her relationship with Cassim Abd el Kareem. While Cassim acts as both protector and enforcer of societal norms, Juanita exerts her influence subtly yet effectively, demonstrating that resistance can take many forms. Her quiet defiance underscores the capacity for agency within constrained circumstances, challenging traditional portrayals of women as passive recipients of rescue. Dawson's description of Juanita as possessing a persistent and uncompromising personality, "she has a most absurd amount of pride" (Dawson, 1900, p. 57), reinforces her strength and fortitude.

In *Out Past the City Gates*, Mrs. Denbigh's characterization encapsulates the tension between fragility and resilience. Despite her confinement within oppressive environments, Mrs. Denbigh negotiates her autonomy through acts of endurance and subtle resistance. Dawson uses the patriarchy of Garda, Kerr's plans to take advantage of Mary Denbigh, alongside the stark landscapes and decaying architecture of *Tẓenab* as metaphors for the broader social constraints faced by women; thus, framing Mrs. Denbigh's resilience as both a personal triumph and a critique of colonial narratives that seek to infantilize or romanticize her struggles.

These narratives collectively illustrate that agency is not limited to grand acts of rebellion but often resides in everyday acts of resistance, negotiation, and survival. By portraying Moroccan women as complex figures capable of navigating intersecting systems of power, Benson and Dawson contribute to a nuanced understanding of identity and resilience. Their stories emphasize the importance of reclaiming agency in the face of systemic oppression, offering a counter-narrative to colonial portrayals that marginalize and dehumanize women. Through these acts of defiance and resilience, Moroccan women assert their place within cultural and historical discourses, challenging reductive binaries and reshaping the understanding of their identities in colonial contexts.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how themes of rescue, oppression, and agency intersect in shaping and disrupting Moroccan gendered identities through an integrative analysis of *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez*, *A Moorish Hero and Juanita*, and *Out Past the City Gates*. While these narratives remain embedded within colonial ideologies, they simultaneously provide spaces where moments of resistance and agency emerge, challenging simplistic representations of Moroccan women as passive victims or exoticized subjects. By foregrounding these themes, the analysis has illuminated the ways in which gender, power, and identity are constructed, contested, and re-imagined within colonial discourse.

A critical takeaway from this study is the layered complexity of gendered agency in colonial contexts. Although colonial narratives frequently position women within oppressive structures, the female characters in these texts negotiate their autonomy through various means—whether through overt defiance, subtle acts of resilience, or strategic adaptations within patriarchal and colonial frameworks. This reinforces Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space," where hybrid identities emerge, subverting the rigid binaries of domination and submission. Similarly, it underscores Gayatri Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern can "speak" through reinterpretation and resistance, even when constrained by intersecting systems of control.

Moreover, this study contributes to broader postcolonial discussions on how literary texts serve as both reflections and instruments of power. The narratives analyzed here do not merely document historical realities but also participate in the production and reinforcement of colonial ideologies. However, they also reveal fractures in these ideologies, where moments of female agency disrupt the dominant discourse. The persistence of such themes in colonial literature necessitates an ongoing scholarly interrogation of the ways in which gendered identities have been shaped by imperial narratives and how these representations continue to influence contemporary cultural perceptions.

The relevance of this analysis extends beyond its historical and literary contexts. In a world where gendered oppression remains a pervasive issue, revisiting colonial texts through a critical feminist and postcolonial lens allows us to recognize the enduring impact of historical narratives on contemporary gender politics. By recovering and reassessing these overlooked texts, scholars can further deconstruct colonial frameworks and amplify the voices of those historically marginalized. Additionally, modern literary criticism must continue to challenge and revise past interpretations, ensuring that representations of women in colonial narratives are understood not as static depictions but as dynamic sites of contestation and reclamation.

Ultimately, this study affirms that colonial narratives are not merely relics of the past but continue to shape present-day understandings of identity and agency. By critically engaging with texts like *Thamar: The Jewess of Fez*, *A Moorish Hero and Juanita*, and *Out Past the City Gates*, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced and

inclusive literary history—one that recognizes the complexities of gendered subjectivities and the persistent struggle for autonomy within oppressive structures. Through such engagement, postcolonial feminist criticism remains a vital tool in reshaping our understanding of historical narratives and their ongoing cultural significance.

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