

Preface by Chouki El Hamel
For *The House on Butterfly Street* by Mhani Alaoui

The House on Butterfly Street is a fascinating and powerful novel that fits within the genre of documentary fiction. It uses fictional situations to enhance our understanding of lived experiences in contemporary Morocco. The main theme of the novel is the collapse of a family in the city of Casablanca, and the family's connections with other central characters. But the focus is on women navigating intersectional injuries, women who are the victims and heroes of an unjust social system. It is a micro-sociological analysis that reflects the ills of the entire society. *The House on Butterfly Street* exemplifies what a novel can offer to a society that is deeply dysfunctional on multiple levels. It captures different ways where people's behaviors and attitudes become so oppressive in a society that has been conditioned to be sexist and racist.

The novel uses facts and real lived experiences to support an accurate perspective that differs from the conventional narratives and prevailing wisdom on women in Moroccan society. Mhani Alaoui uses this literary genre as a tool to engage the readers for the purpose of raising awareness about taboo subjects. She relies on historical, economic, and legal facts to make her fictional story believable. This is a fiction to process the social ills, discover their causes and challenge the conventional narratives of women living in contexts of violence. The author tells us that the truth is never as simple as it seems. Behind the golden comfort and bliss of the upper class there is a complicated twist of glum, betrayal, greed, slavery, rape, violence, trauma, racism, and misogyny. Sadness and despair are clearly emphasized in the novel. Alaoui shows how poverty itself is a form of violence and how identity is a product of history. Female indignation is at the center of the novel. It is something that was conditioned to be buried in the horror of silence. But Alaoui breaks this silence by writing this important book and showing effectively how everything is connected to everything else.

The novel also reacts to historical trauma. Indeed, to how history informs the present. The atmosphere of the houses themselves contain the evils of the past. The characters of Yacout, Yasmine, and Amber, for example, cannot be free from the past, a past that weighs heavy on them. Their memories, which come bubbling up to the surface in the household of Raiss and Mesari, represent Morocco's deep involvement in slavery. These memories will linger as long they get left out of contemporary narratives of Moroccan history. For instance, "Dada", a word that may seem like an affectionate term, has brutal roots. Alaoui explains this word so eloquently: "Dada is the ancient name for an enslaved woman who raises generations of children in the house that holds and keeps her. Slavery in Morocco was abolished over a century ago, but the name Dada lingered on. Dada Amber, though a free woman, had spent her entire life in the service of one family, and choice wasn't a word she had much use for."

People do not see slavery as something that is still happening today. But the legacy of slavery and forms of servitude still exist in Morocco. There are international charters that define what constitutes a modern practice of slavery. These state that modern slavery is a situation where a person and/or their labor are owned by another person, and where that person does not have the freedom/choice to leave and/or is subjected to abusive treatment. Jeanne and Ghalia in the novel, who are employed as domestic servants, are a clear example of this. The treatment of domestic servants is a continuum of the legacy of slavery that lingers in all Moroccan cities. It is

a form of servitude in which young women live in the most precarious conditions. Forms of slavery did not vanish, but they transformed with colonial capitalism and quasi-feudal social modes of production into meagre wages. Domestic workers are virtually slaves to their employers, acquiescing to unreasonable and degrading demands and these workers are forced to compromise in negotiating their situations as they need any work to survive.

Slavery as a legal institution vanished rather as a consequence of the capitalist system introduced by the French colonial occupation of Morocco (1912-1956). The French colonial authorities were also reluctant to undertake proceedings against Moroccans who owned slaves, and in this way, the colonial authority gave tacit consent to slavery, where slaves were already owned and used primarily for domestic purposes. Colonial action was undertaken only in cases of obvious abuse, as implied by a 1950 French circular revealing that the French colonial authority took measures only against the aspects of slavery that shocked them the most. As of 1935, the Moroccan royal establishment cooperated with the French authority to combat the horrors of the clandestine sale of slaves, but slavery was not abolished by an official decree. France attempted to implement policies that benefited their national interests. However, domestic slavery and women's issues were left to be regulated under the *shari'a* (Islamic law). It is important to note that the universalism and justice equality of Islam according to the Prophet Muhammad's vision and the Qur'anic ideals were never realized. The influence of deeply entrenched cultural inequalities that benefited a caste system, and a society controlled by men, coupled with the interpretive Maliki authority, also the sole purview of men, provided the epistemological foundation of an unjust legal edifice.

In principle, governments who sign the UN human rights treaties must adhere to their principles that consider slavery as a crime against humanity and are supposed to inform their public. Morocco is one of these countries that gives the impression that it is moving in the direction to promote respect for human rights and fundamental individual freedoms.

Therefore, it is crucial for scholars to speak up against these practices and engage in socially relevant topics to promote justice and gender equality. Books like Alaoui's novel give us hope that we are making progress. Up until recently, slavery in the Maghreb was not well understood and the approach to slavery, racial issues and gender prejudice has been silenced or conceived in apologetic ways. With the growth of human rights groups that have recently been raising awareness of the marginalization of black Moroccans and the legacy of the unpunished crimes of slavery, Moroccan media is making positive changes on human right issues; it dares to open the debate to discuss taboo topics such as slavery and racism. Alaoui must be commended for her ethical bravery and principles.

Although the book is fictional some of the characters are real, such as Aicha Chenna, founder of the *Association Solidarité Féminine* in Casablanca to provide help to single mothers and women victims of abuse, and died in 2022. The author honored her in this novel by creating the character of Nayla who follows Chenna's footsteps in the fight for women's rights. It is fitting that Alaoui dedicated this book to Chenna, a woman who was beloved for her social activism. Lastly, Mhani Alaoui observed that even streets are rarely named after women, she wrote: "Casablanca's streets often had the names of ancient male Arab heroes, poets, and explorers." Hopefully, the government will listen and name a street in Casablanca after Aicha Chenna.