Judeo-Spanish Feminine Narratives in Morocco

The Heritage of Spanish Jewry in Morocco from the Expulsion to the Present Day

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The Judeo-Spanish Romancero song tradition found a hospitable dwelling in the Jewish communities of Northern Morocco. The proximity between Spain and Morocco led to a constant cultural, economic and political exchange across the Strait of Gibraltar. This maritime frontier, which today is experienced as a formidable barrier for those Moroccans without a visa, was confronted with much more ease and openness in centuries past. The very fact that each population establishes almost daily visual contact with the land across the Strait determines the continuous presence in the imaginary realm as well as the palpable reality of their contiguity. A sustained exchange of music and ideas migrated along with commercial goods and diplomatic missions earlier than the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. I like to think of this aqueous frontier as a fluid and live center of intercultural, interreligious and interlingual encounters.

The Jewish community at times also occupied the position of buffer community between Muslims and Christians. They had family and contacts in both Christian and Muslim lands and were thus often involved in cultural or political
encounters. You may wonder, with such a vibrant influx of information, how it is that the Romancero in Morocco was preserved with such detail and semblance to early Peninsular versions? It would likely be the victim of multiple influences, which would change it to the point of non-recognition. However, this is not the case.

Women in Northern Morocco, lived and interacted generally in the private sphere of home and family and were the guardians of Jewish daily life and identity. Tetouan’s community was quite a closed community, with a mellah that closed its doors at night and on Shabbat. Tangier, as the port of entry from Europe was quite different: a cosmopolitan city even before its International Zone days, with a visible and integrated Jewish population. Diverse experiences of interaction between the Jewish community and the general population affected women’s culture, but women were still staunch guardians of tradition. According to Jewish law, Judaism is passed through the maternal line to the children. In the traditional female domestic role, the woman creates the Sabbath, Kosher food and is in charge of laws concerning sexual relations as regards to her monthly cycle, all three of which are in place to ensure ritual purity in body and soul.

The Judeo-Spanish Romancero was the oral domain of Jewish women. Barring some rare exceptions, women were completely uninvolved until the twentieth century in the written Hebrew liturgical tradition. Their domain of literacy was contained in this repertoire of songs, stories and paraliturgical rituals.
The Romances trace connections to various earlier musico-literary sources.

Epic song traditions of narrated musical story-telling as well as vernacular jarchas in the female voice both wind their way into the streams that helped nurture Romances.

Virginie Dumanoir searches for origins stating that

L’exploration des sources possibles de la présence de ces traces d’oralité conduit a mettre en évidence dans le Romancero Viejo l’héritage des pratiques de la geste, mais aussi des motifs privilégiés de la poésie courtoise castillane, elle-même évolution de celle des troubadours de Provence. (238)

When one explores the possible sources for the presence of these traces of orality, we find evidence in the Romancero Viejo that there is a remnant from epic songs, and also of the privileged motifs found in Castillian Court poetry, which is in itself evolved from the Troubadours from Provence. (238) (My translation)

The realm of jongleurs, troubadours and erudite poets of Muslim Spain nourished the feminine oral tradition, which was later carried to the Sephardic diaspora. The varied tributaries that fed into the river of Romances in Sephardic women’s oral tradition brought Jewish women in cultural contact with Muslims and Christians through these literary connections. Even though they may have lived reclusive lives within a judería or mellah, as in the case of Tetouan, their language and oral tradition betrayed the deep exchanges that were at the base of their communal identity and history.

The language for home and family was a particular version of Judeo-Spanish called Haketía (Coming from the Arabic Haka – to tell or recount). Haketía was built on a base of Spanish with Hebrew and Arabic insertions. The Hebrew insertions usually referred to the specific Jewish experience of rituals, places, names and things (eg. Brit - circumcision, Shehita – ritual slaughter, Har Sinai – Mount
Sinai, Shamayim – heaven, Mose – Moses, Lujot HaBrit – Tablets of the covenant).

The Arabic insertions are more complex, as they are a verb root conjugated as a Spanish -ar verb (eg. Zorear – to pray at a tomb, Fukearme - to help me, Jalfear - to replace, Laabear – to trick, Tahfearse – to get stuck).

The linguistic code-switching which Haketía speakers were proficient in also hints to a cultural code-switching between Spanish, Arab and Jewish cultures. This linguistic hybrid is an embodiment of hybridity in these languages, which held different status in the community’s context.

Spanish and Arabic were “lower,” as the languages of the daily and mundane whereas Hebrew, the ritual language had a “higher” status. In private conversations with E., from current-day Tangier, she has repeatedly expressed the impossibility of full translation of words in Haketía. She stresses that the Arab-root words, which she calls “true Haketía” are the most difficult to explain and translate, and also the ones that give the most pleasure to use and say. They carry a visceral, emotional expression.

I find it quite telling that this language, with its deeply emotional expressions is precisely the one that is linked with women’s cultural contributions. In Sherry Orthner’s groundbreaking feminist theory article originally written in 1972, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” she states that woman’s biological status as continuer of the species through childbirth and lactation and her function as the first socializing factor in the life of an infant places her in an intermediate position.
between nature and culture. Men, she states, are generally considered more transcendent in patriarchy because of their removal from the long creative process of renewing the species, and thus focus most of their creative energies on abstract cultural development.

Linking this feminist theory to the linguistic and literary pattern of oral narrative in a hybrid language that combines “lower” and “higher” languages presents an interesting parallel with feminine narrative in Moroccan Judeo-Spanish songs.

Are these songs then functioning within the community as women’s way of paving the “transitional” path between nature and culture? If I was to state that Hebrew poetry and ritual was generally considered the “higher” and more “refined” output of this community, then it would seem to point this narrative to a “lower,” more intrinsic, emotional and unconscious creation. This creative expression seems to be the basis with which this community wishes to begin the process of socialization as regards gender and societal norms.

Not only is this women’s literary realm in a “lower” and thus more natural and visceral language, it is also oral and carries the inherent fragility that is present in non-documented forms of expression. Very often oral traditions are seen as the “lesser” of traditions because of the impossibility to trace their origins and the difficulty in measuring their value. However, orality can also be connected to someone reading to you or singing from a text that they are reading from a written
source you have no access to. In early Spanish, ver (to see) and oír (to hear) are both verbs connected with literacy. In the *Diccionario medieval español* by Martin Alonso un decir (a saying) is a brief song. These *Romances* then have an intrinsic tension between what is generally seen as “lower” oral, nature-based emotional communication and the deep emotional charge that they hold for the listener within this cultural context.

So even though a written, more intellectualized literature has theoretically a higher status in society, oral transmission touches on deeply emotional chords within the listener that go beyond the intellect. Virginie Dumanoir states that:

…affirmant la supériorité de l’oral sur l’écrit: l’oral est capable selon lui de toucher et d’émouvoir bien davantage que des mots couches sur le papier. Qui dit transmission orale des texts de *romances* dit usage de la mémoire. (102)

…in affirming the superiority of oral tradition over written: only the oral is able to touch and move someone much more than words written on paper. Who ever speaks about oral transmission of *romance* texts is speaking about memory. (102)

Interestingly enough, the narrative threads in these *Romances* are heavily focused on women characters and their behavior. There are repeated examples of women’s infidelity and the nefarious consequences she faced when discovered. (Rachel Lastimoza, Rosablanca) Another common narrative is the kidnapping of a young woman. These were usually in the voice of a Christian woman who was kidnapped by Arabs. (Al pasar por Casablanca, La Infanta y el Culebro, A Francia se va la niña) This twist in identities, where a Jewish woman living in a Muslim land sings a song in the voice of a Christian kidnapped by Arabs seems to be a veiled
explanation of the “dangers” present outside of the safety of the home and how this fate could befall at any time.

Not all the narrative threads have an ominous end for the woman, there are also those modeling the expected behavior from an ideal woman. The faithful wife, waiting for her voyaging husband beyond even the time he indicated she should wait for him (Porque lloras?) reinforces the chaste and long-suffering attitude the ideal woman should have. Una Hija tiene el Rey, Las guerras de León and el Romance de Sol present women ready to face violence and even death for their ideals. These women are celebrated, and in the case of Sol, she has become the sole female tsaddeket in Morocco (Jewish saint) for dying for her ideals.

These Romances were used as work songs, lullabies and songs sung in private gatherings. I am most interested in their educational use while young children were within earshot. Madame Sana, currently residing in Casablanca, narrated to me how her young brother, when he was about 10 years old, would cry when he heard the Romance de Sol, he was so moved by her actions in giving up her life for Judaism. He also loved hearing the song and constantly asked his mother and aunt to sing it to him. Mesod Muyal, a man from Tangier in his seventies, reiterated how she was a woman like none because of her chasteness, youth and piousness. The Romance and the myth of Solika obviously impacted him deeply from childhood until the current day. Alegria Bengio, from Alcazarquivir, told me how they would enact the stories
of the *Romances* when she was eight years old. Each sister would have a character, they would dress in costumes and present the short enactments as a theatrical game.

These feminine narratives, with female characters and narrated by women permeate the collective memory in this community. During creative moments, in Hebrew or Spanish, portions of these texts appear as known allusions, which are revealed from their unconscious seclusion. They come out as “lo primero que pasa por la mente”, “the first thing that pops into my head.”

In conclusion, the *Romances* play a series of fundamental roles within the Juedo-Spanish community of Northern Morocco.

1. They serve as a model for expected female roles, delineating and describing specific positive and negative consequences according to behavior.

2. They function as the first cultural and identity context for young children through lullabies and theatrical games.

3. They establish the hybridity that is present in this community’s identity and language.

4. They are the basis of the community’s collective memory, which includes all the messages above: gender roles, identity, cross-cultural exchanges and the historical ties to previous lands and civilizations.

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