

Desiring ‘Love’, Crafting Intimacy: Conflicting Gender Ideologies and Social Transformation in Morocco

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Over the last few decades issues of kinship, sexuality and gender have captured feminists’ attention thus leading toward a rethinking of dominant Euro-American theoretical assumptions. In line with post-colonial and anthropologists’ attempts to broaden the understanding of agency, power and subjectivity beyond the dichotomy of subordination vs resistance, my paper discusses the notions of love and intimacy circulating among young women in a Moroccan boomtown.

By drawing upon ethnographic research, I explore the competing forms of subjectivity and politics of femininity available in a rural region of Morocco affected by social transformation linked to transnational migration to Europe as well as to the national modernizing processes since the 1970s. Specifically, I focus on the everyday practices by which young women with various cultural and economic backgrounds negotiate conflicting subject positions, desires and romantic imageries. By engaging with different discourses on love and intimacy not only do young women contest ‘traditional’ marriage practices and the perceived ‘backward mentality’ of men at large, but also they reflect upon the ways in which love, violence and power entangle within intimate relationships. Meanwhile, they find themselves involved in different notions of modernity which illuminate the gender politics available within the society they live in. On the one hand, Mexican and Turkish soap operas and TV satellite circulate new romantic fantasies. Moreover, the access to education, work and transnational migration provide young women with lease of life and gendered imaginaries unthinkable for their mothers and grandmothers. On the other hand, the growing influence of Islamic reformism shapes gender ideologies and trajectories of self-crafting that reframe the meaning of being a ‘modern subject’.

In contrast with the recent scholarship emphasizing romantic love and companionate marriage as an emergent trait of globalization, I endeavor to complicate young women’s lived experience of love and their desires of conjugal intimacy. A historical perspective shows that the notions of love and ‘modern couple’ have been at the core of national politics since the post-colonial era. Issues of gender, sexuality and kinship have always been appropriated by different social forces aiming at orienting social change in different directions.