

Female Narratives in Moroccan Judeo-Spanish Romances

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As early as 1391, Jews began fleeing the Catholic fervor that was sweeping through the Peninsula in what has been called the *Gerush Sbilía*, the Expulsion from Seville (S. Levy 1991, 143). The departure of the Jews from Spain reached its peak with the official expulsion in 1492. It continued until the eighteenth century, as Conversos fled the Inquisition and its harassment of those who continued privately practicing Judaism (Garzón 2008, 45). As they fled, they took with them things of substance and also more spiritual items. This paper focuses on a portion of the spiritual items that were carried out of Spain, specifically the female narratives in the oral tradition of the Moroccan Judeo-Spanish Romancero.

The Spanish Romancero, which is still found throughout the Iberian Peninsula as a live oral tradition, was carried beyond Spain and Portugal during the colonization of the Americas and the Sephardic Diaspora. It traveled on the ships going back and forth between the Americas as evidenced in the words of a Friar who accompanied Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, returning to Spain from the Americas in 1544, "...los seglares tañendo guitarra y cantando *romances* y cada uno a su modo..." ("the non-religious [on the boat] were playing the guitar and singing *romances*, each in his own manner").¹

The Romancero can also be found along the geographic routes of the

1 (Beutler, 20) quoted in note 38 according to Fray Fancisco Ximénez, *Historia de la Provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala* (Guatemala, 1929), p. 280.

Sephardic exile. Two distinct areas around the Mediterranean region received the largest numbers of exiles: Northern Morocco and the Ottoman region, including Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia (Weich-Shahak 1995b, 17). This paper focuses on the Romancero of Northern Morocco and its female narratives.

The proximity between Spain and Morocco permitted uninterrupted cultural, economic, and political exchanges across the Strait of Gibraltar. Although the Spanish only “rediscovered the Sephardim in the mid-nineteenth century” (Díaz-Mas 1992, 152), when they invaded Tétuan and discovered the Jewish community there, Sephardim had maintained their identity-connection to their Spanish heritage throughout those intervening four hundred years. 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. I like to think of this aqueous frontier as a fluid and live center of intercultural, interreligious, and interlingual encounters. Following the renewed contact with Spain during the period of the Protectorate (1912–56), the Sephardic Romancero began to absorb newer Peninsular influences (Weich-Shahak 1997, 12).

By the early sixteenth century, Tétuan had become a new center for Jewish migration, allowing for an exclusively Sephardic leadership to establish itself. Tétuan is located north of Fez, close to the Mediterranean coast, and next to an active port. This new locality became a nucleus with a specifically Spanish and Andalusian heritage in its architecture, family lineages, and music (Garzón 2005). Other urban centers where Sephardim maintained the Romancero were Tangier, Alcazarquivir, Larache, and Asilah.

With this long history of migration and change, how did the Romancero in Morocco preserve the detailed semblance to early Peninsular versions? It might have been expected to be the victim of many outside influences, which could have changed it to the point of non-recognition. However, that was not the case.

One of the reasons for this is that 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. They also preserved the Romancero. The Jewish community of Tétuan was quite a closed one, with a *mellah* that shuttered its doors at night and on Shabbat (Garzón 2005, 69). 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

(de Nesry 1956, 53). Diverse experiences of interaction between the Jewish community and the general population affected women's culture, but women usually remained staunch guardians of tradition. Not only is Judaism passed on through the maternal line, but the traditional female domestic role is to create the Sabbath, guarantee kashrut, and control the laws concerning sexual relations based on her monthly cycle. All three of these responsibilities are in place to ensure ritual purity in body and soul.

The Judeo-Spanish Romancero was the oral domain of Jewish women (Díaz-Mas 2008, 255). Even when a man interprets a *romance*, he immediately informs us that he learned it from his grandmother, mother, or aunt (Weich-Shahak 2009, 283). 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.

History of Romance Development

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*. Based on her research into the origins of the Romancero, Virginie Dumanoir says that:

L'exploration des sources possibles de la présence de ces traces d'oralité conduit à 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 courtly poetry, which is itself evolved from the Troubadours of Provence. (author's translation, all subsequent translations throughout the article are the author's)

An impressive mix of performers including minstrels from Provence, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and also Muslim and Jewish singers and musicians from the south of the Peninsula, who were found in the royal courts of Aragon, Catalonia, Castile, and Leon (Reynolds, 22). The widespread geographical origins of the musicians found in the court were another source of the musical and textual influences on the Romancero, which were later conveyed to the Sephardic Diaspora.

These tributaries feeding into the river of *Romances* in Sephardic women's oral tradition brought Jewish women into contact with Muslim and Christian literary connections. Even though they may have lived reclusive lives within a *Judería*, as in the case of Tétuan, their language and oral tradition betrayed the deep exchanges that were at the base of their communal identity and history.

A small sample of the varied origins within the Romancero are, for example, the *Romance, Rey Fernando, rey Fernando*, which tells of an invasion that is recounted in medieval chronicles and in *El Cid* (Weich-Shahak 1997, 38). *Levantóse el rey a cazar* recounts an episode found in Latin Merovingian chronicles (Weich-Shahak 1997, 131). *Don Bueso y su hermana* is related to the thirteenth-century Austrian epic *Kundrunslied* (Pomeroy, 235). Modern versions of *Diego Leon* are related to the *xácara* (Pomeroy, 155), of Arabic origin. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore further the hybrid origins in the Romancero, but the acknowledgment of its complex history is crucial to understanding its importance in the formation of the multifaceted Sephardic identity, and the various uses of oral tradition for societal control.

Language

Another example of hybridity is the particular case of Judeo-Spanish that developed in Northern Morocco. The language for home and family was called Haketía (coming from the Arabic *Haka* – to tell or recount). Haketía was constructed on a grammatical base of Spanish with Hebrew and Arabic insertions. The Hebrew insertions usually referred to the specific Jewish experience of rituals, places, names, and things: *Brit Milá* – circumcision, *Shejitá* – ritual slaughter, *Har Sinai* – Mount Sinai, *Shamayim* – heaven, *Mosé* – Moses, *Lujot HaBrit* – Tablets of the Covenant. Arabic appears either as vocabulary words of common daily usage such as: *Farrán* – communal oven, *Sahha* – health, *Sarawel* – pants, or as a verb root conjugated as a Spanish -ar

verb such as: *Zorear* – to make a pilgrimage, *Fukkear* – to help, *Khaftear* – to snatch, *Laabear* – to trick, *Tahfeer* – to get stuck (Jalfón de Bentolila 2011, 59–105).

The linguistic code-switching in which speakers of Haketía were proficient also hints at a cultural code-switching between Spanish, Arabic, and Jewish cultures – which are all a part of the identity of Jews from Northern Morocco. This linguistic complexity is an embodiment of their hybrid identity, and hints at the relationship each language represents to each one of the cultures. Each language holds a different status in the community’s context.

In Judaism, everyday languages enjoy a “lower” status whereas Hebrew, the ritual language, carries a “higher” status.² In Sephardic Northern Morocco, a Spanish base is used for home and family, either as Haketía or as Spanish. Arabic is used daily either for business dealings outside the home or for household employees. Hebrew is used in the synagogue or for Torah study. Each language has its own function and status, although the boundaries between them are not as strict as linear classification would imply. These three languages meld, and, through expressions and words, they personify specific complex experiences of a Sephardic Jew living in Morocco.

In private conversations with a Haketía speaker from current-day Tangier,³ she continuously repeated the impossibility of a full translation of words in Haketía. She stressed that the Arab-root words, which she calls “true Haketía” are the most difficult to explain and translate – and also are the ones that give her the most pleasure to use and say. They carry a visceral, emotional expression. This language, with its deeply emotional expressiveness, is the one that is linked to this community’s cultural contributions by women.

In her groundbreaking article on feminist theory, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?,” originally written in 1972, Sherry Ortner states that a woman’s biological status as the 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 (Ortner, 27). Men, she states, are generally considered more transcendent in patriarchy because of their removal from the long creative process of renewing

2 (Bentolila, 249) quoting in note 5 Chaim Rabin’s article “What Constitutes a Jewish Language?,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 30 (1981): 19–28.

3 Personal interviews conducted between 2007 and 2009. The informant (E.A.) is anonymous based on her request.

the species, and thus focus most of their creative energies on abstract cultural development.

Linking this feminist theory to the linguistic and literary patterns 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 we were to accept that Hebrew poetry and ritual were 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. The *Romance* seems to be the basis on which this community initiates the process of socialization about gender and societal norms, especially for women.

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 regarded as inferior traditions because of the impossibility of tracing their origins, and the difficulty in measuring their value. However, orality can be connected also to someone reading to you or singing from a text that they are reading from a written source to which you have no access. In early Spanish, *ver* (to see) and *oír* (to hear) are both verbs connected with literacy. In Martin Alonso’s *Diccionario medieval español, un decir* (a saying) is a brief song (Alonso 1986).

An intrinsic tension is created in these *Romances* 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. Even though, theoretically, a written, more intellectualized literature holds 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 couchés sur le papier.

Qui dit transmission orale des textes 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. Whoever speaks about oral transmission of *romance* texts is speaking about memory.

Examples of Female Narratives

Perhaps because it was generally women interpreting this repertoire, the narrative threads in these *Romances* are focused heavily on female characters and their behavior. There are repeated examples of women's infidelity and the nefarious consequences they faced when discovered. One example is the wedding song *Raquel Lastimoza*, which is still sung throughout Morocco today at pilgrimages such as those to the tombs of Rabbi Amram ben Diwan in Ouezzane, and Rabbi Yitzhak Bengualid in Tétuan. An early twentieth-century version in a songbook from Tangier describes in vivid detail how the husband, on discovering his wife's infidelity, stabs her and her lover to death:

El gobernador seloso de todo era sabedor
 ...
 Golpesitos dió a la puerta nadie que lo contesto
 Con el puñal que á traido hizo un bujero y entro
 Hallara ala jenerala demudada de color
 Con el puñal que á traido de puñaladas la dió
 ...
 a la entrada mas adentro con el mansebo se encontró
 como era noble y valiente alli muerto le dejó (Pomeroy, 45)

The jealous governor found everything out
 ...
 he knocked on the door and nobody answered
 He made a small hole with the knife he had and entered
 He found his wife (*la jenerala*) with a changed face
 He stabbed her with the knife he had brought
 ...
 further inside (the house) he found the young man
 since he was noble and courageous he killed him right there

In a version sung at a wedding in Casablanca in 2005, the mother of the bride edited the original text for the songbook they distributed among the guests. In a 2008 interview she said, “I cut out the part about jealousy, after all it’s a wedding. I wanted it to be a joyous occasion, so I made it a lot shorter and ended it with *Hodu l’Ad-nai ki tov*” (A.B., 2008). This active modern editing of a traditional text suggests that, in earlier times, some women must have felt the discomfort that this violent text created. However, as Lacoste-Dujardin explains in her book, *Las madres contra las mujeres: patriarcado y maternidad en el mundo árabe*:

... la mayor parte de las sociedades de la ribera del Mediterráneo estaban atadas, hasta hace poco, a un código de honor muy estricto, especialmente en lo que concierne a las mujeres, celosamente preservadas y protegidas. Los miembros de un patrilineaje son solidariamente responsables de este honor. (Lacoste-Dujardin 1993, 33)

... most societies on the Mediterranean coast were bound, until recently, to a very strict honor code, which affected women mostly. They were jealously preserved and protected. Members of a patrilineal society show solidarity in their responsibility for preserving their honor.

The older women, who determined the repertoire to be sung at the wedding party in the earlier twentieth century, played their role as guardians of the community’s honor. They reminded the bride and other married women of the possible consequences of infidelity. Many marriages were not based on love, but family alliances. It would not have been uncommon for a young woman to be married to an older, wealthy, or powerful man (for example, *el gobernador*), to whom she might not be attracted. A *romance* with this graphic outcome could produce the desired effect by instilling fear of acting on temptation.

Another common narrative is the kidnapping of a young woman. These were usually in the voice of a Christian woman who had been kidnapped by Arabs. One example is the *Romance Al Pasar por Casablanca*. The young maiden says to the knight who finds her washing clothes by the river:

No soy mora caballero, que soy cristiana cautiva
que me cautivaron moros, dias de Pascua florida⁴

4 Version from Julia Bengio, Tangier, 2008.

I am not Muslim, oh knight, I am a captive Christian
 who was captured by the Muslims during a spring feast day

This convoluted twist of a Jewish woman living in a Muslim land, as is the case with a Sephardic singer in Morocco, singing a *Romance* in the voice of a Christian kidnapped by Arabs, serves as a veiled explanation of the “dangers” outside of the safety of the home and community. Young women living within the confines of the *mellah* were warned about how this fate could befall them at any time were they to venture outside the doors.⁵

Not all the narrative threads end ominously for the woman; there are also those modeling the behavior expected from an ideal woman. The *Romance Por qué lloras Blanca niña?* narrates the case of a young wife complaining to her husband who is about to leave on an extended voyage, leaving her without sufficient money to pay for her children’s food. Her husband tells her to sell their property if she needs to.

Ay por qué lloras Blanca niña?
 Ay por qué lloras Blanca flor?
 Ay lloro por vos caballero
 Que vos vais, que vos vais y me dexais.
 Me dexais chica y muchacha
 Chiquita y chiquita y de poca edad
 Siete hijicos chicos tengo
 Lloran, lloran, lloran y demandan pan.
 Metió la mano a su bolsa
 Cien docoados, cien docoados le fue a dar
 Para qué me abundai esto?
 Para vino, para vino o para pan
 Si no te abundare esto
 Vendereis, vendereis media ciudad
 Vendereis campos y viñas
 Lo mejor, lo mejor de la ciudad.⁶

- 5 Personal interview from 2011. The informant (M.E.) is anonymous based on her request.
- 6 Sung by Isaac Azuelos from Casablanca for Kol Israel Radio Show, 1980. Hebrew University Sound Archive, CD 04758 FLAD230.

Oh why do you cry white girl?
Oh why do you cry white flower?
Oh I cry because of you sir
Who is leaving, leaving and leaving me
You leave me small and young
Small, small and of a young age
I have seven children
They cry, they cry, they cry and ask for bread.
He put his hand in his sack
One hundred ducats, one hundred ducats he gave her
What will this help me with?
For wine, for wine or for bread.
If this is not enough
You will sell, you will sell half a city
You will sell fields and vineyards
The best, the best of the city.

This establishes an accepted standard of female assertiveness regarding finances when the husband is not there to provide.

Other examples of women's idealized behavior can be found in the *Romances Una Hija tiene el Rey*, *Pregonadas son las guerras*, and *el Romance de Sol*, which present women ready to face violence and even death for their ideals. These three valiant women are celebrated at the end of each *Romance*. In *Una Hija tiene el Rey* the last two lines state:

para que diga la gente viva viva esa doncella
que por salvar a su amor se echo ella a la tormenta. (Weich-Shahak
1997, 106)

so that people may say, long live that maiden
who threw herself into the storm to save her beloved.

The *Romance Pregonadas son las guerras* ends with the valiant daughter's marriage to the king's son as a result of her courage and ability as a warrior:

Ya cabalgaba la niña, cabalgó más que un varón;
y a la entrada de las guerra[s], los cien moros ya mató;

y a las segundas batallas, la guerra, niña ganó
 y a las terceras batallas, sombrero se la cayó.
 Todos dicen a una boca: -Hembra es, que no es varón.
 Decía el hijo del rey: -Por mujer la llevo yo.
 La echara en los sus brazo[s] y a su casa la llevó,
 y otro día en la mañana las ricas bodas s'armó. (Weich-Shahak 1997,
 176–77)

The maiden was riding, she was riding more than a man
 and at the beginning of the battle, she killed one hundred Moors
 and at the second battle, she won the war
 and at the third battle, her hat fell off (her head).
 Everyone says in one voice: it is a female and not a male.
 The king's son said: – I will take her as my wife.
 He took her in his arms and took her to his house.
 And the next morning, a rich wedding was celebrated.

In the case of Sol, otherwise known as Sol haTsaddeket, or Solika Hachuel, she has become the sole publicly celebrated female *tsaddeket* in Morocco (Jewish saint). Her story is complex and controversial. For the purpose of this paper, I wish to focus only on the two lines of the *Romance* that are presented explicitly as an example for girls to learn. This version was taught to young Jewish women at the Alliance Israélite Universelle's school in Larache in the 1940s.⁷

Por el mundo se extienda su historia, las doncellas que cobren valor
 No fiarse de ninguna mora para no verse como Sol se vió.

Her story should extend throughout the world, maidens should become
 courageous
 Not to trust any Muslim woman, not to find oneself in the situation Sol
 found herself.

M.S., currently residing in Casablanca, recounted how her young brother, when he was about ten years old, would always cry when he heard the *Romance de Sol*; he was so moved by her actions in giving up her life for Judaism.

7 Personal interview Viviane Ghozlan, 12 May 2008, Tangier.

He also loved hearing the song and constantly asked his mother and aunt to sing it to him. M.M., a man from Tangier in his seventies, reiterated how *Sol haTsadekktet*, because of her chasteness, youth, and piety, was a woman like none other. The *Romance* and the story of Solika as a Jewish martyr obviously had affected him deeply from childhood, and for the rest of his life.

These *Romances* were used as wedding songs, women's work songs, lullabies, and songs sung at private gatherings. Their educational value was strong (Anahory-Librowicz, 287). They were sung to children as lullabies and became part of their personal "story library." A.B., from Alcazarquivir, narrated how one of the games she would play with her sisters was to enact the stories of the *Romances*. Each sister would have a character, and they would dress up in costumes, and later present the short enactments as a theatrical game. Passive ways of acquiring the repertoire was by being within earshot when they were sung at weddings or during other adult gatherings.

These female 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 familiar allusions, which are revealed from their unconscious seclusion. They come out as *lo primero que pasa por la mente*,⁸ "the first thing that comes to mind."

In conclusion, the *Romances* play a series of fundamental roles within the Judeo-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 a cultural initiation 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 other cultures.

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8 Personal interview E.A., Tangier.

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