

# The Many Meanings of Marriage: Toward a Post-Marriage Reading of the Moroccan Novel *A Country for Dying*

**John Paolo Sarce**

College of Arts and Letters, Polytechnic University of the Philippines

Sta. Mesa, Manila, Philippines

Email: [jpsarce@pup.edu.ph](mailto:jpsarce@pup.edu.ph)

**Abstract** This paper examines how Abdellah Taïa’s novel reimagines the marriage plot through what can be called a “post-marriage” lens, where marriage no longer functions as the unquestioned telos of women’s lives but as an unstable, contested, and ambivalent institution. Across the intertwined stories of Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb, the novel stages marriage not as fulfillment but as dissolution, exposing how love and intimacy are inseparable from structures of patriarchy, colonial modernity, and queer refusal. Zahira dreams of marrying Iqbal as a path toward legitimacy and stability, yet her pursuit, financed by prostitution and even sorcery, unmasks the institution as both compromised and desacralized. Zannouba, in turn, articulates a queer anti-marriage critique rooted in her trans identity: marriage becomes the mechanism that erased the intimate bonds with her sisters and transformed them into “living dead” wives, a figure of dispossession that queerness unsettles by refusing both patriarchal and Western liberal scripts of womanhood. Finally, Zineb’s story situates marriage within colonial entanglements, where desire, romance, and legitimacy intersect with imperial power. Her obsession with the film *Andaz* underscores this ambivalence: marriage in the postcolonial imaginary appears as a site of love, betrayal, and punishment, dramatizing women’s inevitable sacrifice under patriarchal law. Read together, these narratives produce a critique of marriage as both fantasy and apparatus: a promise of recognition and belonging that simultaneously disciplines, commodifies, and erases. By mobilizing strategies of appropriation, refusal, and cinematic dreaming, Taïa’s characters destabilize the marriage plot, revealing its persistence but also its collapse into uncertainty. In this way, the novel illuminates the contours of a “post-marriage” moment in literature and culture, where engagements, weddings, and unions remain narratively central, yet their meaning is fractured, contingent, and open to queer and postcolonial

reimagination.

**Keywords** Marriage; Anti Marriage; Moroccan Novel; Postcolonialism

**Author** **John Paolo Sarce**, LPT, MA LCS, is an Instructor I at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. He previously taught at Ateneo de Manila University and Our Lady of Fatima University. His research interests include postcolonialism, queer theory, and pedagogy. He enjoys anime, RuPaul's Drag Race, and reading books.

## Introduction

Marriage is a powerful literary trope because it condenses intimacy, power, and social order into a single institution. Traditionally, marriage has not only represented personal union but also the consolidation of power, particularly under legal and Christian frameworks where women were placed under the authority of men. As Luce Irigaray notes, “the man-woman couple is always out of phase by a generation, since male and female genealogies are collapsed into a single genealogy: that of the husband” (*Sexes and Genealogies* 2). In this system, power and lineage are surrendered to the husband, while the woman's genealogy is erased, absorbed, or replaced by male ownership. Marriage also takes on multiple forms, forced, arranged, fake, polygamous, traditional and romantic, each reflecting cultural values and conflicts. Literature and film often explore these variations, exposing both the endurance of patriarchal structures and the creative ways people navigate or resist them. A striking example of these shifting dynamics is Abdellah Taïa's “A Country for Dying”, which reimagines marriage not as a stable union but as a site of fantasy, disruption, and subversion.

Abdellah Taïa's work is often described as a necessary contribution to world literature, offering readers an intimate view from both inside and outside the Muslim world. *A Country for Dying* vividly depicts the landscapes of Muslim life and colonial history through its unique and eccentric characters. Zahira's fantasy of marrying the Sri Lankan man Iqbal drives her to extremes in her work as a prostitute; Zannouba's dream of becoming a woman is interwoven with painful memories of her youth as Aziz, including the loss of her sisters to marriages that became prisons; and Zineb's account of her hopes for love, even as she is passed from man to man, exposes the limits of romantic and marital fantasies. Together, these stories constellate around Zahira's marriage dream, only to unravel and expose the problems embedded in the marriage plot itself. The novel stitches these narratives together through a polyphonic structure in which each character takes

on the role of narrator. Memory, song, and letters intertwine to create a fluid and dreamlike narrative texture. Instead of a single chronological storyline, the novel unfolds in fragments: monologues, dialogues, letters, dreams, and film songs. These fragments resist neat closure and instead form a mosaic of voices, each disrupted by colonialism, migration, and survival. This fractured narrative design mirrors the instability of the characters' lives, marked by exile, dislocation, and fractured identities. In doing so, "A Country for Dying" rejects the coherence of a traditional plot, reflecting instead the impossibility of stability in a world shaped by colonial and patriarchal violence.

This paper examines how Abdellah Taïa's novel reimagines the marriage plot through what can be called a "post-marriage" lens, where marriage no longer functions as the unquestioned telos of women's lives but as an unstable, contested, and ambivalent institution. Across the intertwined stories of Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb, the novel stages marriage not as fulfillment but as dissolution, exposing how love and intimacy are inseparable from structures of patriarchy, colonial modernity, and queer refusal. Zahira dreams of marrying Iqbal as a path toward legitimacy and stability, yet her pursuit, financed by prostitution and even sorcery, unmask the institution as both compromised and desecrated. Zannouba, in turn, articulates a queer anti-marriage critique rooted in her trans identity: marriage becomes the mechanism that erased the intimate bonds with her sisters and transformed them into "living dead" wives, a figure of dispossession that queerness unsettles by refusing both patriarchal and Western liberal scripts of womanhood. Finally, Zineb's story situates marriage within colonial entanglements, where desire, romance, and legitimacy intersect with imperial power. Her obsession with the film *Andaz* underscores this ambivalence: marriage in the postcolonial imaginary appears as a site of love, betrayal, and punishment, dramatizing women's inevitable sacrifice under patriarchal law. Drawing on queer theory, feminist criticism, and scholarship on the marriage plot, this study pursues a close reading of the novel's staging of marriage as dream, as critique, and as allegory of colonial entanglement. The analysis begins by outlining the theoretical frameworks, marriage plots in literature, queer positionality in the Arab world, and the colonial reconfiguration of intimacy, before turning to the novel itself. Through Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb, Taïa exposes the marriage plot as a site of both fantasy and foreclosure, ultimately reimagining postcolonial unions as tragic iterations of an enduring but destabilized form creating many meanings for the sign of marriage.

### The Marriage, Forced Marriage, and Post Marriage Plot

In the tradition of the romantic novel or novels about marriage, marriage frequently functions as the narrative suture, the point at which the sequence of actions culminates in a “happily ever after.” Yet this resolution is rarely immediate; it is preceded by struggles, delays, and conflicts that both threaten and ultimately prepare the nuptial moment. Such structures indicate that the literary representation of marriage is never straightforward but always layered with complexity. As Dagmar Stöferle observes, “the proof of reality that literary texts strive for in the representation of marriage does not result from the course of a marriage, but from the form in which this marriage is concluded” (*Marriage as a National Fiction: Represented Law in the Modern Novel* 3). The novel, as the paradigmatic modern genre, not only reflects but actively critiques social realities, and within this framework marriage operates less as a record of domesticity than as a metaphor, a form, and a juridical construct. It reveals the processes of social regulation, but also opens spaces of critique and transgression. As a trope, marriage discloses relations of power, privilege, and oppression; it is a figure of the double bind, irreducible to singular meaning, staging life as a site of constitutive dualities. However, marriage is also, in form, is not one. There are other forms of it such as forced marriage, fixed, traditional, and even polygamous.

One distinct form of the marriage plot in literary history is the forced marriage plot, a representation of marriage that is inherently violent because it violates a woman’s freedom and autonomy. The heroines of these novels may not achieve independence in the modern, twenty-first-century sense, but their struggle for even a “semblance of power and control over [their] life, especially when it comes to a major life event such as marrying” was radical within their historical context. As Leah Grisham observes, “forced marriage plot novels depict the un-thinghoodification, if you will, of the female consciousness; their patriarch’s capitalistic drive may have alienated women’s awareness of their own consciousness, but forced marriage plot novels show women reclaiming their subjective consciousness.” (*Marriage as a National Fiction: Represented Law in the Modern Novel* xv) In these texts, the female figure rises against patriarchal coercion and challenges entrenched power structures. Branded as disobedient or unruly, the heroine’s resistance becomes central to the narrative; whether she is ultimately successful or not, her refusal to submit transforms her into a necessary and disruptive presence. The forced marriage plot, therefore, is crucial because it critiques both patriarchal and capitalist practices by dramatizing women’s resistance. It stages their movement

from obedience to autonomy, frames their disobedience as morally just, and situates their oppression within wider socio-economic systems such as slavery, industrial capitalism, and speculative finance. This type of marriage or marriage plot in literary works shows how marriage is never linear nor singular, that multiplicities and versions are possible which can even further be elucidated by the idea of “post-marriage.”

The term post-marriage, much like post-structuralism or postmodernism, signals a shift to what comes after marriage, particularly if we understand marriage as the product of a long tradition of male-centered society or as a form of romantic fantasy tied to the industrial era’s ideal of the “good life.” In this sense, post-marriage does not mean that marriage has vanished altogether, but rather that we live in a cultural moment where marriage is no longer the unquestioned center of adult life or of fiction. As Malin May observes, “In the post-marriage era, what happens to the marriage plot? The marriage rate halved between 1991 and 2019, but fiction can’t shake its fondness for the will they/won’t they question, for love triangles and dilemmas.” (*Man as Mindfulness App: Naoise Dolan*) In contemporary literature, then, the marriage plot persists in form, engagements, weddings, the suspense of commitment, but its meaning is hollowed out. Marriage is now only one option among many, shaped by cultural programming, miscommunication, and a preference for safety rather than fulfillment. Post-marriage fiction marks a literary and cultural era in which the once-stable resolution of marriage is destabilized, transformed from a guaranteed ending into an open question: provisional, compromised, and sometimes arbitrary.

### **Queer in the Arab World**

The Arab world is often perceived as a traditional and conservative society, reinforced by laws that criminalize and punish queer individuals for homosexual acts. Yet, despite such prohibitions, queer culture continues to exist, often thriving in underground or secretive spaces. Many queer individuals also seek freedom by migrating to more open and liberal contexts, where they can explore their identities more fully. Within this framework, queerness carries multiple and shifting meanings, from passivity to deviance, and becomes especially legible in cultural production. Queer or queerness could mean denote homosexuality or deviation but represents a transformative openness to difference (Byun, *Beyond Gender: Catheresque Queer Harmony and possibility \_Archives* 2021). As Joseph Massad observes, “literature has become in the twentieth-century Arab world a central (if not necessarily the most popular) forum through which matters of sexual desire and its connections to

civilization and its antonyms are negotiated and how matters political and economic are allegorized through appeals to the sexual and to the realm of desires” (*Desiring Arabs* 416). Arab literature thus became a key arena for negotiating sexuality and modernity. While writers such as Naguib Mahfouz dramatize these debates in subtle and undidactic ways, the larger cultural trajectory reflects the assimilation of Western sexual categories. The medieval figure of the majin (the bawdy trickster) was gradually redefined as the “deviant,” and later as the “homosexual” (mithli), a juridical subject with rights, under the influence of European Orientalism and the Gay International. In this sense, queerness in Arab literature and society does not emerge as an indigenous identity but rather as a contested site shaped by Orientalist discourse, state repression, Islamist responses, and global rights-based frameworks. One key queer Arab writer is Abdellah Taïa who writes queer subjects and complex issues in Arab world.

Arab-Muslim queer subjectivities disrupt both nationalist and Western homonationalist discourses by unsettling fixed notions of identity, sexuality, and belonging. In Abdellah Taïa’s works, read through postcolonial and queer theoretical frameworks, literature becomes a site of resistance: it contests exclusionary definitions of the nation, exposes the politics of sexuality, and imagines “experimental nations” that exist beyond rigid borders. As Tina Dransfeldt Christensen notes, “Taïa’s literary play with the “self-absorbed” is not a retreat into narcissism but an enactment of what Abdelkébir Khatibi calls *pensée-autre*—an “other” mode of thinking about sexuality and marginality.” (*Writing Queer Identities in Morocco: Abdellah Taïa and Moroccan Committed Literature* x) Writing the “self-absorbed” thus becomes a performative strategy that demands recognition for marginalized voices without assimilating them into new forms of normativity. In this way, Taïa’s queer writing does not simply represent gay identity; it destabilizes the categories through which queerness is policed in both Moroccan and Western contexts, shame, monstrosity, extremism, and nationhood. By transforming silence, screams, and even violence into literary testimony, his work reimagines queer subjectivity not as conformity to dominant narratives but as a radical insistence on visibility, resistance, and the possibility of living otherwise. Queer theory or queerness, from this, is a flexible and inclusive way of thinking that resists rigid labels and embraces diversity, not only in sexuality and gender but also in cultural, social, and emotional expressions of identity (Scherr, 2011). These depictions of resistance and possibility of alterity are also present in other contexts of postcolonial society just like unions or nuptials which will be elaborated on the next section.

### Postcolonial Unions

Marriage, while often framed as a sacred bond and a symbol of social unity, carries multiple layers of meaning in postcolonial societies. It functions not only as a personal or spiritual union but also as a political and cultural apparatus that disciplines women into heteronormative roles and sustains patriarchal structures, making individual empowerment secondary to marital status. In Ghana, marriage stands as the primary marker of adulthood, respectability, and gender identity, shaped by both indigenous traditions and colonial disruptions. As Dery and Bawa (2019) explain, “the concept of marriage does not only symbolize sexual relations between a biological man and a woman; it is a complex enterprise regulated by extended family structures and identical communal norms and practices” (*Agency, Social Status and Performing Marriage in Postcolonial Societies* 992). Marriage in this context is both a fantasy and a necessity. It offers women respect, belonging, and legitimacy, but simultaneously reproduces hierarchies of gender and power. While precolonial systems afforded women greater authority within community life, colonial interventions, through chieftaincy, Christianity, and heteropatriarchal morality, eroded these powers, recasting marriage as the central pathway to social recognition and respectability. Marriage, then, emerges as the key institution through which gender, adulthood, and social worth are constructed. Postcolonial analysis, in the study of Dery and Bawa, reveals how colonialism reshaped this institution by imposing monogamy, patriarchal authority, and Christian morality, thereby narrowing women’s roles and freedoms. What persists is a deeply ambivalent structure: marriage as both a site of belonging and a mechanism of control, indispensable to social identity yet inextricably tied to the legacies of colonial domination. This dual meaning of marriage in postcolonial society is clearly exemplified by the works of Moroccan Leila Abouzeid.

Leila Abouzeid constructs her identity as a modern Moroccan woman by linking modernity to Islamic tradition, resisting Western secular models, and situating her feminism within Morocco’s cultural and religious framework. Unlike earlier feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi, who directly attacked patriarchal states, Abouzeid develops a more strategic and context-specific form of Islamic feminism, one that underscores both the possibilities and limits of women’s emancipation in Morocco. Central to this project is her representation of marriage in postcolonial society. As Eva Hunter notes, Abouzeid resists Western assumptions of superiority by portraying Zahra, the protagonist of “Year of the Elephant”, as a woman who insists on her own customs yet also recognizes, with

irony, that patriarchal cruelty transcends cultural boundaries. Zahra repeatedly exposes the injustice of Moroccan family law, “[w]hen a woman is divorced, her husband owes her only ‘[e]xpenses for a hundred days’. Throw them out on the streets with a hundred days of expenses” (quoted from *Feminism, Islam and the Modern Moroccan Woman in the Works of Leila Abouzeid* 9) while simultaneously mocking Western modernity when Zhara hears of Dr. Christiaan Barnard abandoning his first wife she said that “[m]aybe she was a traditional woman, too.” (Ibid 69) In Abouzeid’s fiction, marriage emerges as a powerful symbol of betrayal, where the promises of independence give way to renewed patriarchal domination. Postcolonialism frames this critique: the anti-colonial struggle, which once promised liberation, instead entrenched new exclusions, leaving women confined by laws and customs that continue to sustain their marginality. One way to read these issues present in novels or texts like of Abouzeid’s work is to closely read and pay attention to these texts as cultural work that carries meaning. A careful attention and understanding of the text is often associated to the method of close reading which the next section will discuss.

### **A Note on Method: Close Reading**

Rather than functioning as a “finished cultural product,” the novel operates as an event, a transformative encounter that unsettles the reader and reorients how the world is perceived. Figures within the text, together with formal disruptions, compel readers into an ethical confrontation with otherness. As Falcato explains Nausbaum idea in writing, style and form are never neutral vessels but themselves bear ethical significance. Ana Falcato makes a similar point in “The Ethics of Reading J. M. Coetzee”, noting that “this disruptive power—with regard to both the reader’s settled views and prejudices and her stance toward the literary work as a finished cultural and historical product—is precisely what makes reading literature an ethical act.” (253) Reading thus demands sustained attentiveness not only to a text’s thematic content but also to the stylistic and formal strategies through which meaning and history are constituted.

Close reading is not merely a scholarly tool for textual analysis but a disciplined practice of attention. Instead of reducing a work to its “main ideas” or projecting assumptions onto it, close reading demands that we attend closely to what is actually on the page, even details that might seem minor or unexpected. Such attentiveness trains us to listen more carefully, both to texts and to people. As Jane Gallop explains, “By ‘reading’ here, I mean of course close reading, learning to hear what’s really on the page, listening closely to the other, and being willing to catch

what the other actually says, and able to hear what we didn't expect him to say.” (*The Ethics of Reading* 17) In this sense, close reading resists the impulse to idolize or dismiss, instead fostering a fair and balanced engagement with others, whether in love, in conflict, or in everyday encounters. For Gallop, close reading is more than a method of literary study; it is also an ethical training ground that cultivates openness, fairness, and respect across human relationships. This paper adopts close reading as its method in examining representations of the marriage trope or plot. The next section will provide a summary of the novel “A Country for Dying”, followed by a discussion of Zahira’s plan to marry Iqbal, an analysis of Zannouba’s marriage perspective from a queer lens, and finally an exploration of the postcolonial specter of marriage through Zineb’s fantasy.

### **The Many Marriages in “A Country for Dying”**

The novel opens with Zahira recalling her father, now deceased. She remembers his physical strength, his grief for his lost sister Zineb, his past as a soldier, and the painful decline of his health, which she helplessly witnessed. The next chapter shifts to Aziz, later as Zannouba, after undergoing gender reassignment surgery. This section reveals the roots of Aziz’s transition: his longing for the intimacy and affection once given by his seven sisters, who dressed him like a girl in childhood. It also recounts his resentment over their gradual disappearance from his life, as they were sold or married off by their Algerian father. These losses propelled him toward Paris, where he eventually lived as a gay prostitute. The third chapter returns to Zahira’s perspective. Now a prostitute in Paris, she dreams of marrying Iqbal, a Sri Lankan client. To achieve this, she plans to save money and consult a Moroccan sorcerer to cast a spell of attraction. She also draws inspiration from her former colleague Naima, who managed to marry an Arab man despite her past, fueling Zahira’s belief that she, too, might find a future through love.

Part II begins with the aftermath of Aziz’s transition into Zannouba. Here, she struggles with the tension between her new identity and the fear of losing her younger self. The chapter also reminded her again of her now veiled sisters and how she hates the idea of marriage. This culminates in an imagined dialogue with the boy she once was, recalling their admiration for actress Isabelle Adjani and her portrayals of powerful women. The following chapter in Part II returns to Zahira, recounting her brief romance with Mojtaba, an Iranian political exile. Through their affair, she is symbolically introduced to his mother by letter, as though being presented as a possible wife. The last chapter of Part II features Allal, the man Zahira first loved before leaving Morocco. In her dreams, he becomes a figure of

reproach, haunting her with reminders of her past and even wishing her death.

Part III turns to the story of Zineb, Zahira's vanished aunt. Across three chapters, her fragmented life unfolds. First, Gabriel encounters Zineb as she journeys to Indochina. This chapter establishes the dream of being together for a life time with Gabriel but at the same time abandoning his mission to venture into India as Zineb's dreams to be in that country. Next, the narrative reveals her exploitation in Morocco, where she is sold into prostitution. Finally, Zineb contemplates whether to flee to India, reinvent herself, and pursue her dreams of becoming like her idol, the Indian actress Nargis.

### **Marriage as Dream**

Zahira is one of the novel's central characters, and much of the narrative of figures like Zannouba and Zineb is anchored in relation to her. What Zahira desires most is freedom and self-determination, which she initially experiences while working as a prostitute in Paris. That sense of independence shifts when she meets Iqbal, a young Sri Lankan man whom she dreams of marrying. As she declares, "Iqbal is still attached to me, I see it clearly, through his cock and through something else: love, I'm sure of it. But I want more, I need more: to become his wife" (36). For Zahira, Iqbal represents not only sexual compatibility but also authority, wealth, and the possibility of a legitimate future. Yet after discovering that she continues to work as a prostitute, sometimes even with his friends, Iqbal begins to distance himself. In response, Zahira turns to strategy and even sorcery and she saves money by taking on more clients in order to bring an Azilal sorcerer to Paris who could help secure Iqbal's love. After years of enjoying her single life, Zahira now imagines surrendering herself to marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. She is willing to lose her autonomy in the name of love, and her first step is to bind Iqbal to her, whether through seduction or through magic.

Zahira's dream of marrying Iqbal is not merely a passing fantasy but is intensified by her friend Naïma's unlikely success story. Despite a life marked by prostitution and decline, Naïma finds redemption in love and marriage to Jaâfar, an Algerian hotelier who had long admired her. Zahira emphasizes this miracle:

Naïma says that miracles happen. Now her family is proud of her. Naïma brought Jaâfar to Casablanca. They had a big wedding. They bought a house in El Jadida, Naïma's birthplace. But both of them love Paris. That's where they dream of going to try their luck till the very end. I don't know if I want to be like Naïma. I'll never have her luck. But I believe in her miracle. (44)

Naïma's late rescue, through forgiveness, financial stability, and ultimately love, offers a powerful counter-narrative to social shame and moral condemnation. She refuses rigid piety, embraces the dignity of her past, and shows that even a "dark path" can lead to renewal and blessing. For Zahira, Naïma becomes a living model of hope: proof that marriage and belonging are possible even for those at the margins. Inspired by her friend, Zahira clings to the possibility of achieving the same kind of miracle with Iqbal, even if his love remains uncertain.

Zahira's dream of marriage and the elaborate schemes she pursues to achieve it can be read within the broader tradition of the marriage plot in literature. In many romantic or realist novels, marriage functions as the narrative resolution, yet one that is complicated by conflict, delay, and struggle. Zahira, however, does not simply conform to this script rather she rewrites it on her own terms. Rather than passively awaiting a husband, she actively orchestrates the conditions of her desired marriage, financing it through prostitution and even plotting to enlist sorcery. In this sense, she resembles heroines of the forced marriage plot: figures branded disobedient who resist patriarchal dictates and reclaim some semblance of power over a major life event. But Zahira goes further. She does not reject marriage outright, instead, she hijacks its patriarchal logic by appropriating the right "to be married" as an act of self-determination. This destabilizes the conventional meaning of marriage, exposing it as less a natural destiny than a contested social construct. At the same time, Zahira's actions push toward what we might call a "post-marriage" moment. For her, marriage is no longer the unquestioned telos of female life but one option among many, an institution she bends, manipulates, and even desecralizes by linking it to sex work and sorcery. Her dream of marrying Iqbal thus stages marriage as an unstable, contradictory form. It is at once a site of patriarchal regulation and a field of female agency, both complicit in tradition and subversive of it. Similarly to this subversiveness is the anti-marriage sentiments of Zannouba which is to be which is to be discussed next.

### **Queer Anti- Marriage Sentiments**

Aziz, who later becomes Zannouba, occupies one of the novel's most compelling and conflicted roles: the question of whether to be a woman is not merely accidental for him, it is the axis of his subjectivity. In the realist register of the novel, Aziz is resolute about becoming Zannouba. He longs for the physical "opening" of transition and even plans to have his penis removed to realize that self. His desire is rooted less in a theatrical fascination than in a deep, embodied memory: the way his seven sisters dressed, kissed, and transformed him as a child gave him a sense

of belonging and feminine identity that he cannot relinquish. That communal ritual is violently undone when the sisters are married off and dispersed at his thirteenth year, which for him is a rupture he experiences as both personal loss and social erasure. He cries out,

They had shown me the path. The world destroyed it all. Brutal men stole, kidnapped my sisters. They rape them, I know, over and over. My sisters can't say anything. Now my sisters have children. But I don't want to know them. I don't want to know anything about them anymore, about their new lives. ( 50)

This anti-marriage sentiment is bound up with a furious rejection of patriarchal authority and marriage functions in the novel as the mechanism that scatters the intimate, ritual space that once affirmed him. Aziz's anger extends to all men, even to the level of the state, invoked through the figure of President Boumediene, because legal and social institutions enable the dispossession of his sisters. In other words, Aziz's rejection of heteronormative marriage is both an anguished response to personal loss and a political refusal: heteronormative men, and the laws that protect them, cannot have, define, or contain the women, and the self, he loves.

This conflict continues even after Aziz has fully transitioned into Zannouba. In a dreamlike confrontation with her old self, Zannouba debates Aziz about transition and identity, while she longs to dissolve and erase her former self, Aziz resists this erasure. At the heart of their argument is the question of how to live as a woman. Zannouba declares, "[y]ou're wrong, Aziz. Your sisters can't do anything for you. You know what Algerian society has turned them into: veiled women, slaves to their cowardly husbands. The living dead" (102-103). For Zannouba, her sisters' marriages symbolize the loss of agency since veiling represents both literal concealment and the figurative erasure of self in patriarchal structures. This is something that Zannouba wants to refrain to becoming. Yet Aziz counters sharply, accusing Zannouba of adopting Western stereotypes that reduce Arab women to passive victims. He even mocks her by insisting that she herself is now an Arab woman. This exchange crystallizes the novel's critique of marriage as a system of dispossession. Zannouba equates it with death-in-life, while Aziz destabilizes this view by exposing its reliance on Westernized assumptions. The tension underscores how Zannouba's transition sharpens her anti-marriage stance, but also reveals her uncertainty. In rejecting marriage as a site of female subjugation, she finds no guidance in her sisters' lives for understanding her own womanhood.

The anti-marriage sentiment voiced by Zannouba is not only a rejection of

patriarchal norms but also a distinctly queer intervention. Marriage, in her view, is a mechanism through which the male-centered order absorbs and erases the woman, particularly the Arab woman, reducing her to wife and mother. Veiling becomes the figure of this dispossession which is a concealment of self, an enforced invisibility. Yet Zannouba's critique cannot be located simply in the perspective of "woman" or "man." It emerges from her trans and queer positionality, which unsettles the binary logics through which marriage and gender are naturalized. This is the value of *pensée-autre* or a thinking otherwise as discussed by Khatibi and interpellates the idea of Edleman as queer without futurity since marriage is a bond that forges futurity and the sharp queer critique here signifies the cutting of the futurity by negating the possibility of marriage. Further, by speaking from a space that is neither fully male nor fully female, she exposes how marriage functions not as a universal union but as a patriarchal contract that owns, disciplines, and domesticates the female body. This queer perspective is crucial, because it disarms the very logic of normativity. In refusing the categories through which "womanhood" and "marriage" are policed, Zannouba demonstrates how queer identity destabilizes the supposed universality of the marital order. Her rejection of marriage does not merely echo feminist critiques of patriarchy rather it complicates them by showing how queerness itself opens a new site of resistance. In Taïa's writing, the trans body is not a resolution but an unresolved fracture, a refusal of fixed identity that unsettles both Arab patriarchal systems and Western liberal narratives of progress. Zannouba's rejection of marriage can be read as part of this queer literary strategy that it dismantles heteronormative unions as the foundation of social belonging and reimagines subjectivity as a site of refusal, alterity, and possibility. Queerness here does not simply stand for identity rather it becomes a mode of critique, a way of imagining life beyond the scripts of patriarchy, nation, and even gender itself.

### **The Allegory of Postcolonial Nuptial**

The final part of the novel shifts to Zineb's story and her journey toward Indochina, a life marked by tragedy similar to that of the other characters. As a young woman, she was captured after discovering treasure in the Atlas Mountains with her father and Zahira's grandfather. To escape punishment, she entered into a domestic and sexual arrangement with Charles, the French police chief who protected her. When Charles abandoned her, Zineb joined the world of prostitution in Casablanca, where she met Gabriel, a French soldier. With him, she began to dream not of Indochina, the site of colonial violence and death, but of India which is a place of cinema, reinvention, and possibility. Zineb tests Gabriel's love by making their imagined

journey to India the proof of his devotion. He eventually consents, and she responds, “[y]ou are my love. You will be my man. We will live together.” Yet beneath this declaration of intimacy lies a dynamic of negotiation and power. Zineb uses the language of romance and marriage not only to secure Gabriel’s commitment but also to advance her own dream of transformation. Their relationship, therefore, oscillates between genuine affection and commodification, intimacy and strategy. Love becomes a form of leverage, a means of redirecting Gabriel’s future away from colonial war and into her fantasy of self-reinvention in India. In this way, Zineb reconfigures the structures of desire, using the fantasy of union to imagine a new life and a new identity.

Zineb’s fantasy of becoming a new person in India is fueled by her idolization of Nargis Dutt, the celebrated Indian actress, especially for her role in *Andaz*. She feels deeply connected to this film, insisting that she understands its images in a way that transforms her sense of self. When Gabriel asks what the film is about, Zineb initially reduces it to “a woman who loves two men.” But for her, the real power of *Andaz* lies not in its narrative but in Nargis’s acting, which embodies self-abandonment, intensity, and truth. As Zineb admits:

Okay then, yes, I am [crazy]. And all the better. Since delving into the images of the movie *Andaz*, I’ve gone crazy. I’ll admit it. But that’s the only thing that can really save me. (970)

Her so-called “madness” becomes a creative force that which is also a refusal of imposed reality and a commitment to possibility. Yet *Andaz* is far from a simple romance or story of women’s liberation. It is a tragic melodrama of marriage, betrayal, and female suffering. The film follows Neena, who marries her fiancé Rajan despite her lingering feelings for Dilip, a man she recently met. When Neena mistakenly told Rajan, thinking it is Dilip in the darkness, to leave because she does not love him, Rajan furiously flees with their child. In a climactic confrontation, Dilip loses control and attacks Neena, who kills him in self-defense. At her trial, Rajan testifies against her, framing her as an adulteress, and she is imprisoned. Only later does a letter from Dilip reveal that Neena truly loved her husband all along, underscoring the bitter irony of her fate. For Zineb, losing herself in this film is not only about embracing Nargis’s luminous performance but also about recognizing the tragic structure of women’s lives under patriarchy where marriage becomes a site of betrayal, violence, and loss. By identifying with *Andaz*, Zineb imagines both the possibility of reinvention and the inevitability of failure. The film dramatizes

how women, no matter their desires, are trapped in narratives of sacrifice and punishment. In this sense, Zineb's obsession with Nargis mirrors her own condition: a life shaped by violence, commodification, and the precarious hope of becoming someone new.

There is a chain of dreaming in the novel: Zahira aspires to her aunt Zineb, and Zineb in turn aspires to Nargis. Each dream expresses the desire to become a woman with agency, capable of love and reinvention, yet each ends in tragedy. Marriage, in these narratives, appears less as fulfillment than as dissolution, a structure that consumes women rather than liberates them. Whether chosen or imposed, marriage becomes the trap through which women's lives collapse into betrayal, dishonor, or commodification. What unites Zahira, Zineb, and Nargis is not simply failed love but their entanglement with men who are shaped by colonial power. Zahira's Iqbal, migrant in Paris, embodies cosmopolitan ideals filtered through colonial modernity. Zineb's Gabriel is a French soldier, a direct figure of imperial authority. Nargis's Rajan returns from London, marked by European influence. These men, whether Moroccan or Indian, are not purely local figures but products of colonial education, mobility, and cultural assimilation. Their very difference, their foreignness within the intimate sphere, transforms marriage or love into a site where colonial power is reproduced. Read this way, *Andaz* becomes an allegory of postcolonial unions. The film dramatizes a marriage undone by jealousy, misunderstanding, and patriarchal logic, where Neena's desires culminate not in fulfillment but in imprisonment. For Zineb, identifying with Nargis means embracing this tragic inevitability that a woman who loves, who chooses, who dreams, yet who cannot escape a structure designed to discipline her.

This reading resonates with postcolonial analyses of marriage more broadly. As Dery and Bawa argue, in Ghana and across colonized societies, marriage is not simply a sacred bond but a political and cultural apparatus that disciplines women into heteronormative roles, rendering individual empowerment secondary to marital status. Colonial interventions curtailed women's authority by institutionalizing monogamy, patriarchal authority, and Christian morality, transforming marriage into the central marker of adulthood and respectability while eroding older forms of female agency. What persists is an ambivalent institution: a fantasy of belonging that simultaneously functions as a mechanism of control. Zineb and Nargis embody this ambivalence. Their dreams of love and marriage are also dreams of recognition and legitimacy, but in each case those unions collapse into betrayal, violence, or self-loss. Meanwhile, Zahira in the novel's present time is haunted by the same possibility. Her story ends unresolved, with the question of marriage to Iqbal left

open, but the shadow of failure looms large, whether chosen or not, marriage carries the risk of erasure. Much like in Leila Abouzeid's fiction, where marriage emerges as a symbol of postcolonial betrayal, these women's stories show how anti-colonial promises of liberation often reinscribe patriarchal domination. Their entanglements with men shaped by colonial modernity reveal marriage not as the beginning of freedom but as its foreclosure—a structure that sustains the colonial-patriarchal order even as it promises intimacy, love, or belonging.

### **Conclusion: The Many Forms of Marriage**

In Abdellah Taïa's novel, the marriage plot is not abandoned but rewritten into a post-marriage form. The marriage remains central as a dream, threat, or fantasy, yet it never culminates in stability. Instead, it becomes an unstable structure, desired, resisted, manipulated, or allegorized, through which the characters negotiate freedom, gender, and colonial power. For Zahira, marriage appears as the fantasy of legitimacy after years of independence in Paris. Her longing to wed Iqbal condenses not only love and sexual compatibility but also authority and wealth. Zahira's pursuit of this dream is anything but passive, she finances it through prostitution and even turns to sorcery to bind Iqbal's love. The very means she uses to chase marriage destabilize it, desacralizing the institution by linking it to sex work, strategy, and magic. Zahira does not reject marriage outright rather she appropriates it, bending its patriarchal logic into an act of self-determination. Yet because her desire is modeled on Naïma's "miracle marriage," it also exposes marriage as a fragile social construct and less a natural telos than a contested site where freedom and self-erasure collide.

If Zahira dreams of marriage, Aziz, later as Zannouba, comes to embody its queer refusal. Marriage is the mechanism that dispersed his sisters, erasing the intimate space of belonging that once defined his sense of self. For Aziz, heteronormative marriage is synonymous with patriarchal violence, dispossession, and state-sanctioned erasure. As Zannouba, this rejection sharpens into a queer critique. She names her sisters' veiled, married lives as a form of death-in-life, while also exposing how Western feminism stereotypes Arab women as passive. Her positionality, neither fully male nor female, unsettles the very categories through which marriage is naturalized. Zannouba's anti-marriage stance thus produces a distinctly queer post-marriage plot. It is one where marriage is not the telos of identity but the contract that must be refused in order to imagine life otherwise.

Zineb's narrative rewrites the marriage plot as an allegory of colonial entanglement. Her relationships with Charles and Gabriel use the language of

intimacy yet they function as negotiations shaped by survival, commodification, and empire. Zineb's obsession with the film *Andaz* intensifies this allegory. Neena's tragic marriage, destroyed by patriarchal jealousy and misunderstanding, becomes a mirror for Zineb's own condition. As she identifies with Nargis Dutt, Zineb recognizes that women who dream, love, and choose are nonetheless imprisoned within structures designed to discipline them. Read this way, *Andaz* and Zineb's story stage the postcolonial marriage plot that is a union haunted not by liberation but by betrayal, control, and loss.

What unites Zahira, Zannouba, and Zineb is not the fulfillment of the marriage plot but its unraveling. Zahira hijacks marriage as fantasy, only to expose its instability; Zannouba rejects it outright from a queer position that disarms its heteronormative logic; Zineb allegorizes it as the site where colonial and patriarchal power converge. In each case, marriage persists as form but loses its function as resolution. It becomes, instead, a contested arena which is desired yet dangerous, imagined yet destabilized. This is the essence of the post-marriage plot which not the disappearance of marriage from literature, but its transformation into a site of contradiction, where the dream of intimacy collides with patriarchy, queerness, and colonial history. It is the many meanings and possibilities of marriage.

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