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Maternity, Sexuality, and Capability: An Exploration of the Aesthetics of the Rural Moroccan  
Female Body

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Center for Cross-Cultural Learning  
SIT Study Abroad Fall 2005



*“Work of the eyes is done,  
do now the work of the heart.”*  
-Rilke

I would like to thank Latifa Laarouti for her invaluable help with interview translation, Hassani Hassan for his direction and kindness, the many families of Boujad who offered me housing and meals during my project, and most importantly the women of Loutichina who allowed me this intimate look into their lives and thoughts. Thanks to them, this project was much more of an emotional experience than an academic assignment, much more a work of the heart than I ever imagined it would be.

## *Abstract*

This paper provides an intimate look at the rural female body and its nuances – aesthetics, self-perception, sexuality, maternity, and purity. Based on this research conducted in the rural village of Loutichina, it seems apparent that almost unrealistic demands are traditionally made on the rural female body, most noticeably the demands of reproduction and physical labor. Local perceptions and attitudes towards maternity and sexuality are also explored, as is the way in which the rural female body undergoes basic biological changes and cycles and is simultaneously affected by surrounding social and cultural pressures. Ethically, I was confronted with issues of confidentiality due to the intimate nature of my interviews and discussions, as well as separate issues concerning the viability of my proposed artistic experiments.



*“How can we reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?”*  
-Kristeva

*“Significance is inherent in the human body.”*  
-Kristeva



## Snapshots

*Who are these women?\**

### ❖ *Halima*

She is 28 years old and has a six month old baby boy. She lives in the house of her husband, Cherkaoui, spending most of her time with the other women of the household. Her eyes are deep and lined, too much for her age – but her face is beautiful and strong, her mouth full and her nose decorated with a spray of freckles. She has an aura of loneliness, which she confirms by speaking often of her unhappiness.

### ❖ *Zahra*

She is young, 19 years old, and says she's ready to be married. She wears three slender silver bracelets on her left arm, and they clink together when she moves. Her hair is dark, carefully concealed by her head scarf, and when she laughs, her eyes smile broadly, mimicking her mouth. She's never been to school, and is completely illiterate, but she wants desperately to learn.

### ❖ *Fatima*

She's in her 50's; no one knows her exact age, no one can remember. She's the first wife of the man in the household, and she carries this fact proudly despite her small stature and her nervous, fidgety disposition. Her face is marked with the faded blue tattoos of Berber tradition, and her eyes are seemingly permanently rimmed with thick lines of black kohl.

❖ *Miriam*

She doesn't know how old she is. Maybe 20, she offers, but then retracts the statement moments later. She already has a five year old son, and she is pregnant with a second child. Her husband is jobless and poor, so she'll have to stop at two children, she tells me. Her face is soft and cherubic, and she laughs often, showing rows of straight white teeth. Her belly is round and swollen under her flowered apron – she's in her 8<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy.

❖ *Khadija*

She's in her 40's, and has dark, sun weathered skin and a single silver bracelet wrapped around her wrist. She's the second wife of the man of the household. One of her hands is crimson and wrapped carefully in white gauze – she's referred to by the rest of the family as “sick,” although this doesn't impede her physical activity. She has deep creases in the corners of her eyes, perhaps because she laughs often, opening her mouth wide to show a broken, crooked, infinitely charming smile.

\*All names have been changed by request of the women involved in the project, due to the intimate nature of the research and questioning.

## **Body as Public Space/Instrument of Production**



*She sits on the floor, her legs outstretched, a plastic bag of un-spun wool resting beside her. Her face is heavily lined and tired, her distinctive blue facial tattoo running downwards in a straight line, connecting her lips to her chin. Her henna-stained toes protrude from the wide holes in her dark socks, exposed to the chill of the night air, and she covers them instinctively with the plastic bag. Rapidly and simultaneously, her hands grasp the wooden spindle and she rolls it against her bare calf, which is dark, firm, and lined with muscle. Her second hand grasps the product of her labor, a thin, rough strand of yarn for use in her weaving, and she wraps it around her fingers neatly. Why is this contact with her own body always so functional, so irrevocably intertwined with efficiency and production? Maybe it's because there's so much to do, so many tasks to complete, so many obligations and requirements. There simply isn't time for anything else.*



It is obvious that much rests on the capability of the female body in a rural environment. A woman's ability to work equals physical beauty and marriageability, which translates into familial happiness and domestic success. Especially due to financial shortcomings, the rural female body is required to perform tasks and actions that her more monetarily fortunate counterparts are not. Along the same lines, a woman's fertility and ability to bear children are valuable assets to the family unit, and can indeed endanger her happiness if fractured. According to the women interviewed in Loutichina, if a married woman is found to be infertile or if she is too ill to have sexual intercourse, her husband can take a second wife without her permission. At the same time, the infertile or impure unmarried female body holds little chance of finding a spouse due to physical condition. Why

is it that so much pressure rests on the condition of the body, particularly aspects that often cannot be controlled or altered?



*Halima dips her fingers into the small plate of mashed potatoes and carrots, and transfers the food to the expectantly waiting mouth of her baby, wiping the grainy mixture over his lips and outstretched tongue. He smiles and spits the mixture back into his lap. Halima laughs and cups her hand into the pot of water sitting on the table, bringing it to her lips and drinking deeply. "Chuma, Abdullah," she tells her baby, pushing her fingers, this time covered in danon yogurt, back into his soft pink mouth. In Loutichina, the hands of women become spoons, knives, forks, cups, napkins, rolling pins, sponges, combs, and scissors. Perhaps their bodies are striving to fulfill the needs that their finances cannot.*



In Loutichina, women have little contact with their own bodies. Bathing and cleansing of the body is limited to two times a month, oftentimes being condensed to once after the monthly menstrual cycle. For the rest of the time, the rural female body is carefully concealed under layers of thick, warm clothing: undershirts and coarse wool leggings, long pajama-like tunics and several pairs of socks. A single set of over-clothing will be worn for a week at a time, and underclothing will be worn for even longer. Because of this, little contact with the unclothed, bare body is ever made, and women interviewed admit to paying little attention to their bodies beyond the normal demands of physical domestic labor.



*A thick, warm curtain of steam hangs perceptibly in the darkened air of the small room. Fat drops of moisture fall steadily and slowly onto the women gathered below, their wet, bare bodies reduced to faint outlines against the fog. There's so much noise, so much movement -- the cries of children permeate*

*the air, the sounds of women's voices raising and reprimanding. The potent odors of henna and urine infiltrate my lungs, becoming almost unbearable as they mix ostensibly with the steam and heat. In a sudden frenzy of movement, a mother near me presses her little boy's flailing pink body to the ground and begins scrubbing him with brusque, rapid strokes, until soft rolls of skin float from his body. He yelps loudly, clenching his fists and fighting intensely against his mother's hands. In the middle of the room, a little boy with his round young belly proudly protruding from his hips, peels an orange, throws the discards to the ground, and then urinates on top of them. In a separate corner, a woman sits on a small concrete ledge and presses the hungry mouth of her wailing infant to her breast, using her free hand to travel down the expanse of her own body with her dark soap and scrubber. Young girls with small, pre-pubescent breasts join in the frenetic activity, rubbing soap vigorously into their own hair and the hair of their mothers, their lithe, damp bodies hardly pausing to rest. Gone is any remnant of slow sensuality, of quiet bodily examination and contemplation -- no, there isn't time for this. There are too many bodies to be washed, too much flesh to be scoured and purified.*



The hammam in Boujad is apparently still a popular place for village women to visit on occasion when their husbands and male family members attend the Thursday souk in the city. Indeed, upon entering the hammam on this particular Thursday, I was greeted with several familiar faces of Loutichina women and children. The hurried, frenetic pace of the bath, however, was indeed telling as to the little time these women have to spend caring for and contemplating their physical bodies. Additionally, a rather interesting dynamic was also present – these women's bodies, which are so used to being considered entirely private space, were suddenly completely exposed and revealed to the public eye, the appraising gaze of other villagers, the scholarly and curious eye of the lone outsider (me). It is in this case of the

hammam that the female body becomes public space, open for evaluation and inspection. Particularly in the case of the rural woman, this experience may be particularly disturbing, and as Miriam told me in interviews, “I went to the hammam in Boujad once but I didn’t like it.” She went on to elaborate on her uncomfortableness on being publicly naked, not because she felt badly about her body, but just because she didn’t want to be examined and looked at by other women. When the body is confined to the realm of privacy and solitude for so long, doesn’t it make sense that any sort of publicity would be immediately strange and undesired?



*The men and their wives sit in a room off to the left of the house, eating and drinking for a few moments before their imminent departure. One of the men is traveling to Mecca tomorrow, he's decided to make the pilgrimage; this is a visit of celebration and good wishes. The young women of the household aren't invited to this gathering, and instead they continue in their tasks of making bread and scrubbing the kitchen floor, seemingly tireless in their activity. One of the female guests enters the kitchen, picks up Halima's sixth month old baby from his spot playing on the floor, and wordlessly brings him back to the secluded, private space of the separate room. Halima continues in her work, silently and steadily, seemingly unaffected by the fact that she is uninvited and excluded from this hallowed, sacred place where her infant son has just been taken. A female guest from inside the space gestures towards Halima, and asks with a laugh: "What's her name again? Cherkaoui's wife?" The women laugh, they coo over the baby, smothering his face in warm kisses and words of praise.*

*Why is it that Halima is valued only for this product of her body, this male child who undeniably lends wealth and happiness to a family of which she is no part?*

The dependency of the female body on the whims and actions of men is additionally readily apparent in this rural household. Fatima, the first wife of the man of the house, accompanied her husband in the courting of his second wife, and was given no choice whatsoever in the matter. When questioned if she at all felt inadequate or unworthy physically when her husband chose to marry again, she replied that she was only 15 years old and she didn't know anything about love or marriage or even her own sexuality. Additionally, she claimed to love the other woman as a sister, stating clearly that she felt more emotionally and mentally united with this second wife than she ever had been with her husband. Both wives also attested to the fact that there had never been any physical or emotional jealousy between them, and instead they had devoted themselves entirely to each other, caring selflessly for each other's bodies in times of illness and unhealth.

“If he gives me money, I'll be anything he wants me to be,” Halima tells me, laughing and enveloping my hand in both of hers. Halima has never been to school and thus is illiterate – she depends entirely on the employment of her husband and his father to support, feed, and clothe both herself and her small child. Thus the wellness and condition of her body are irrevocably in the hands of men; she tells me that if she doesn't work hard enough or if she slacks in her work, her husband can refuse her even basic human rights such as food and shelter. She says that she must always strive to labor steadily and quickly, and not show any sign of illness or unhealth, for risk of having her husband feel disappointment in his marriage. If she is infertile or too physically ill to have sexual intercourse, she tells me, her husband can either discard her or take a second wife without her permission. There is so much pressure on her body – even her most basic survival and happiness rests on its success and capability, as well as the decisions and actions of the men that surround her.

## Purity of the Body



*We sit together on the rough straw mat, our knees touching, the afternoon rays of sun slowly warming our hands and faces. Halima shows me her wedding album proudly; it is small and plastic, and she turns the pages rapidly, identifying relatives and laughing when she doesn't remember. Sandwiched between a photograph of the ceremony and an unsmiling portrait of the bride and groom, is a photograph different from all the rest, and she lingers on it for a moment, drawing her fingers softly across the page. In the picture, Halima reclines awkwardly on a soft white pallet, her body entirely covered in a similarly colored sleeping gown. Propped up on one elbow, her gaze confronts the camera with a startling intensity – her eyes are large and dark, her lips pulled tightly against her exposed teeth. Displayed proudly next to her body is a pile of sheets dappled with light crimson splotches, obviously carefully arranged for the intruding eye of the camera. This is her marriage bed, she explains to me, this intimate picture was taken the morning after her wedding night, the morning after she and Cherkaoui consummated their union. This photograph records the virginity of her body; it visually represents the undeniable fact that before marriage, her body was untainted and uncontaminated, untouched and undefiled, whole and virtuous in its unquestionable purity.*



Why is it that this purity and wholeness must be displayed photographically, that the intimacy of the female body and the marriage bed must be exploited and proffered for examination? The value of virginity, of the untouched female body is so high and so important that proof must be offered to confirm the validity of any claim. When I attempted to explain to the women of Loutichina about the medical proof that some women do not bleed

during their first experience with sexual intercourse, they laughed and scoffed at my ignorance. “Blood is the only way to tell.” Khadija tells me.

“You should not know about sexual intercourse before marriage,” Fatima tells me passionately, reminding me that it is shameful to be at all impure in body or mind before your wedding night. And what happens if you do defile your virginity before you are officially married? “You and the man who did it to you will be sent to prison for five years each,” she says, the other women nodding their heads in confirmation. Additionally, according to Fatima and Khadija, the offending girl will be beaten and perhaps even killed by her father, or sent away from the house to do hard physical labor elsewhere. Perhaps most insultingly, when it comes time for the girl to actually marry, she will be forced on a husband who is either very old or already has many wives.

“My husband is the only man to ever see my sex organs,” Fatima says proudly, grabbing her crotch and smiling. She reiterates to me the fact that she gave birth to all of her five children at home with a female midwife, that she never had to be insulted by the gaze of a male doctor. These vehement feelings concerning the apparent sacredness of the sex organs and the extreme need that exists to protect and shield them from the outside (particularly male) gaze was quite evident.

### **Cyclical Time/~~The~~ Maternal Body**

**“Through a body destined to insure reproduction of the species, the woman-subject...is more of a filter than anyone else – a thoroughfare, a threshold where nature confronts culture.”**

-Kristeva

According to a text by Julia Kristeva entitled “Women’s Time,” women universally operate within the constraints of monumental time in the sense of eternity, especially

concerning the processes of motherhood, reproduction and the genetic chain (Kristeva, 84). On the other hand, she claims, the time of history and language is linear, and thus contradictory to the basic experience of women. Interestingly enough, this concept seems to be rather well proven by conversations with Loutichina women, who attest to the fact that the states of their lives and bodies indeed move in circles – motherhood, pregnancy, and menstruation all act as cyclical occurrences that ultimately shape and configure both self-perception and identity.

Fatima was taken as the first wife of her husband when she was fourteen years old, before her menstrual cycle had begun, and she lived with him for two years until she became pregnant with her first child. Six months after the birth of her first child, she became pregnant again, and continued this pattern until she reached her fifth pregnancy. She never used contraceptives throughout her entire marriage, both at the insistence of her husband and because of financial reasons, and she trusted her fertility completely to God: “When Allah wanted me to be pregnant, I was pregnant.” This idea of the female body as completely at the mercy of both God and nature seemed to be prevalent among the older women of the village, while the trend in the younger women was indeed towards family planning and the use of birth control.



*We sit outside eating our lunch of bread and olive oil, the midday sun aggressively assaulting our bodies. Suddenly, Halima’s baby begins to cry, and she draws his small body to hers, pulls a single full breast out of her tunic and presses it to his mouth. He is instantly satiated and content, and he sighs as he suckles gently, sweet white milk dripping from his mouth. Khadija smiles at Halima, and then lifts up her thin t-shirt, exposing her much older and larger breasts to the sunlight. “Look!” she commands me, and she begins to laugh as she jiggles her chest up and down, smiling at the movements of her body. “I fed five children with*

*these,” she says proudly, drawing one of her breasts into her hand and kissing the nipple.*

*Halima, looking up from her nursing baby, nods her head in affirmation: “Very beautiful.*

*Very beautiful.”*



The glorification of the maternal female body in this particular rural village is indeed rather strong. While men’s opinions of the female body were not gauged, it is obvious that in the world of women, a body that has endured the pain and situation of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding is indeed a body to be exalted and praised. When I asked Halima about how her body had changed during pregnancy, she unhesitatingly lifted her tunic to show me her post-childbirth belly, which was covered in wrinkles and stretch marks, clearly inscribed with the signs of maternity. She ran her fingers softly over her belly skin, and described to me how her first baby, who had been stillborn, was a girl, and thus she carried her on the sides of her body. Alternately, her second child, a boy, was carried in the center of her stomach, and this, she said, explained the placement and quality of the stretch marks on her belly. In this way, her body tells a story, thus becoming beautiful and worthy in its capability and experience. Additionally, the maternal female body seems to be believed to be imbued with a certain strength that can hardly be challenged. During their pregnancies, all women interviewed stated that their workload and physical tasks did not lighten, and even though they often felt nauseous and tired, they continued to engage in intense physical labor. Each woman additionally stated that the harder she worked, the easier childbirth would be, and this fact acted as initiative to persevere in her domestic activity.

Another source of maternal physical strength apparently lies in the act of childbirth itself. As stated by many village women, giving birth in a field is not at all an uncommon occurrence, as a woman may feel the pains of labor while she is outside working, and will

subsequently lay down in the grass and give birth to her child with no assistance. As Khadija concisely stated, “if a woman is strong, she can give birth anywhere.”



**“Mother’s shall suckle their children for two whole years, for those who wish to complete the suckling. The duty of feeding and clothing nursing mothers in a seemly manner is upon the father of the child.”**

-El Baqharah

**“Paradise lies at the feet of mothers.”**

-Prophet Mohammed

The two quotes above, from the holy texts of Islam, were both cited by the women of Loutichina during interviews concerning the importance and value of breastfeeding. While none of the women knew where the verses were located or the exact wording, they knew quite well the essential message. Most notably, financial and religious reasons were the two most important factors cited in making the decision to breastfeed for an extended period of time. Even though most women were aware of the current European and American studies regarding the health benefits of breastfeeding, none included this as a primary reason for their actions. Khadija and Fatima described their breastfeeding practices as being tailored to the amount of time they waited until they became pregnant again – once they became pregnant, they immediately stopped breastfeeding because of health reasons, and because they used no contraceptives during sexual intercourse with their husband, their pregnancies were often no more than 6 months apart.

“After your first baby was stillborn, how did you feel physically?” I ask Halima through the help of my translator, waiting quietly for the response. She moves both hands to her chest and tenderly grasps her breasts: “These, they were full. But there was no baby to feed. It was painful.” She waited only 8 months to become pregnant again despite the advice of her doctor, mostly because the pain in her breasts and the changes in her body continuously reminded her of her first lost child.



“If you use that, you are no longer a virgin,” Zahra tells me, gesturing to the American-made tampon I’m holding in my left hand. She elaborates on the concept, telling me that only women who have had sex should be able to insert something so large into their vaginas, and if you are unmarried and you try to insert a tampon, it is very shameful and offensive to Allah. She shows me what she uses instead for her own periods, small torn strips of cloth that she folds carefully into elongated rectangles. “*Always* are too expensive,” she says, referring to the popular brand name of sanitary pads available in most Moroccan cities. I ask her if the rags she uses are uncomfortable or oppressive, and she nods her head vigorously and says: “It’s just part of being a woman.”

According to Halima, the presence of menstruation is no excuse from physical activity, although she did admit to many health problems and much pain before she was married. After marriage, she claims that all pain disappears, and thus women have no reason to slack on their household or domestic duties during their monthly cycle.

While most women verbally claimed that there was no difference in bodily awareness or perception during their menstrual cycles, observation provided an interesting contradiction. Halima clearly stated that she has not and never will have sexual intercourse with her husband during her period, for both reasons of religion and cleanliness. When I asked her if she feels physically unclean during her period, she stated that she doesn’t think about it because she doesn’t feel any different than usual. Zahra, similarly, claimed to feel no different during her period except for the small inconvenience of having to change her undergarments. On a particular day, however, she shrank back in horror when she realized that she had been holding the schoolbook of a small child which contained a passage from the Koran. When I questioned her about the situation, she explained that the Koran says a woman musn’t touch the holy book when menstruating and now she was ashamed. When I asked her why a woman

musn't touch the Koran, she told me that it was because her body was dirty and unacceptable to Allah during this time, although she claimed not to feel anymore dirty than usual. This contradiction between self-perception and religious and social dictation appeared to be rather strong with these particular women.

### **Æsthetic Practices/~~The~~ Feminine Ideal**

**“There’s a pretty girl  
On the face of the magazine  
And all I can see  
Are my dirty hands  
Turning the page.”  
-Jewel**

#### **Femmes du Maroc – November 2005 issue**

*She glistens on the page, with her mass of tumbling platinum hair and cold blue eyes. Her slender frame is wrapped beautifully in a thick, short, fur jacket, a broad expanse of taut, dark tummy purposefully exposed. Her wrist is wrapped generously with a chain of diamonds, and her hand grasps her hip both confidently and alluringly. With legs tightly hugged by pencil jeans and feet carefully concealed in black high heels, she seems to be everything I've ever wanted to be. Beautiful. Glamorous. Desired.*

At first, I had a very careful plan. I wanted to simply show these rural women typical Moroccan beauty magazines and gauge their responses to different ideals of beauty apparent in their own culture. I wanted to see what they thought of varying body shapes and types, of differences in skin coloration, of popular clothing designs and emerging fashions; I hoped to somehow uncover their perceptions of self through their reactions to the appearances of others. Yet somewhere along the line, I realized that I love these women too much to complete this exercise, that I care too deeply about their hearts and emotions to show them these expensive magazines bought casually on the streets of Rabat with their glossy, perfumed pages filled

with slender European bodies and pale airbrushed faces. Statistically it's been proven that after looking at beauty magazines, women feel 75% worse about their own bodies, that their self-esteem and perception of self sinks to deplorable depths. How could I possibly do this to women with whom I've lived, spoken, slept, laughed, worked, and loved? The problem is that when you start to love someone, it complicates everything. How much easier it must be to remain aloof and removed, to keep your heart isolated and self-sufficient, elevated above the task and people at hand. How much easier it must be to exploit people's thoughts, emotions, and lives and use them in the name of academic research, to annihilate them in interpretation and application, to forget that they ever belonged to someone at all.



Traditionally, Non-Western societies have been thought to be relatively free from bodily dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and weight obsessions. While I cannot adequately explore this idea within the constraints of this project, I can suggest an alternate viewpoint, particularly in the light of personal conversations and interviews with young unmarried rural women, who demonstrated an intense bodily dissatisfaction that may rival their Euroamerican counterparts. Perhaps most obviously, for example, in rural Moroccan villages, there are no three way mirrors accented by blaring fluorescent lights in which to examine newly formed thigh cellulite or freshly sprouted love handles. In the house in which I lived, for example, only a single, cracked, tiny mirror hung in Khadija's bedroom, and it was rarely taken from his flimsy green plastic frame. At the same time, Zahra, in personal conversations, demonstrated a dissatisfaction with her clothing, and wished vehemently to look more like western women, to wear jeans, cut her hair and live in a city. She also wished for her skin to be lighter, her eyebrows thinner, and her features more generally European – she was displeased with her sun-darkened skin and her thick, heavy brows. Interestingly enough, however, weight was never mentioned by any of the women as being a factor of concern or

worry. Halima, Khadija, Fatima, and Miriam never discussed weight fluctuations in regards to their pregnancies, and even the young, unmarried women expressed no desire to be any different in regards to body mass.



*She leads me to her room and opens up a large black plastic bag. Inside is her beauty trousseau, and she proudly presents to me its contents: a bottle of Axe brand body spray for men ¼ of the way full (deodorant, she explains), two half-used tubes of bright crimson lipstick, their plastic encasements emblazoned with faded gold letters, and an OB brand tampon (she isn't sure what it is, she confides). She offers me a tube of her lipstick. "Cadeau," she says smiling. I smile back.*



### ***À Failed Experiment?***

**“The whole point of artistic practice is to provide a function to bring out – along with the singularity of each person and, even more, the multiplicity of every person’s possible indentification...the relativity of her symbolic as well as biological existence.”**

-Kristeva

The art world today has become so heavily intertwined with the world of museums, collectors, and markets. As Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi says rather eloquently: “In the Euroamerican culture, arts have been disassociated from the stream of life as artistic creation has increasingly become the function of the specialist. In our definition of art, we differentiate ‘pure’ from ‘folk’ art, ‘fine arts’ from ‘crafts.’ Such distinctions impede the understanding of arts as a basic expression of experience” (Arab Women Art, pg. 89). With this in mind, I wanted to have these women draw themselves, to take up crayons and pencils and paints and attempt to express their own self-perceptions and identities through an artistic medium.



*She shakes her head vehemently. "Please." I say, offering her the crayons and colored pencils again, nodding my head in encouragement and affirmation. She looks at me sideways, her eyelids carefully lowered, and takes the paper reluctantly from my hands. "I don't know how to draw. I never went to school," she tells me, holding a blue crayon hesitantly. And yet for the next half-hour she draws, moving the crayon over the paper in slow, even strokes, pausing to switch colors and critically inspect her work. As her father walks by the open door, she hurriedly turns the paper upside down and shoves it beneath a nearby blanket, covering the crayons and pencils with her apron. She looks up at me sheepishly, offers me the completed drawing, and apologizes: "It's very bad. I'm sorry for your project." "Who is this?" I ask, gesturing towards the girl she has drawn on the paper without any instruction, a girl wearing a thick blue necklace and earrings and a triangular dress splashed with a rainbow of colors. "I don't know," she tells me, "it's no one." "It's beautiful," I tell her, and offering her the crayons again I suggest that she draws something else...perhaps a sun, some grass, anything she wants. Laughing, she looks at me curiously and shakes her head. "How do you draw the sun? It isn't an object. It's like this," she wiggles her fingers in a downward motion, indicating the way rays of sunlight fall on the earth. I nod my head in affirmation, and thank her for her drawing, reassuring her of its beauty. I forgot, momentarily, that it is in school that one learns to draw the sun as a solid yellow orb, suspended unrealistically in the sky, the grass as brusque green strokes pressed against the bottom of the page.*



In my attempt to do this, I was perhaps also being elitist, joining the ranks of the art collectors and museums who dub certain pieces "crafts" and other pieces "fine art." Who's to say that the use of expensive store-bought paints and specially designed drawing paper is any more of an expression of experience than the shaping of a loaf of bread, or the careful

weaving of a sleeping mat? When I began to examine these women's lives, I found their own aesthetic practices even more intriguing than my own artificial plan for artistic experimentation. The way Zahra uses her body - her fingers and fists to knead a loaf of bread, twisting and pushing the dough into its desired shape, leaving her fingerprints on its surface; or the way Fatima tenderly shows me the rug she wove during her third pregnancy, each section representing a separate month, a separate aspect of both an emotional and physical reality. In this way, these aesthetic practices are indeed artistic processes, acting as mediums to express and bring out both individuality and symbolic and biological existence.



*Halima presses her soft tanned cheek to mine, kisses me softly, and slips a ten dirham coin into my hand. Her whispered words tickle my ear: "Take it. It's a gift from me. To buy yourself something beautiful in Boujad." My heart swells. I know she has very little of her own – all money is controlled by her husband and father-in-law and most of her few possessions were provided to her by the same men. I kiss her and thank her profusely, and before it becomes even harder to leave, I walk down the dirt bank towards the narrow, dusty road that will take me to Boujad. I look backwards only once, to see her still standing, watching me, her baby tightly secured to her back with a thin purple blanket, the sunlight emblazoning her hair in a halo of red.*



## Conclusion

In conclusion, this project turned out to be much different than I initially imagined or planned. By actually living and working with these women for over 2 weeks time, I learned a great deal of intimate details and aspects of their lives and thoughts – details that oftentimes were too private to be written about in any academic context and thus were omitted by request of the women themselves. A sense of intimacy and friendship was also established between myself and these women, thus making it increasingly difficult to view any of the information they gave me objectively. In the end, additionally, this final write-up tends to be slightly fragmentary, an accurate imitation of my conversations and experience in Loutichina itself. Despite this, ideally, the truth underlying the self-perception and role of these women's bodies in their everyday lives will consequently be somewhat illuminated, revealing the immense pressures and expectations for fertility and capability, maternity and virginity. The demands made on the rural female body are indeed intense and profound, deeply rooted in ideals of religion and tradition, culture and society.

## *Bibliography*

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All references to women's opinions or thoughts were taken from informal personal conversations with Miriam, Zahra, Halima, Khadija, and Fatima conducted over a 2 week long period in Loutichina between November 18<sup>th</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

Note: All direct quotations from women were translated from the original Moroccan Arabic into English by Latifa Laarouti.