



Sharon Vance: *The Martyrdom of a Moroccan Jewish Saint* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

One of the strengths of *The Martyrdom of a Moroccan Jewish Saint* is its rich and expansive research work. Sharon Vance relied on a bibliography of over 280 books and articles to produce such a work. Another positive point is the use of a very detailed footnote system which is an advantage for the readers to further explore the story and its events for more interpretations and insights.

The author relied on literary works written by European diplomats and travellers as well as works by Moroccan Jewish writers. The works Sharon Vance used include poems, tales, novels and even paintings. According to Vance, the multitude and diversity of sources she used for the same story aims at comparing the different views to see how the linguistic (Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic, and European languages), cultural and historical factors affect the way in which the story was told.

The writer also wonders whether religion and contemporary politics have a say in Suleika's (Sol, Solika, Sol Hatchuel, Lalla Suleika in Moroccan Arabic, Solika la Saddika in Judeo-Spanish, Sulika Ha-Saddiqa in Hebrew) martyrdom. For the importance it has in the Jewish heritage, Soleika or Sol's story had been retold in both written and oral forms even prior to Vance's work in 2011. For example, Said Sayagh wrote *L'autre Juive: Lalla Soulika La tsadika: roman* in 2009, and Soly Anidjar published "Lalla Sulika Sol Hatchouel De Tanger" in 2010.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter one surveys and compares the diverse versions of Suleika's story whether in European languages written by Jews and non-Jews, in Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, and in Hebrew. The

earliest texts of the story were based on interviews with Suleika's family members.

Chapter two mainly revolves around Suleika's beheading in its historical context. Suleika' was executed because she converted to Islam and later she renounced her Islam, a fact which was considered heretical and therefore punishable by execution. Suleika's Muslim neighbours testified that she converted. The XIXth century witnessed deep changes at the political, social and religious levels. Chapter two also talks about the Jewish legal status in Morocco at that time as well as the limiting conditions on non-Muslims and the role played by Moroccan Jews in society.

As for chapter three, it portrays how Suleika's death is interpreted in the light of the Jewish law or teachings. The Jewish authors writing in Hebrew describe Suleika's "martyrdom within the sacred historical conception of exile and redemption." (4) They (Jewish writers) see her as a martyred maiden for the Jewish faith and identity.

In chapter four, the author analyses *qinot* or lament poems for the dead. Vance refers to the shared culture between Arabic art of writing poetry and the Jewish public worship poetry. She also treated the issue of gender discourse in the Moroccan Hebrew texts at the symbolic and sociolinguistic levels.

Two documents in Judeo-Arabic are examined in chapter five. One is from Morocco and the other is from Algeria. The former, written in dialect and in the first person, describes the extreme fear of an anxious and frightened young girl. The latter dating back to the end of the XIXth century breaks with the Jewish teachings because of the french colonialism and the anti-Semitic violence that Algeria witnessed during that period.

Ultimately, chapter six takes us to Suleika's story in the Judeo-Spanish newspaper *La Epoka*. Here the author talks about the role the Judeo-Spanish press played in spreading the genre of serialised translated novel or *romansero*. *La Epoka* published its version of Suleika's story relying on Spanish, not Moroccan Jewish, texts. The newspaper modified the text to be in harmony with the modernising message of the newspaper's editorial trend and the modernising education reforms of the Universal Israelite Alliance. The texts about Suleika's story published by *La Epoka* conveyed their great respect for saints and the importance of Suleika's story in their day-to-day life.

As Sharon Vance puts forward in the conclusion, there are a lot of variations vis à vis Suleika's or Sol's martyrdom. Earlier European narratives expressed some kind of opposition towards Suleika, while later or end of XIXth century European texts showed sympathy to her unfortunate situation. The Jewish written works, on the other hand, were strongly

categorical that Suleika was a heroine who did not convert and who died a martyr. Moreover, the Jewish texts condemned the injustice of the Muslim ‘executioners.’ Within the same framework, the Judeo-Spanish narratives or works do not refer to Islam at all and described ‘Moroccan’ as ‘villains’ (212).

The conclusion also deals with the status of Jews in Morocco before the French Protectorate. They were promised protection in return for the acceptance of social inferiority as *dhimma*, “social and legal subordination, the expression of which meant that Jews could not contradict Muslims or testify against them.” (212). There is also reference to the *ulama* or religious scholars’ influence and the Sultan’s (MawlayAbdal-Rahman) dependence on them to keep the throne. Throughout history, Moroccan Sultans appointed Jews as advisors and mediators with European powers either to purchase weapons or borrow money. Furthermore, European consulates hired Moroccan Jews as representatives and translators to deal with the Moroccan government.

Vance explains that when Algeria was conquered by France, Muslims and non-Muslims’ relations became progressively worse as the former felt threatened and judged that any challenge or danger to their religion had to be stamped out. There was massive public anger which resulted in Suleika’s imprisonment and beheading.

The concept of martyrdom brings into light Judaism and gives credit to the Jewish community. It is seen as a way of paying for the Jewish sins and paving the way for their redemption as mentioned earlier in this review. Vance also draws the readers’ attention to the shared cultural meaning of sainthood. The author refers to the ‘Maghrebian personality’ (214). Both ‘Moroccan Islam’ and Judaism believe and practice the veneration of saints, male and female saints, and both faiths have common rituals when it comes to pilgrimage to saint tombs for procreation and healing sick children.

Finally, Suleika’s story was not only told by men but women writers as well. The narratives produced by either gender depict Suleika’s death as an example of sacrifice, inspiration and a role model for the Jewish collective memory to learn and pass on to generations to come.

Said Zaidoune,
University Hassan II
Casablanca