

Black Jasmine

Le Jasmin noir

Wafa Ghorbel

TRANSLATED BY

Peter Thompson

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Black Jasmine
an English translation of *Le Jasmin noir*
by Wafa Ghorbel
Translated by Peter Thompson

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Preface

In her well-known article, “Le Rire de la Méduse” (“The Laugh of the Medusa”, 1975), French-Algerian feminist Hélène Cixous suggests that “women must write of women and bring women to write.”¹ This written space is one from which “they have been marginalized as violently as they have been from their bodies... Woman must dedicate herself to the text—to the world, and to the story.”² Women must pick up their pens to create an *écriture féminine*. From 1970 forward, “*le féminin*” inherent in Cixous’s conception of women’s writing would always represent the “in-appropriable,” the *insoumis* (the *unsubmissive quality*) of rebellious feminist thought (“*la pensée subversive*”).³ Inspired by *la pensée subversive*, Maghrebi women’s postcolonial, cultural production would be rooted in revolutionary, subversive themes promoting gender equality in newly formed nations. Female authors used their pens to “save themselves” in Cixous’s words, as they constructed artistic forms to escape the patriarchally dominated structures of knowledge and culture in their societies. Writing in French became women’s “*antilogos* weapon” used to liberate their voices as well as those of their sisters who had been silenced both in the past and the present.⁴

In the midst of French feminist movements of the late 1960s-early 1970s, Cixous’s “Le Rire de la Méduse”

1 Cixous, Hélène. « Le rire de la Méduse », *L'Arc* (1975): 39-54, 39.

2 Cixous, 41.

3 Cixous, 42.

4 Cixous, 42.

announced a new approach to studying and exploring sexual difference. As their countries were emerging into postcolonial nations, Maghrebi women of French expression were inspired to write in the wake of independence from France (Morocco 1956, Tunisia 1956, Algeria 1962). “The Laugh of the Medusa” conceptualized a new feminist language through which women could adopt positions that were rebellious and revolutionary. Their new language engaged with new theories and political platforms pertaining to their sexuality, their roles in family and public space, as well as their political enfranchisement in society. In Cixous’s words, the female writer from the Maghreb sought to be “*plus qu’elle-même*” (more than herself).⁵ Female authors carved out their voices in emerging societies and nations torn between modernity and tradition, the past and the present, and a plethora of challenges associated with postcolonial reality. Choosing French instead of Arabic (a language in which many educated Maghrebi women—Assia Djebar, Gisèle Halimi, Fatima Mernissi—felt alienated), these writers have contributed ever since to the wider “littérature-monde” of francophone authors.⁶

In keeping with the generation of female authors before her, Wafa Ghorbel recognizes the importance of Cixous’s call to be “*insoumis*.” She and others use Cixous’s symbolic “antilogos weapons” to orient readers to three important points that are integral in the struggles for equality in the Maghreb. First, Maghrebi women writers seek to rectify the overlooked voices of women silenced in colonial texts as well as postcolonial

5 Cixous, 41.

6 Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, *Pour une littérature-monde*. Paris : Gallimard, 2007.

Maghrebi discourse. Second, they strive to liberate Maghrebi women from the Orientalized stereotypes in which they were cast during the colonial period. As many point out, these images have persisted—certainly in the West in the postcolonial era. Third, Ghorbel and others reflect upon the postcolonial “*identité fragmentée*” (fragmented identity)⁷ in which women feel they live as they negotiate the patriarchal socioeconomic and political challenges of the everyday Maghreb, a region that in the postcolonial era has been burdened by civil war, brutal dictators, and economic calamity.

Rebellious women writers of the Maghreb

The rebellious characteristic of feminine cultural production⁸ in Tunisia has been particularly noticeable in the new millennium since the Arab Spring spread across the Arab world. Tunisia as ground zero in 2011 provided a fruitful context in which women literatae were able to pick up their pens to defend countless women who have been unable to speak. Wafa Ghorbel is one such voice. Ghorbel’s work, like her generational counterparts across the Maghreb (Algerian Amina Mekahli, Moroccan Sanaa el-Aji, for example), have used the political impetus of the Arab Spring to shape how they see themselves in postcolonial societies which now are far into the *post-* of the postcolonial.

In general Tunisian women’s writing, since foundational women authors such as Gisèle Halimi first expressed themselves

7 See my work, *Nomadic Voices of Exile* (Ohio UP, 1999) in particular for a discussion of feminine Maghrebi “fragmented identity” in the context of women’s writing.

8 Seen both in writing and filmmaking by filmmakers such as Moufida Tlatli and Raja Amari.

in French, has continued to be informed by postcolonial feminist platforms. These have been shaped by internationally recognized feminists such as Françoise Vergès, Sophie Bessis and Fawzia Zouari. Ghorbel's novel finds resonance in how Vergès describes non-Western feminist discourse and writing in her recent work, *Un Féminisme décolonial* (2019).⁹ Vergès explains that contemporary women creatives are inspired by an emerging “decolonized feminism that has for its objective the destruction of racism, capitalism and imperialism” as well as gender equality.¹⁰ For Tunisian women writing today, feminism in the context of the Maghreb means more than simply challenging the patriarchal status quo in the name of equality. As Vergès remarks, “decolonized feminism ... captures the struggles of women” in many sectors and echelons of society.¹¹ Within this framework, “les luttes se jouent sur de multiples terrains et pour des objectifs visant différentes temporalités” (struggles play out on multiple fronts and for objectives oriented toward different temporalities).¹² These targeted “temporalities” encompass the social, the political and the cultural realms—what feminist Julia Kristeva defines as the “dénominateur symbolique” (symbolic denominator)¹³—as they dictate what women can and cannot be (and do) in postcolonial Maghrebi society.

9 Vergès, Françoise. *Un féminisme décolonial*. Paris : La Fabrique, 2019. Electronic version.

10 Vergès, *Un Féminisme décolonial*, loc. 62.

11 Vergès, loc. 88.

12 Vergès, loc. 113.

13 Kristeva, Julia. « Le temps des femmes » 34/44 : Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents, no. 5 (winter 1979) : 5-19, 5.

Tunisian women and the sociopolitical shifting tides of the postcolonial era

Women's millennial writing in Tunisia reflects the shifting sociocultural and political tides in the country and how women are constantly affected by them. Although fewer in number than their sisters in Morocco and Algeria, the women of Tunisia's postcolonial writing scene have been inspired by high profile feminist pens; the most famous of these is Tunisian feminist-activist and lawyer for women's rights is Gisèle Halimi (1927-2020). Women writers born in the 1950s, contributing to Tunisian literary production today include Azza Filali (1952-) author most recently of *Chronique d'un décalage* (2005) and *Ouataan* (2012). Dora Latiri (1957-), living abroad in Brighton, UK, is known for *Un amour de tn* (2013), which offers a look at her own return to Tunisia after the Arab Spring. Today, one of Tunisia's most recognized feminist authors is Fawzia Zouari (1955-), known for having organized the first "Parlement des écrivaines francophones." She published *Valentine d'Arabie ; la nièce oubliée de Lamartine* (2020), *Le Corps de ma mère* (2016) and her debut novel *La deuxième épouse* (2006).

Of the younger generation Wafa Ghorbel's (b. 1975) debut novel *Le Jasmin noir* captures a contemporary Tunisia that offers women little in the way of emancipation from the patriarchal status quo. Professional singer as well as a university professor, Ghorbel weaves the autobiographical with commentary on the sociopolitical and cultural tensions of present-day Tunisia post-2011 Arab Spring. Noticeable in Ghorbel's novel is how her unnamed heroine's struggles, both physical and psychological, are bound up in the contexts

of tradition and modernity as well as the political challenges the Tunisian postcolonial nation faces in the global era. Her work, like those of others across the Maghreb, engages with historical representations of the Arab female body defined through Western Orientalist ideals that continue to persist in the postcolonial era. The cowed, silenced, and colonized body is countered by Maghrebi women writers' dedication since independence to revealing women's unrecognized roles as freedom fighters, mothers, and martyrs in the history of the Maghreb. Their *écriture féminine* has been conceptualized through the challenge of finding ways to insert themselves into the postcolonial hyper-patriarchal, national scripts of the region. In the case of Tunisia, despite the country's first president Habib Bourguiba's progressive politics, women have been unable to extract themselves from their fragile sociopolitical positions, remaining trapped between tradition and modernity in the patriarchal status quo.

During the colonial and postcolonial eras, male authors have dominated Tunisia's literary scene in French.¹⁴ Despite a robust feminist movement and legislation focusing on equality in education and all public sectors hammered out by Bourguiba in the decades following independence, Tunisian feminism became coopted by what feminist historian Sophie Bessis calls "un féminisme d'État".¹⁵ At the installation of independence in 1956, Bourguiba granted women the most advanced civil rights in the Arab world (particularly noticeable

14 The most famous of early generation postcolonial authors are Mahmoud Aslan, Salah Farhat, César Ben Attar and Albert Memmi.

15 Bessis, Sophie. « Le féminisme institutionnel en Tunisie », *Femmes du Maghreb*. No. 9 (1999): 93-105, 94.

was the right to abortion and the banning of polygamy). “In the years following independence, women obtain the right to work, to move around, to open bank accounts and to create businesses without the authorization of their husbands.”¹⁶ Contraception, widely available, also dissuaded women from having multiple children. The UNFT’s (L’Union des femmes de Tunisie) work for women’s rights was integrated into the state’s official discourse which, according to Bessis, made the country interesting for the West. State supported feminism was seen by the outside as a rupture with tradition and an embrace of modernity, “making Tunisia the most attractive Maghrebi country to Europe for doing business in the post-independence era.”¹⁷

Despite forward thinking feminist causes supported by the government, women’s rights have slowly eroded since the late 1970s. With the coup d’état of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 1987 and his subsequent 25-year, heavy-handed rule, women lost significant political ground. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, the rise in conservative Islamic politics in the country has complicated women’s advancement. In a 2018 interview, Fawzia Zouari, notes that when women lose political ground their bodies are the first to be covered by headscarves and heavy clothing. Harassment in public space leads women to give up, definitively defeated by patriarchal purview and domination. Commenting on women’s lost ground in public space since the 2011 Arab Spring, Zouari notes: “I am shocked by this hasty move by women to sell their freedom for a faith that they display more than they practice, just so that they can exist

16 Bessis, 94.

17 Bessis, 95.

in public space... why must we pay the fines of submission in order to have access to public space?"¹⁸

Ghorbel's *Black Jasmin* engages with the constantly shifting contemporary Tunisian ground women must try to stand on. The novel is epistolary, comprised of three letters to a man in the protagonist's life who had abused her—but alluding to others (a lover, and a husband) and almost addressing them as well. The protagonist, a young university professor, has just finished her doctorate in Paris. She is now seeking an academic position in France as she reflects on exile, the pain she has suffered in the past (we learn later in the novel that she was raped), and the difficulties of negotiating between living a “western” life and the overbearing traditional one her family in Tunisia wants to foist on her. “As a rule in my country . . . a girl doesn't leave the family lap until she joins her spouse's family. Despite the progressive Tunisian laws regarding women, compared to the rest of the Islamo-Arab world, tradition often has the upper hand and makes you, voluntarily or not, dependent and hobbled” (12). Most important is Ghorbel's exploration of the feminine body in the body politic of modern-day Tunisia where, as her protagonist remarks, “*I grew up in a society where no one wants a woman who is in charge of her own body. I followed the herd for fear of being outcast*”.¹⁹ Pulled in different directions by the pain of past encounters ranging from rape to abandonment which have caused her significant psychological trauma, the anonymous protagonist can only find solace in her *écriture féminine*. Her

18 Fourreau, Eric. « Fawzia Zouari: Entretien ». Nectart #8. (October 2018): 12-23, 18.

19 Author's italics.

letters are putatively destined to her rapist. Writing is a way of processing, of trying to figure out the future she must hammer out for herself, despite the box in which her Tunisian family wants to place her. Ghorbel's novel is a testament to the "the signals, forces, interdictions and conditioning" placed on the feminine Maghrebi body since independence. Hers is a body that is constantly tested in the public and private spheres of the social, the cultural, the political and the economic forces that seek to define her every day existence.²⁰

Wafa Ghorbel's novel demonstrates that women's physical and psychological autonomy is precarious in a society that is still rooted in tradition and expectations in which women are mandated socioculturally and politically to play specific roles. Her novel recalls what Tunisian feminist Sophie Bessis contextualizes in her numerous publications: that women in Tunisia have been constantly marked by an "assumed modernity" that is evoked in political discourse, yet in reality, is too "radical" for the society in which they live.²¹ Reminding us of this conflictual reality, Ghorbel's anonymous narrator notes towards the end of her novel: "Here, I'm trying to learn to be free, be a woman, be myself—construct my own story" (91).

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20 Boutouba, Jamila. « Femmes d'images et image de femmes : Parcours féminins et culture visuelle au Maghreb ». *Nouvelles Études Francophones*. Vol. 27 (1) (Spring 2012) : 145-262, 148.

21 Bessis, 104.

Black Jasmine



*True night dwells
in the heart of flowers,
the great black flowers
that never open*

—René Daumal, *Le Contre-ciel*

First Letter

Sneak Peek

It's two-thirty in the morning. An overwhelming desire to write, to write to you, flows through me, grabs me, plants me before the virgin page—the page aching to be caressed, to be furrowed by a voluble pen, a pen that's been holding back...

I would give anything to be this paper, to be this pure, this serene, this accessible, this open to any shape, any color, or mood, as easily penetrated, as light, as provoking in its avid silence, its desire for the weight of words, their resonance, and their meaning.

It's two-thirty in the morning. A sharp pain in my lower belly almost jerks a yell out of me. I stifle my pain the way I've always been able to, I try to swallow a cry that remains stuck in my throat, gnawing at me, torturing me, cutting off my breathing. It's time for it to launch, this yell. It's time that it unfolded, freed itself along with me. It's time to mutilate the pitiless, transparent hand that blocks my mouth. It's time to give birth... and suffer... and be done with it. Twenty years in the womb is plenty!

I watch images filing by to the rhythm of my breathing—images my life is constructed (de-constructed?) around, images you've made, you've produced, you've authored and in which you're the main actor. I shut my eyes, trying to stop this pain, this underground journey, this unstoppable falling within myself. The more I try, the deeper I fall in. They are in me, these images, way deep in my being, carved, indelible, revived with my every breath, gesture, shift of position, my every act, thought or plan.

I sentence you to have to read this page just as you condemned me to write it... I sentence you to look your own handiwork in the face. Recognize it? Not yet? Don't worry! You'll end up recognizing it and maybe even being proud of it! Open your eyes! Your hungry eyes, your rapacious eyes, your lying eyes! Open them wide and soak up the pain! Let my suffering penetrate your cornea, iris, pupil, retina, your nerves, veins, bones the way you penetrated me that time all the way to my marrow! Let my body empty out and my memory burn, till it burns you up. Let me finally cough up the phrases that have been rotting my existence for an eternity. Let me line up a few letters and make new, firm ground with them: the earth's thin crust has crumbled away just like my dreams, and over this same eternity. Let me expel you like a putrid fetus... When you get used to the pain, when you nourish it with your blood, soul, heart, energy, time and even your bewilderment, you end up getting used to it, getting attached to it, loving it so that you fear separation, fear amputating it, aborting it... My frailness is so far advanced... gangrene is stealing my heart and threatens the rest of my body...

I'm being so familiar! Saying "*tu*" instead of "*vous*," you notice? I'm still doing that, as always, despite the long years that separate us. The years, and the facts. How could I not? YOU! My familiar rending, my lasting fear, the shadow that dogs me... YOU! The very air I breathe, foul but vital! The essence of my existence! My being! My life!

You still don't understand? Be patient! We have the whole night before us, and a voracious stack of pages in your image. Settle in.

It's two-thirty in the morning. It was as dark inside me as inside the room, before I lit a candle. A power failure had put out the nightlight I always have on when I go to bed. It brightens the hollow of my room and that of my thoughts. It helps me, for a moment, to chase away the horrific monsters that haunt me relentlessly, that are eating away pieces of me... the monster that is me... The very Monster you are.

I'm afraid of the night. I hate the night... absence of light, absence of color, form, face, possibility, horizon, future, hope... Negation of life... inconsolable mourning... implacable silence, a falling into nothingness, the indeterminate, the ineffable, chaos. Night resonates in me, makes my being quiver, shakes my reason, faith and force... Night of solitude, night of exile, night of fear burrowing under my nails, under my skin, into my bones... Blackness has a way of redrawing this face of yours that lacks features, color or odor, and making it as palpable as my nightmares... Night devours every glimmer that tries to pierce the darkness wrapping my soul... I live through an infinite night... an infinite night lives in me... you live in me... grow in me. Your shadow wandering through all the bends of my being stretches out, unfolds throughout the days, months and years, taking over every possible way out.

And the silence. The infinite blackness of silence... my obsession, my unshakeable fear. As dark and suspect as the night, the silence sequesters me in my solitude. It causes all the voices that live in me to ring out, deafening me. I hear myself screaming in the depths of my being. Every cry is a descent,

a tumbling within me... I've never understood people who complain about their neighbors' noise. I've never understood people who can sleep without a light on. When I'm alone, at night, I sometimes leave the TV on until dawn, trying to have a virtual presence, a voice, a glimmering. I'm afraid to close my eyes... I'm afraid of being absorbed forever, swallowed up by the world-without-sound... I'm afraid of finding you at the end of the tunnel and being rendered, once again, speechless. The memory of you freezes the blood in my veins, the air in my lungs, and the sounds, phrases, cries in my powerless throat. "*There are silences that are as sobs in the night closing upon night.*"²² I'm the only one that can hear them, these sobs, my own sobbing. I am the night closing over the night, a sound willed but aborted in the shadows of silence.

It's hot and close, this September night (as close as the pulse that has defeated me, crushed me, wrenched my back as far back as I can remember). A cold sweat trickles down my neck. A violent fright makes my stomach writhe. I get up again. Open the shutters. I poke my aching head outside. Nothing. Not a stirring of wind. I'm out of breath. My body weighs me down. My skin, too. A raging desire to be rid of it, to tear it off, make it fall in shreds, sweeps over me. I turn around. My gaze barely alights on this body, stretched on the bed, all the more spellbinding wreathed in candlelight, moonlight. I stop myself from falling on this protective body, this consoler of mine, so generously open to my troubles, my complaints—silent and otherwise. I stop myself from shaking him, waking him up just to interrupt this heavy solitude. Sleep, my love! You're lucky you can sleep peacefully, and close your eyes without sinking

22 Tahar Ben Jelloun, *L'Enfant de sable*, Editions du Seuil, 1995

into the abyss of bitter memories or mercilessly recycled nightmares.

I see a black ocean, churning, foaming, about to engulf the whole world, sky and sun... bodies at the end of their rope, struggling despite their fatigue... I can make out, far off, my loved ones... their dull expressions... blank eyes... mumbling mouths... their arms hanging exhausted... there's nothing I can do for them... I'm being slammed by wild, random waves. I hold out with all my strength... I'm losing it... Suffocating... my body gets heavy, swells up, grows cold... I'm sinking...

I see shredded, dismembered bodies, lolling in their own blood... chopped limbs, severed heads, bulging, white eyes, glaring at me, machine-gunning me with their macabre gaze, drawing me into their dreadful silence... I recognize this body, this head, these eyes... They're mine...

I see a gigantic shadow advancing on me... bestriding me, crushing me with its blackness... I hear a piercing, rending laugh, deafening... I see myself trying to get up, save myself, cry out... no strength, no voice... I see myself swallowed by the shadow.

I see shapeless reptiles... snakes... hundreds of snakes hanging from a ceiling, dangling above me... and me, rooted to the spot, unable to move... and me, mute, unable to utter a single word.

I see the apocalypse... Open tombs... corpses issuing from the bowels of the earth... half-rotten faces... I see my own cadaver emerging from all these bodies... worms writhing in my ears, my nose, the bony hollows of my head...

Now I see myself climbing the endless, irregular stairs

of an old abandoned building... Climbing... climbing... I stumble... I tumble all the way down.

I see kids having fun castrating cats with razor blades... nauseating rivers of blood... shattering wails from the cats. One of the kids looks up and sees me... his eyes freeze me for a second. I don't know if this is really a child. He flops the struggling cat on the ground, aims his razor while holding my gaze. I start running, climbing walls, beating on doors that refuse to open—and him, behind me, still spattered with blood, razor in hand.

Out of my mind, I hunt for my little cat, in every room, in the yard... I find her, under a tree... shapeless, her eyes pleading... a puddle of blood... it flows from between her legs...

I see myself before the Registrar's window at my old department at the University of Sfax... with a little dog drawing near. I bend down to pat him and I'm amazed at how short his tail is. His master, a student, sees how startled I am and reassures me saying that tail-length depends on the breed. I smile at him, unconvinced, and get ready to leave school. On my way towards the exit I find... a lump of tail, on the ground... no blood... just a section of tail with extremely short hair... and with the tip rounded off... like the glans of a human penis... The sight of this organ turns my stomach.

I see a little girl run over by a car... I hear a piercing howl that rings on with no end... her hair, her clothes are familiar, it's me...

I see myself doubled: two identical women, facing each other, with my very same features... their gaze, however, is different. One of them, hysterical, is hacking at the naked body

of the other with a knife, energetically, ferociously. The other, ripped and bleeding everywhere, suffers in silence, submitting to her torturer.

I wake up with a start, shuddering, in tears, screaming, and this wakes up everyone under my roof. I can't help it. My father advised reading several chapters of the Koran before going to bed, thinking that might calm me. I tried... in vain. It seems I had signed a pact with madness, in some previous life. But—I don't believe in previous lives.

Sleep, sweet love! I'm so ashamed! How does he put up with me? I can barely stand myself! How can he be so generous with such a selfish woman, someone as feckless, troubling, frustrating as I am? How does he keep on loving me, supporting me, believing in me? When I stopped believing, as far back as I can remember, back to the black memories of you.

I need him, his love, friendship, patience, understanding, his soft words, his sweet, calm voice laying my fears to rest, his fingers caressing my hair... I need his arms, to fight off your image constantly thrusting into my life—your image pursuing me, hunting me when I laugh, when I walk, cry, eat, work, read, write, when I go to bed, when I sleep, when I wake up... as I go about living... a vice, in fact, that locks me in and paralyzes me, haunting my days and my nights. A nightmare!

What shape are you? I don't even know anymore. Handsome? Ugly? Tall? Short? Strong? Slender? Dark-haired? Pale? I try to picture you again, to add features, contours, outlines, colors to your face and your body. But nothing comes! I only see a shadow... a vague shadow, a timorous voice (ponderous?) and panting breath still burning on my face

and neck... Is this burning forever? Are you going to toy with me this way forever? Chase me into my grave? Is that your fondest wish? No! Your own grave, that's what I'm digging with my fingers, and I'm doing it now, tonight! I'll stretch you out in it gently, with a care you were never capable of, and drown you in this black ink, its avid flow a bit like your vibrant flesh. I'm going to dilute you in it, down to the last sigh, though you're in no way worthy of this lovely ending. Die, and let me live. I want to learn to live again—to live far from you—in spite of you—to live without you!

Sneak Peek



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