

## The Autobiographical and the Historical Turn in the Moroccan Female 'Resistance Literature' L'autobiographie et le tournant historique dans la "littérature de résistance" féminine marocaine

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### Abstract:

The birth of female 'resistance literature' is a turning point in Moroccan literary history. Post-colonial female writers have made recourse to the self-insertion narratives, "performances" and "hidden transcript," such as prison autobiographies, memoirs, letters, and, diaries, to assign agency to their reshuffled gendered subjectivities. Such writings, that foreground a conscious feminist scholarship, show the very antagonistic strategic location the female writers and activists have taken to dismantle the overwhelmingly coercive and manipulatives discourse that shaped their subjectivities for centuries. This paper puts forward the argument that Moroccan female "Resistance Literature" of the "Years of Lead" is informed by the need to (re)write the female self that has been excluded and manipulated in the literary discourse and the national history. This marked both the historical and the autobiographical turn in the Moroccan "Resistance Literature". To articulate its arguments, this paper is grounded on the following female prison autobiographical writings: Merouazi's *Biography of Ash* (2000), Malika Oufkir's *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail* (2001) and *El Bouih's Talk of Darkness* (2008). In so doing, it shall first review the post-colonial literature to (re)position the female writers within the literary and historical discourse of Morocco. The focus will be replaced afterwards on how these autobiographical writings assign agency to the writing subjects and foreground the history (re)writing project launched by the politically conscious female writers.

**Keywords:** *Autobiography, History, Agency, Female Prison Writings and the "Years of Lead Morocco"*.

"Autobiographical prison writing is the most comprehensive articulation of this oppositional 'power of writing.'<sup>2</sup>

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2 - Paul Gready, "Autobiography and the 'power of writing': political prison writing in the apartheid era", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, n° 19(3) (1993), 493.

“Women are associated with a domestic, oral history rather than a written, political history.”<sup>3</sup>

Many political and social events have shaped the political and the literary history of the post-colonial Morocco. In the political realm, on the one hand, the social turmoil and political unrest have shaped the lives of the post-colonial subjects in Morocco. The notorious “Years of Lead” (1956-1999) and their traumatic polemics have been marked by the tyrannical, totalitarian and oppressive *modus Operandi* of the Moroccan regime. As a result, many outspoken activists and “nationalists” who ‘spoke truth to power’ have been arrested, imprisoned and tortured in the Moroccan “carceral” system. This period marks a transitional and a historical turn in Moroccan history. On the other hand, in the literary history of Morocco, this period coincided with the emergence of the self-assertion or self-representational modes of self-articulation of many of those dissident activists. Such self-assertion writings and voices took place either within the confines of the repressive state apparatus of prison or outside in the chaotically turbulent society that had just celebrated its independence from the French colonial rule. Such period has also marked the autobiographical turn in Moroccan literature, more specifically female autobiographies.

Such autobiographical turn is attributed to the “disappearance” of a totalitarian system that censored the production of any narrative about the past traumas or political taboos. “Ten years ago, these publications would have been banned and their progenitors detained”<sup>4</sup>. Such (auto)biographical writings, that have been published after 1999 (the death of the late King Hassan II), include Fatna El Bouih *Talk of Darkness* (2008), Marouazi’s *Biography of Ash* (2000) Nour Eddine Saoudi’s *Femme- Prison Parcours Croisées* (2005) (Women prison, Crossed Paths) and Malika Oufkir’s *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail* (2001). The main *raison d’être* of these forms of writing was to resist and frame the consciousness of the female subjects to “work-through” their political drama and trauma. The so-called post-colonial marks the emergence of many writings about the repercussions of colonialism and its subsequent polemics as well as the identity politics of a heterogeneously hybrid Moroccan society. Besides the numerous prison autobiographies, other autobiographies address the same issues above, for example, Layla Abouzied’s *Return to Childhood* (1993) and Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994), to mention a few.

Moroccan female ‘resistance literature’ has experienced an autobiographical turn and historical turn. To serve as a historicising project, literature, as a discursive formation, has been manipulated, weaponised and appropriated to challenge the hegemonic power. To challenge those hegemonic discourses

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3 - Susan Slyomovics, *The performance of human rights in Morocco* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 153.

4 - Andrew Smith & Fadoua Loudiy, “Testing the red lines: On the liberalization of speech in Morocco”, *Human Rights Quarterly*, n° 27, (2005), 1082.

that shape the production of literature and history, this paper argues that female prison writings are shaped by rewriting the excluded history. Women, Slyomovics (2005) argues, are not associated with any political history of Morocco. Prison autobiographies highlight the political, historical and material aspects of the post-colonial Morocco. This, however, poses a methodological question about the relationship between text and context, world and the text, literary narratives and history.

There is an ongoing debate on the relationship between the text and the world. The nature of such a question has shaped the critical theories to date. In the post-colonial theory, Said's notion of the "worldliness" of the text tries to position the intellectual work "in the world, and about that world. It is not about things that are so rigidly constricted and so forbiddingly arcane as to exclude all but an audience of like-minded, already fully convinced persons"<sup>5</sup>. Based on Said's argument, one can safely argue that the "Years of Lead" (auto)biographical prison writings are informed by the historical conditions shaping the period within which they were produced. The transition from social events into texts and history is meant to contest the existing historiography. It allows the female prison (auto)biographer, as a writing subject, a sense of agency to voice her trauma of the "Years of Lead". Fluck (1995) goes on to argue, in the same vein, that

we "historicise," that is to say, in order to bring to light a relation of continuity, or perhaps even a relation of identity, between literature and other cultural forms. Literature, on this view, is not only occasioned by history, and not only embedded in history, but, in some deep sense, also metonymic of history.

(Resistance) literature is weaponised to generate a space of self-articulation for silenced identities. Autobiographical writing, as such, falls outside the discursive classification of "fact" and "fiction"<sup>6</sup>. It is worldly, subjective and historicising. It articulates the unsaid history of the writing subjects. The post-colonial female narrative seeks to dismantle and subvert the patriarchal discourse that has narrativized the subaltern women from the perspective of men. This is meant to rescue the marginalised, forgotten and unheard voices from the "neglect and secondariness to which for all kinds of political and ideological reasons they had previously been condemned"<sup>7</sup>. Autobiographical writings are, as shall be argued in what follows, is a contestatory narrative that contests the male narrative:

These writers' narrativization of the marginalized female figure is handled from a male writer's perspective, i.e. from the

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5 - Edward Said, *Reflections on exile and other essays* (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2000), 375.

6 - Leigh Gilmore, "The mark of autobiography: Postmodernism, autobiography and genre", In Kathleen Ashley & Leigh Gilmore (eds.), *Autobiography and postmodernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

7 - Edward Said, *Reflections on exile*, 382.

outside, from the position of the patriarchal order and such a presentation would inevitably be distorted and incomplete as long as it lacks the feminine sensibility and the feminine perspective as a subaltern<sup>8</sup>.

There has been a growing academic interest in female autobiographical studies. Such literature has focused mainly on the use of autobiographies, as a form of witnessing, testifying and self-articulation, negotiating the subjectivity of the writing subject in the official discourse that has excluded them<sup>9</sup>. Departing from these findings, this paper argues that the autobiographical or subjective voice of the female prisoner writer contributes to the (re)writing history project by replacing “the emphasis on the subject as an agent in discourse”<sup>10</sup>. This is a humanist approach and call to position the female writing subject at the very centre of generating narratives. This call is also meant to empower the Moroccan female writer; for their “autobiographical prison writing is the most comprehensive articulation of this oppositional ‘power of writing’”<sup>11</sup>.

Gready (1993) and Gilmore (1994) view autobiographical prison discursive practices as a site and as text that resist and create new subjectivities. To assign agency to the female prisoner and autobiographer to reveal the unsaid history of trauma and violence. Their act of writing is, therefore, subversive, for it is a “key means of subverting dominant hegemonies and reasserting agency, a means of voicing their silenced narratives”<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, their prison writings are meant to subvert the “phallogentric” discourse that has subalternised them. It is also meant to challenge the epistemic violence exerted on them as subjects to the state power/knowledge discourse and the elitist patriarchal historiography. In the same line of thought, El Bouih argues that “I understood that I should publish my prison memoir, that I should speak out, that there was a female courage to be valorised” (El Bouih Interview, 19 November 2012). Speaking about the trauma of imprisonment is a way of asserting the self into the discourse. The use of the subject “I” is a form of resistance to the current discourse. El Bouih (2012) shows the beginnings and intentions of the postcolonial female subjectivities that speak out against injustice and oppression.

Being aware of the discourse of inclusion and inclusion in history and the potency of their conscious feminist voice, female political prisoners have made recourse to writing self-empowering autobiographical narratives. They

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8 - Larbi Touaf & Soumia Boutkhil, *Representing minorities: studies in literature and criticism* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 65.

9 - Larbi Touaf & Soumia Boutkhil, *Representing minorities.../ Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, Arab women's lives retold: Exploring identity through writing* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007). / Leigh Gilmore, “The mark of autobiography: Postmodernism, autobiography and genre”, In Kathleen Ashley & Leigh Gilmore (eds.), *Autobiography and postmodernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994). / Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

10 - Leigh Gilmore, “The mark of autobiography”, 3.

11 - Paul Gready, “Autobiography and”, 493.

12 - Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Arab women's lives retold*, 185.

challenge the official power by dint of what Paul Gready calls the “power of writing”. Fatna El Bouih, for instance, makes it clear from the very outset of her *Talk of Darkness* That “I began writing about other women political prisoners and their amazing courage that should be part of Moroccan history”<sup>13</sup>. El Bouih is conscious of the exclusion of women in the political history narrative. Her autobiography is confrontational and self-assertive. El Bouih (2008) concludes her prison autobiography with two chapters by two “feminine voices” and political prisoners: “The Prison that Was a Refuge after the Isolation in Police Stations,” by Widad Bouab and “The Police Station, Torture, Prison, and Torturers” by Latifa Jbaldi. This suggests that El Bouih (2008) empowers and attributes agency to these prisoners to write their trauma (hi)stories from their subaltern subjective perspective on history. Writing, in this case, is a form of resistance; it alludes to unsaid and the excluded chapters that “should be part of the Moroccan history”.

There are many techniques that these female prisoners use to reclaim their agency. The act of writing the self serves by all means to restore the agency of the female prisoners that have been mitigated by the trauma of imprisonment. In line with this argument, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (2007) argues that “key means of subverting dominant hegemonies and reasserting agency, a means of voicing their silenced narratives” (p. 185). works towards canonising the female self. The assertion of the first subject pronouns ‘I’ or “we” is confrontational and contestatory. The “I” (and sometimes “we”) defines the autobiographical voice of the survivor who chronicles the confrontation of the self with the world<sup>14</sup>

Autobiographical discursive practices are meant to subvert and resist the dominant ideology that shapes the production of literary narratives and history. Such repressive ideology as argued before works towards denying the agency of the female subaltern activists and interpellating them into silent subjectivities. The very subject position that the female writing subject takes, as El Bouih’s *Talk of Darkness* shows, is antagonistic and oppositional. The use of the “I” and “We” subject pronouns in their prison narrative is antagonistic and subversive. It is meant to insert the excluded subjective voice from the discourse. Merouazi’s (2000) *Biography of Ash*, for instance, uses these subject pronouns throughout her prison autobiography to talk about the trauma of the silenced female prisoners. She says “لا أعرف لماذا لا يزال الاستنطاق مستمرا معنا نحن التسعة” (p. 14) (I was wondering why only the nine of us are still interrogated). Besides the other linguist functions of the first subject pronoun, the “I” in autobiographical accounts is contestatory in the sense that the writing agent attributes agency to herself to articulate the self. The use of the first subject

13 - Fatna El Bouih, *Talk of darkness* (M. Kamal, & S. Slyomovics, Trans.) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 43.

14 - Sandra Young, “Rehearsing trauma: The reader as interrogator in prison narratives”, *Journal of Literary Studies*, n° 29 (2) (2013)./ Laura Menin, “Rewriting the world: Gendered violence, the political imagination and memoirs from the ‘Years of Lead’ in Morocco”, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, n° 8 (1) (2014).

pronouns (I/We) is echoed in these female prison autobiographies to serve as a sense of agency reclaiming, identity empowerment and reasserting resistance.

In her 2001 prison autobiography, *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail*, Malika Oufkir goes to echo Marouazi and El Bouih. Using the subjective pronouns “I” and “We”, Oufkir tries to articulate the trauma of her imprisoned and continuously disclosed family. Malika Oufkir asserts that “had I been free, I would have followed those women. I would probably have been an activist like them” (p. 167). The trauma of her imprisonment has urged the need of women to take an antagonistic subject position such as that of a “feminist” to generate a new resisting subjectivity that would put an end to those atrocities and forms of violence exerted on women. By taking a feminist positionality, Oufkir, and others, would be empowered to articulate their dissidence and subject position vis-à-vis the atrocities of the “Years of Lead” history.

Marouazi (2000) has similarly urged female writers and activists to subscribe their “feminine voices” to the historicising project. She says that “We must chronicle the pulse of our lives” (p.45). Articulating their female subjectivities, as a way of self-assertion, has been central to their autobiographies. Their narratives are meant to reshape the conception of their gendered identities. El Bouih is also aware of this epistemic violence and asserts that “we start to speak though it was forbidden”<sup>15</sup>. By the use of the subject pronoun “we”, El Bouih and Marouazi are at pains to make “a collective memory as a transformative site of agency and political imagination”<sup>16</sup>. The collective pronoun “we” suggests that these women have experienced the same trauma.

There is a noticeable use of the active voice in these autobiographies: “We must chronicle the pulse of our lives”<sup>17</sup>, and “Each day is a miracle that intoxicates me. I want more. I greet every morning like a new pleasure. And yet I am keenly aware of all life’s artifices”<sup>18</sup>. This suggests that the female prison autobiographers are actively and historically conscious agents of the (re)writing history discourse. Following Sandra Young “Narrative self-construction can be thought of as an appeal as much as an assertion of self”<sup>19</sup>. These female writers’ overuse of the “I” and the “we” in their prison writings is another way of asserting themselves. The pronoun “we” also is meant to recover from a cultural trauma and at the same time articulate the collective identity and memory of common and communal cause. As noted by Leigh Gilmore (2001) “trauma is never exclusively personal” (p. 31). The autobiographical writings analysed here show that the survivor’s trauma is by all means collective. Such trauma experience is inevitably intertwined with history. Trauma exists within (hi)stories; writings such trauma means contextualising it within history.

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15 - Fatma El Bouih, *Talk of darkness*, 9.

16 - Laura Menin, “Rewriting the world: Gendered”, 3.

17 - Khadija Merouazi, *Biography of Ash* (Casablanca: Afriqya Sharq, 2000), 45.

18 - Malika Oufkir, *Stolen lives twenty years in a desert jail* (R. Schwartz, Trans.) (New York: Hyperion, 2001a), 384.

19 - Sandra Young, “Rehearsing trauma: The reader”, 101.

The interdiscursive intertextuality in these prison autobiographies is no coincidence. Such analysis shows the shared political and feminist consciousness of the post-colonial female writers. Their writings are informed by their shared call to liberate women from patriarchal ideologies that shape both literature and history and historiography. This further highlights the historicising nature of the prison autobiographical narrative. The post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak contends that “Autobiography is a wound where the blood of history does not dry”<sup>20</sup>. The autobiographical writings of the “Years of Lead” bear the traces of the history of the unsaid trauma.

There is a bidirectional relationship between the agency of the writing subject and the history writing process. When the agency of the writing subject is denied and politically silenced, his/her account on history will be as marginalised as the writing subject himself or herself. The trauma that these prisoners have experienced during the “Years of Lead” was meant to silence them and confirm the docility of the female activists. In her *Transitional Justice and Human Rights in Morocco: Negotiating the Years of Lead*, Fadoua Loudiy (2014) argues that such “Fear produces silence and political silence produces historical amnesia, so entire generations were growing up in total ignorance of the recent history of their country or had partial or distorted knowledge of it” (p. 92). So far as history is concerned, the moment these prisoners have broken this silence and started to write autobiographies, they tried to reveal the excluded episodes of the Moroccan “dark history” of the notorious “Years of Lead”. As their contributions have been marginalised, female subaltern prisoners have been assigned agency to articulate their takes and perspectives on that history. The historicity of their writings is articulately expressed in their prison autobiographies. The historical context that this thesis seeks to foreground is also articulated in these writings. These prisoners generate a conscious political discourse that redeems the subjectivities of the “Years of Lead” trauma survivors.

To reiterate its argument, this paper has argued that the birth of female ‘resistance literature’ offers a new avenue for silenced women to write their trauma (hi)stories. Such literature marks a turning and transitional moment in the literary history of Morocco. Marginalised women have been assigned agency in autobiographical writings and have been given a voice. By and large, there is an intersectional relationship between the agency denial of the Moroccan female political prisoner of the “Years of Lead” and writing the traumatised self. Prison autobiographies offered the silenced activists a space of self-articulation and resistance. It has further argued that when these female prisoners restore their agencies by dint of breaking the silence and writing the trauma of the experience, female prisoners have proven that their contestatory autobiographical writings could serve as sites where their history and agency are articulated.

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20 - Spivak quoted in Leigh Gilmore, “The mark of autobiography, 99.

To mark the historical and autobiographical turn in Moroccan literature, there has been an unprecedented use of autobiographical writings by the female (prison) writers who survived the “Years of Lead” Morocco. Moroccan female prison writers have generated, as mentioned above, many (auto) biographical and self-representational narratives. Their autobiographical writings foreground a conscious feminist narrative to speak of the unspeakable unsaid history trauma of the epistemic and systemic violence they were subject to. They are actively and consciously engaged in what Barbra Harlow (1987) calls an “urgent historical confrontation”. Such antagonistic confrontation and resistance to the patriarchal narratives are informed by the need to rewrite the female self. The counter-narrative autobiographies have marked their contestation and refusal of the history narrated by the dominant patriarchal hegemony. These prison autobiographies are consequently meant to articulate the oppositional power of writing. As historically conscious subalterns, the Moroccan female autobiographers have authored and rewritten a history of their own.

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### **Titre: L'autobiographie et le tournant historique dans la "littérature de résistance" féminine marocaine**

**Résumé:** La naissance de la " littérature de résistance " féminine est un tournant dans l'histoire littéraire marocaine. Les écrivaines post-coloniales ont eu recours aux récits d'auto-insertion, aux " performances " et aux " transcriptions cachées ", telles que les autobiographies de prison, les mémoires, les lettres et les journaux intimes, afin d'assigner une agence à leurs subjectivités genrées remaniées. Ces écrits, qui mettent en avant une érudition féministe consciente, montrent la position stratégique très antagoniste que les écrivains et les activistes féminins ont adoptée pour démanteler le discours coercitif et manipulateur dominant qui a façonné leurs subjectivités pendant des siècles. Cet article avance l'argument selon lequel la " littérature de résistance " féminine marocaine des " années de plomb " est informée par le besoin de (ré)écrire le soi féminin qui a été exclu et manipulé dans le discours littéraire et l'histoire nationale. Cela a marqué à la fois le tournant historique et autobiographique dans la "littérature de la résistance" marocaine. Pour articuler ses arguments, cet article se base sur les écrits autobiographiques féminins de prison suivants : La Biographie de Merouazi (2000), Vies volées de Malika Oufkir : Twenty Years in a Desert Jail (2001) et Talk of Darkness (2008) d'El Bouih. Pour ce faire, nous passerons d'abord en revue la littérature postcoloniale afin de (re) positionner les écrivaines dans le discours littéraire et historique du Maroc. L'accent sera ensuite mis sur la manière dont ces écrits autobiographiques assignent une agence aux sujets écrivains et mettent en avant le projet de (ré) écriture de l'histoire lancé par les écrivaines politiquement conscientes.

**Mots-clés:** Autobiographie, histoire, agence, écrits féminins en prison et les " années du Maroc de plomb ".

## العنوان: السيرة الذاتية والمنعطف التاريخي في الأدب المقاوم لنساء المغرب

**ملخص:** تشكل نشأة "الأدب المقاوم" لنساء المغرب انعطافة مهمة في تاريخ الأدب المغربي. لجأت الكاتبات في فترة ما بعد الاستعمار إلى محكميات الاندماج الإرادي والكفاءة و"الكتابات المخفية"، مثل السير الذاتية السجنية، والمذكرات، والرسائل، واليوميات، من أجل منح فاعلية لخصوصياتهن الجندرية قوة. تُظهر مثل هذه الكتابات، التي يسكنها وعي نسواني، الموقع الاستراتيجي المعارض للغاية الذي اتخذته الكاتبات والناشطات النسويات لتفكيك الخطاب القهري والمتلاعب والمهيمن الذي شكل ذواتهن لعدة قرون. تنطلق هذه المقالة من الفرضية القائلة بأن الأدب المغربي المقاوم، خلال سنوات الرصاص، سعى إلى (إعادة) كتابة الذات الأنثوية التي تم استبعادها والتلاعب بها في الخطاب الأدبي والتاريخ الوطني. كانت هذه الكتابة بمثابة علامة على انعطافة تاريخية وسير ذاتية في الأدب المغربي المقاوم. ومن أجل الاستدلال على صحة هذه الحجج، تستند هذه الورقة إلى الكتابات السير ذاتية النسوية التالية: سيرة الرماد لخديجة مروازي (2000)، الحيوات المسروقة: عشرون عاما في سجن صحراوي للمليكة أوفقيير (2001)، وحديث العتمة لفاطمة البيه (2008). وبذلك، يتعين على هذه المقالة بداية مراجعة أدب ما بعد الاستعمار لإعادة ترتيب وضع الكاتبات في الخطاب الأدبي والتاريخي المغربي. وهكذا سيتم سيتم تعديل المنظور قصد التركيز على الطريقة التي أسندت بها كتابات السيرة الذاتية هذه الفاعلية لموضوعات الكتابة وتقديم مشروع إعادة كتابة التاريخ الذي أطلقته الكاتبات الواعيات سياسياً.

**الكلمات المفتاح:** السيرة الذاتية، التاريخ، الفاعلية، كتابات السجون النسائية و"سنوات الرصاص بالمغرب".