

# **Tunisian Women Novelists**

*Testimonies of Resistance and Resilience*

Edited and Translated by

**Hager Ben Driss**

# Tunisian Women Novelists: Testimonies of Resistance and Resilience

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# Introduction

## Woman, Writer, Warrior: An Intersectional Reading of the Tunisian Literary Scene

*Hager Ben Driss*

The idea for this book was conceived on a particularly significant day: International Women's Day, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023. I was honored to receive an invitation from novelist Amel Mokhtar, then the Director of the House of the Novel in the Cultural City of Tunis. She entrusted me with the task of chairing a round table discussion on a topic that resonated deeply with me: "Tunisian Women Novelists: Experiences and Tribulations." I steered the discussion around two central questions designed to illuminate the experiences of Tunisian women writers. Firstly, we explored how Virginia Woolf's seminal essay, "A Room of One's Own," resonated with their creative journeys. Woolf's call for women to have the space and resources necessary for women's creative flourishing provided a potent framework for our conversation. Secondly, the discussion zoomed into the specific obstacles faced by Tunisian women novelists. We openly addressed the question: What are the major difficulties faced by a writer in Tunisia who identifies as female? Does the fact of being a woman intrinsically influence, or even restrict, the creative expression of Tunisian women? Exploring the intersection of gender and creative pursuit within this specific cultural context became a central focus of the discussion.

For over two hours, a captivating exchange unfolded at the House of the Novel. Tunisian authors Hanene Jannene, Kahena Abbas, Najet Bokri, Saadia Bensalem, Rachida Cherni, and Amel Mokhtar bravely stepped forward to dissect the current state of Tunisian literature. Their presentations transcended mere descriptions, evolving into candid and insightful testimonies. With remarkable courage, they diagnosed the maladies plaguing the literary landscape, offering a critical yet nuanced perspective. While the House of the Novel recorded the debate for

their archives, these powerful voices risked remaining largely unheard beyond the confines of the event's immediate audience. This apprehension served as the genesis of *Tunisian Women Novelists: Testimonies of Resistance and Resilience*, a project designed to amplify these critical perspectives and ensure their lasting impact. This book, therefore, represents a continuation of that initial conversation, a more comprehensive examination of the realities faced by Tunisian women writers, aiming to celebrate their achievements, illuminate their struggles, and ultimately, contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding artistic creation in a dynamic and evolving society.

While the immediate impetus for this collection of testimonies arose from the event organized at the House of the Novel, its true origins lie in a long-standing concern: how to carve a space for Tunisian literature within the global literary landscape. In essence, this project seeks to propel Tunisian literature onto the world stage, integrating it into the grand mosaic envisioned by Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* (world literature). This term, coined by the German polymath in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, transcends the limitations of national literatures. It posits a dynamic and interconnected literary sphere where cultures and languages interweave, fostering a global dialogue.

Regrettably, Tunisian literature has garnered scant critical attention in the English language. While scholar and Oxford university professor Mohamed Salah Omri's work represents a commendable and sustained effort, it remains largely singular. This critical dearth, coupled with a paucity of translations, relegates Tunisian literature to the margins of the global literary landscape, rendering it virtually "minor" and invisible. Ewa Lukaszuk's article, challengingly titled "Is There Tunisian Literature?", underscores this alarming reality. Her assertion that Tunisia is a "blank space" characterized by "a modest minor literature that accepts its peripheral condition" (80) appears to stem from her inability to "find sufficient material" (86). This perceived absence of Tunisian literature on the international stage, its "inaudible" presence (86), can be attributed primarily to a lack of robust Tunisian critical discourse and a paucity of translated works.

Lukaszky's provocative title, "Is There Tunisian Literature?", does not question the existence of a vibrant Tunisian literary scene. Rather, it strategically shifts the focus to the global literary landscape. If Tunisian literature flourishes domestically, its translation into major world languages remains limited, hindering its international reach. This situation, however, is undergoing a gradual transformation. The 2015 awarding of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction to Chokri Mabkout marked a turning point. This recognition not only re-positioned Tunisian literature within the broader Arab literary landscape, but also enhanced its visibility on the international stage. The subsequent translation of Mabkout's *The Italian* into English (2021) served as a catalyst, attracting significant attention beyond the Arab world. This growing trend of translation includes Yamen Manai's *L'Amas Ardent* (2017), translated as *The Ardent Swarm* (2021), and two novels by Habib Selmi: *The Scents of Marie Claire* (2016) and *Goat Mountain* (2020). Although the number of translated works remains relatively modest, it represents a positive trajectory for Tunisian literature's global presence.

However, despite these encouraging advancements in global recognition, a closer examination of translated Tunisian literature exposes a persistent gender disparity. While Tunisian women have established a thriving literary presence within the nation's borders, their voices remain largely absent in the international literary sphere. This is particularly evident when examining the stark imbalance between translated works by male and female Tunisian authors. A case in point is *Banipal*, a prominent platform for showcasing contemporary Arabic literature in English. In its special issue (Issue 39, 2010) dedicated to Modern Tunisian Literature, only 7 out of 24 featured writers were women. This imbalance reflects a broader trend within the translation industry, where women authors from the Arab world, including Tunisia, are often underrepresented.

Recent initiatives, however, suggest a growing awareness of this gender asymmetry. In 2023, *ArabLit*, a leading literary magazine dedicated to bringing Arabic literature to an English-speaking audience, took a commendable step towards redressing this imbalance. They compiled



a special issue entirely devoted to Tunisian women's short stories. By featuring this diverse collection, *ArabLit* has expanded the visibility of Tunisian women writers on the global literary scene.

The scarcity of translated novels by Tunisian women is another cause for concern. While Amira Ghenim's *The Calamity of the Nobility*, short-listed for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2021, and Wafa Ghobel's *Black Jasmin*, winner of one of the Comar Prizes in 2016, represent noteworthy exceptions, they remain outliers in a landscape dominated by male voices. Their novels stand as testaments to the depth and caliber of Tunisian women's prose, yet they represent a mere fraction of the existing body of work by women writers.

*Tunisian Women Writers: Testimonies of Resistance and Resilience* intervenes in a critical gap within scholarship on North African women's narratives. While existing works offer valuable insights, they haven't provided a comprehensive exploration of the Tunisian literary landscape specifically through the voices of women novelists.

Michèle Cohen Hadria's *Three Tunisian Women Artists: Nicène Kossentini, Mouna Karray and Moufida Fedhila* (2013) focuses on the artistic practices of three contemporary Tunisian women, situating their work within the post-revolution period. Through interviews, she examines their artistic processes and experiences as women navigating the Tunisian art scene. Additionally, she contextualizes their work within the broader framework of Tunisian history and culture. However, her study remains firmly grounded in the visual arts, leaving a gap in our understanding of contemporary Tunisian women's literary voices.

Dora Carpenter Latiri's *Tunisian Women of the Book*, a visual and textual project, takes a similar approach, including interviews with fifteen creative women across various disciplines. It showcases the creative lives of Tunisian women through a two-part approach. The first is a published article featuring the author's reflections, black and white portraits of the fifteen participants, and interview excerpts. The second is a traveling exhibition with color photo-portraits and snippets of their conversations printed on photographic paper (Rocca). While Lati-

ri's work presents a fascinating and original project, it doesn't offer an in-depth exploration, specifically of the literary field. In a similar vein, Douja Mamelouk's 2013 article, "Battling Lost Memory: Tunisian Women Write the Revolution," examines how three women writers – Fathia Hechmi, Messaouda Boubaker, and Amel Mokhtar – responded to the aftermath of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. Mamelouk's work documents women's active role in recording the revolution and their awareness of the responsibility to preserve the comparatively high level of freedom that Tunisian women have enjoyed within the Arab world since independence. Although Mamelouk provides a platform for these novelists to express their cultural and political anxieties, the limited sample size restricts the scope of exploration.

*Tunisian Women Novelists: Testimonies of Resistance and Resilience* fosters the transnational dissemination of women writers' perspectives, directly connecting them with an international audience. This project goes beyond simply making them heard; it seeks to foster active listening, thereby challenging epistemic injustice. Building upon Miranda Fricker's influential work on epistemic injustice as an impediment to one's capacity as a knower, I propose a broader application of the term. This reconceptualization encompasses the unequal distribution and circulation of knowledge due to disparities in language, culture, and geographical location. By introducing these novelists and their views to a broader audience, particularly those accustomed to Eurocentric narratives, this project contributes to a more inclusive and representative understanding of global literature. This aligns with the spirit of Fadia Faqir's edited volume, *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* (1998), which pioneered the platforming of Arab women's voices. However, *Tunisian Women Novelists* narrows the focus by offering a dedicated space solely for Tunisian novelists, rectifying the absence of a comprehensive resource on this specific subject within the broader field of Arabic literature

This project, initially aimed at capturing the enthusiastic intellectual exchange of a roundtable discussion featuring six writers, evolved into a comprehensive exploration of a multiplicity of voices. The collec-

tion now encompasses sixteen novelists, representing a spectrum of generations and writing styles. My translation approach is informed by Goethe's notion of the translator as a mediator, particularly in navigating the cultural nuances in the original Arabic-language testimonies (with the exception of Wafa Ghorbel and Meryem Sallami's contributions, written in French).

However, the concept of the translator-mediator holds complexities. It necessitates a critical reflection on positionality, which directly intersects with the women novelists' role as cultural conduits. By entrusting their narratives – their anxieties, disappointments, and critiques – to a foreign audience, these writers risk accusations of serving as mere cultural informants. This concern deserves serious consideration, for neglecting it may reduce the entire project to a self-serving plea for Western sympathy.

Furthermore, the label of "translator-mediator" – sometimes referred to as "broker" or "comprador" – could be misconstrued alongside the testimonies themselves. If the latter are perceived as exposing the "dirty laundry" of Tunisian culture, the entire venture might be dismissed as reinforcing tired Orientalist tropes of the oppressed Arab woman. Notably, many of the narratives either directly address or subtly critique the patriarchal structure of Tunisian society, where female creativity is often stifled. This, in turn, could inadvertently perpetuate the stereotype of the voiceless Arab woman, further solidifying existing westernized expectations.

The notion of positionality demands a critical examination of my own role within this project. Positionality "involves the idea that people from different backgrounds often have different ways of perceiving the world, constructing knowledge, and making meaning" (Orlowski 47). As a translator based in Tunisia, I occupy a unique position – an insider with access to the cultural context in which these testimonies were written. While this proximity offers a distinct advantage in understanding the nuances of the source text, it also necessitates a conscious awareness of potential biases. My own upbringing and social loca-

tion within Tunisian society will inevitably shape my perspective. For instance, my gender will undoubtedly influence how I relate to the experiences recounted by the female novelists. However, unlike a translator situated outside of Tunisia, I definitely possess a deeper understanding of the specific social and cultural factors that inform these experiences. Furthermore, the women novelists themselves represent a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. Their social class, education, and even their specific regions within Tunisia will all contribute to the viewpoints they offer. Recognizing these complexities is essential for a subtle translation that respects the richness and authenticity of the source material.

By acknowledging these intersecting positionalities, I can strive for a more ethical and responsible translation practice. The goal is to employ my insider knowledge to create a bridge between cultures, ensuring that the women's voices are accurately and thoughtfully conveyed to a wider audience. This awareness allows me to navigate potential pitfalls, such as perpetuating stereotypes, while highlighting the multifaceted narratives that contribute to a more comprehensive appreciation of Tunisian literature.

Engaging with the Tunisian literary scene through an intersectional framework fosters a more layered and comprehensive understanding. Intersectionality, a critical theory pioneered by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, dismantles monolithic analyses of power structures based solely on race or gender. Crenshaw posits intersectionality as "a prism to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that weren't being appreciated by the courts." She further argues that "courts seem to think that race discrimination was what happened to all black people across gender and sex discrimination was what happened to all women, and if that is your framework, of course, what happens to black women and other women of color is going to be difficult to see" (qtd. in Coaston). By contrast, intersectionality proposes a holistic approach that acknowledges the mutually reinforcing nature of social identities and how they shape experiences of marginalization. This approach, I believe, is applicable to the Tunisian literary landscape.

My analysis, informed by an intersectional framework, advocates for a faceted understanding of the Tunisian literary scene. It moves beyond simplistic characterizations of a uniformly fragile entity encountering common issues related to publishing, dissemination, and limited readership. Instead, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of various challenges faced by different groups within this scene. Specifically, the experiences of women writers demand focused attention due to the unique set of obstacles they confront, often obscured by broader literary discussions.

While acknowledging women writers as a separate cohort can create a risk of marginalization or constructing an exclusive category, neglecting gendered challenges fosters a myopic perspective. Historically, patriarchal norms have subjected women writers to societal prejudice. Tunisian scholar Raja Ben Slama's book, *Bayan al-Fuhula: Abhath fi al-Muthakkar wa al-Muannath* (*Virile Eloquence: Studies in the Masculine and the Feminine*, 2005), elucidates the prevailing sociocultural order that dictates a hierarchical relationship between male and female authors in the Arab literary tradition. This order, Ben Slama argues, attempted to obstruct women's full participation in the poetic domain through three main methods: discrediting the femininity of the poetess, challenging her legitimacy as a poet, or penalizing her audacity to compose verse (44).

Arab women engaging in poetry historically faced a double bind. They were either misconstrued as males or as possessing masculine traits, undermining their femininity and artistic merit. Alternatively, they were dismissed as sentimentalists, downplaying the intellectual rigor of their work. Furthermore, familial intervention acted as a silencing force. Fathers, siblings, and other close relatives sought to control these women's voices, particularly when they addressed "taboo" subjects like romantic love and desire (Ben Slama 44).

Unfortunately, these outdated modes of marginalization persist in the contemporary context, manifesting in more subtle forms that are no less detrimental. Modern instances of disparagement towards women writers include skepticism regarding the authenticity of their work,

coupled with accusations of surreptitious collaboration with male counterparts, who are perceived as *de facto* guardians of their creativity (Ben Slama 44). Such pervasive and deeply ingrained gender-based discrimination necessitates a critical scholarly investigation into the underlying socio-cultural factors that perpetuate these inequities within the Tunisian literary realm.

This investigation is anchored in two fundamental inquiries: how the literary landscape of Tunisia is shaped by the variegated social positions of its authors, and how the confluence of cultural and economic forces influences literary production. The testimonies of Tunisian women novelists illuminate the inextricable link between the writing process and their female identity. Their accounts serve as potent evidence of this intersection. This analysis will focus on two key elements that intersect with gender: the economic pressures and the cultural expectations surrounding motherhood and the reception of female-authored works.

The economic realities faced by Tunisian women novelists present a significant obstacle to their creative pursuits. Many navigate a demanding double burden, working outside the home while managing household responsibilities like childcare, cooking, and cleaning. The featured testimonies in this book consistently highlight an unequal distribution of domestic chores, even within educated couples. Despite achieving economic independence, women often find themselves solely responsible for these tasks. This expectation to contribute financially while also performing unpaid domestic labor creates a significant time constraint. For unemployed Tunisian women, the already daunting prospect of getting published becomes even more challenging when self-publishing is the prevailing mode. The sheer pressure of balancing motherhood and work leaves a woman writer perpetually divided, her creative energy fragmented.

The notion of motherhood as a potential barrier to artistic expression is not culturally specific. Western feminist scholars have also engaged with this complex relationship. Therefore, raising this issue within the context of these women's testimonies is not simply reinforcing stereo-

types of the oppressed Arab woman. Rather, it highlights the enduring presence of patriarchal discourses that permeate societies worldwide.

In her seminal work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Adrienne Rich unpacks the duality of motherhood, differentiating between two distinct meanings. The first, she argues, represents “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” (13). The second meaning, however, focuses on motherhood as an institution designed to ensure that this potential, and women themselves, remain under male control (13). This institutionalized facet of motherhood finds resonance in Sharon Hayes’ concept of “intensive mothering.” Hayes posits that intensive mothering hinges on the belief that a child necessitates constant care from a single primary caregiver, typically the mother. When the mother is unavailable, other women are expected to step in as replacements. Further, Hayes characterizes intensive mothering as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (8). This framework of “intensive mothering” becomes particularly crucial when examining the challenges faced by Tunisian women novelists, as it reinforces the societal expectation that women prioritize motherhood over other pursuits, including creative endeavors.

These constraints extend beyond the domestic sphere, intruding upon the creative realm as well. Indeed, the permissible subjects for female writers significantly intersect with gender itself. This limitation reflects deeply ingrained cultural biases about appropriate subject matter for different genders. In her article, “The Body and Sexuality in Tunisian Literature,” Abir Kréfa illuminates this persistent issue. She observes:

For literary actors who take a position opposite to the purely aesthetic pole, the ‘transgression’ of structural taboos (namely sexuality, religion, and politics) in contemporary Tunisian society is one of the criteria for identifying a ‘good’ literary work. Special attention is paid to sexual transgression—that is, to the representation of characters whose sexual practices run counter to prevailing social norms and do not lie within

the exclusive framework of marriage. However, this is a literary criterion that discriminates against women.

Kréfa's point highlights how the very notion of a "good" literary work can be skewed by these cultural biases, unfairly penalizing women writers who tackle transgressive themes.

The Tunisian literary scene is tainted by a stark gender disparity. Male authors enjoy the freedom to broach a broad spectrum of topics, while their female contemporaries often face harsh criticism and limitations in their thematic choices. This gendered landscape restricts female writers, subjecting them to stricter judgment for venturing into certain territories. Themes of sexuality or religion, which male writers can explore with relative impunity, become potential minefields for women. If they attempt to transgress these boundaries, they risk marginalization.

This discriminatory practice underscores the broader issue of gender inequality in literature. The expectation that women should conform to certain topics not only limits their creative expression but also perpetuates a patriarchal standard that devalues women's contributions to literature. By enforcing a narrower scope of acceptable subjects for women, the literary establishment reinforces traditional gender roles and hinders the progression towards a more inclusive and equitable literary culture.

Tunisian women novelists traverse a labyrinthine cultural terrain fraught with challenges that engender a pervasive climate of self-censorship. Familial structures often function as primary sites of constraint, where female authors confront explicit prohibitions against their literary endeavors, imposed by male relatives such as fathers, brothers, and husbands. This patriarchal control can be multifaceted, encompassing not only direct limitations but also the subtle inscription of societal expectations that can discourage women from pursuing artistic expression. Even when they manage to surmount these familial hurdles, women novelists encounter a critical landscape rife with gendered biases. Reviews, predominantly by male critics, frequently cast their works in an autobiographical light. This framing, often unfair and



reductive, reflects a deep-seated assumption that a woman's writing can only be an extension of her personal experiences.

Bouchoucha Ben Jom'a's assertion that women writers "coily hide behind a veil of borrowed names" (20) to evade accusations of autobiography exemplifies a pervasive critical siege faced by female authors. This sweeping generalization underscores the deeply entrenched skepticism towards their creative autonomy. It implies that women's narratives are inherently limited to self-reflection, a perspective that diminishes the artistic merit of their work. Mahmoud Tarchouna's analysis of Alia Taabi's sole novel, *Zahrat al-Sabbar* (1991) further exemplifies this reductionist approach. Tarchouna interprets the novel as an exhaustive account of Taabi's life, suggesting her subsequent literary silence stems from a lack of further personal experiences to draw upon. Such a myopic critical lens not only fails to acknowledge the broader artistic and thematic possibilities within Taabi's novel, but also reinforces the restrictive notion that women's writing is inherently confessional.

While the autobiographical mode has its own allure and analytical value, its overapplication—especially when targeting female authors—reveals a voyeuristic and disparaging attitude. This reductive approach not only undermines the diversity and complexity of women's literature but also perpetuates a patronizing view that diminishes their creative legitimacy and intellectual agency. This collection of testimonies, therefore, serves as an urgent intervention to challenge these biases and foster a more equitable understanding of Tunisian women's literary production.

The thematic organization of *Tunisian Women Novelists* into six parts is not intended to create a compartmentalized approach, with each section solely devoted to a distinct theme. Rather, this structure serves primarily as a framework for the book's content. Within this framework, readers will engage with the interwoven narratives of the sixteen featured Tunisian women novelists. These texts themselves are intersectional, in the sense that they present interconnected accounts that unpack a multitude of overlapping themes and issues. The testimonies

reflect shared experiences that the authors discuss with affection or employ as a means to resist and subvert challenges.

A unifying thread of feminist consciousness runs through the narratives of all sixteen Tunisian novelists featured in this anthology. Some Tunisian women writers, however, resist the feminist label, perceiving it as restrictive. Messaouda Ben Boubaker, for instance, explicitly rejects the term, stating her goals “transcend the cleavage man/woman as perceived by either feminist or anti-feminist discourse” (qtd. in Ben Driss 346). While none of the featured writers identify as “militant” feminists, their works convey feminist ideas through clear and often outspoken discourse. Notably, Wafa Ghorbel directly confronts the question of feminism in her testimony, asking, “Am I truly a feminist?” Her answer, “I find myself being one, even though I am not actively involved in any feminist movement,” resonates with the stand of her peers. Their feminism emerges organically, reflecting lived experiences rather than a formal political affiliation.

Mamelouk’s investigation into women writers’ post-revolution engagement with the political arena suggests that “whether they are conscious of it or not, they present a new feminist discourse that supports nationalism in post-revolutionary Tunisia.” This feminist impulse, however, has deeper historical roots. As Cohen Hadria points out, these writers are the direct “heirs to Bourguiba’s Code of Personal Status” (vi). In her own testimony, Hayet Rayes echoes this sentiment, referring to Tunisia’s first president, Habib Bourguiba, as “a symbol of modernity and a liberator of women.” Spanning various post-independence generations, these sixteen women have undeniably benefited from a political legacy that prioritized female emancipation and education. This has fostered a cohort of strong-willed women, unafraid to challenge patriarchal structures and openly critique any limitations they impose.

The opening section of *Tunisian Women Novelists*, titled “I Write, Therefore I Resist,” sets the stage for the entire book. This statement positions writing itself as an act of defiance. It resonates with bell hooks’ assertion that “True resistance begins with people confronting pain... and

wanting to do something to change it" (229). This emphasis on writing as a tool for transformation is evident throughout the book, particularly in the essays by Meryem Sellami and Wafa Ghorbel, whose work highlights the power of the word to enact change.

Sellami's first testimony, "Words in Ache: Why Writing?", chronicles a transformation from social scientist to literary voice, where writing itself becomes a form of resistance. Initially conducting ethnographic research, Sellami encounters the limitations of academic frameworks in capturing the complexities of young Tunisian women's experiences. The haunting voices of her interviewees propel her towards a more profound mode of expression, one that transcends the constraints of academic data. She recognizes self-censorship as a manifestation of the silencing mechanisms employed by patriarchy, and overcoming it becomes a necessary step towards creative liberation. Sellami embraces fiction's potential to depict the women's inner worlds and societal pressures. Referencing Annie Ernaux, she wields words as a "knife" to dissect and challenge the marginalizing forces at play. Ultimately, Sellami's literary turn is driven by a commitment to "restitution," ensuring the silenced experiences of these women find voice and resonance. This focus on reclaiming silenced voices through writing effectively segues into Wafa Ghorbel's exploration of the emotional depths language can access.

In "My Wor(l)ds of Emotions," Ghorbel, delineates her fervent devotion to language and its role in navigating both personal and collective complexities. The original French title, "*Mes mots-émois*," presents a particularly translation challenge. Beyond the delightful sonic interplay between "mots" (words) and "maux" (plural of "mal," meaning pain), the title hinges on a deeper semantic resonance. "Émois" signifies emotions, yet also subtly evokes "et moi" ("and me"), hinting at the deeply personal nature of these words. This title effectively underscores the writer's artistic inclination towards the evocative power of sounds and words. Ghorbel's literary works confront intricate social issues such as violence, trauma, and the quest for cultural identity. Her themes often resonate with contemporary movements like #MeToo.

Her testimony outlines her initial anxieties surrounding the publication of her debut novel, specifically the fear of being conflated with her female protagonist. Through her unique fusion of literary and musical endeavors, Ghorbel champions the power of cultural exchange and the universality of human experience.

The second section, titled “Woman, Mother, Writer,” strengthens the argument for an intersectional reading of the Tunisian literary scene, which I discussed above. Featuring testimonies from three women writers who discuss, among other things, the time constraints and cultural pressures of balancing motherhood and creative pursuits, this section reveals a shared sense of humor laced with irony. Laughter becomes a subversive strategy that resonates with Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Cixous exhorts women to write beyond the confines of a patriarchal order and create a new form of expression that disrupts dominant narratives. The laughter employed by these Tunisian writers serves as a form of resistance, challenging social pressures that often constrain women’s creative endeavors, particularly those juggling motherhood and artistic pursuits.

Amira Ghenim, in her essay titled “I’m not Cut from the Same Cloth as Scheherazade,” grapples with the tension between domestic responsibilities and her artistic calling. She explicitly rejects the comparison to Scheherazade, a figure whose storytelling served as a means of survival. In contrast, Ghenim views writing as a method for confronting life’s complexities, not a tool for escaping them. Her conception of the creative process is one of continuous struggle. Ghenim portrays the act of writing as a constant battle against the burdens of time and the relentless tide of obligations. This resistance to the romanticized image of the leisurely storyteller underscores her rejection of a singular, idealized writing experience. Instead, Ghenim foregrounds the real challenges faced by women writers who must maneuver the often-conflicting demands of their creative pursuits and daily lives.

Drawing upon Virginia Woolf’s seminal assertion that financial autonomy and a dedicated workspace are essential for female literary

creation, Ines Abassi's essay, "A Room of My Own," resonates with the contemporary challenges faced by women writers. Abassi details her personal experiences maneuvering the difficulties of securing a stable income solely through writing. She describes the necessity of supplementing her income with multiple freelance or part-time positions, highlighting the financial hardships that continue to plague many contemporary women writers. Abassi vividly depicts her writing spaces – ranging from cafes to shared living accommodations – as transient and frequently unconventional. She portrays the act of writing amidst the interruptions and demands of domestic life, particularly those associated with motherhood. Abassi's essay serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and adaptability required of women writers in the face of continuous disruptions. Through her experiences, she reinforces the enduring relevance of Woolf's insights within the contemporary literary landscape.

Balkis Khalifa's "Writing: The Beast I Unleashed" examines the intricate and often tumultuous relationship between a writer and her craft. Her exploration exposes the conflict between her roles as a writer and a mother, highlighting the gender dynamics that complicate her creative endeavors. The struggle to balance professional obligations, familial responsibilities, and her writing aspirations underscores the persistent challenges she confronts. Khalifa's critique extends to the contemporary literary landscape, particularly the superficiality fostered by social media, which she perceives as undermining genuine creative expression. Her journey exemplifies the enduring and all-consuming nature of literary passion, marked by a continuous struggle for self-expression and recognition amidst personal and cultural restrictions.

The third section, titled "Self-Disclosure: Stories of Rebellion," foregrounds the confessional mode that permeates these testimonies. While all the writers engage in varying degrees of autobiographical revelation, the three featured novelists in this part elevate confession to a more subversive level. Here, speaking about the self – the intimate, the personal – becomes a disrupting act of resistance. This section departs from a passive understanding of self-disclosure as mere autobiography.

Instead, it highlights the act of confession as a critical tool. Through their narratives, the novelists challenge established norms and power structures.

Hayet Rayes' "Writing in the Face of Perils: A Tripartite Confession" lays bare the challenges faced by women writers in a conservative Arab society that regulates their lives, relegating them to roles defined by secrecy and deception. Rayes confronts the cultural and societal expectations that hinder women from expressing their authentic selves, emphasizing the perilous nature of autobiographical writing. She articulates the tension between conventional norms and personal integrity, particularly in a context where privacy is undervalued and self-reflection remains a rarity. Her reflections extend to her marriage with the novelist Hichem Karoui, a relationship initially marked by intellectual connection but ultimately characterized by disillusionment within a patriarchal system. This personal narrative intertwines with her literary endeavors, highlighting broader themes of female autonomy, creative expression, and the quest for immortality through writing, contrasting sharply with traditional expectations of motherhood and domesticity. Through her testimony, Rayes seeks to dismantle social hypocrisy and advocate for a more transparent and truthful discourse on women's experiences.

Amel Mokhtar's "Writing: My Lifeline" tells the story of her evolution from a child burdened by her father's academic expectations to a woman embracing her passion for writing in defiance of social and familial pressures. Born in the mid-1960s as the eldest daughter in a patriarchal household, Mokhtar confronted limitations placed on her gender by the prevailing social order. However, she found unwavering support from her father, a staunch advocate for her education. Initially steered towards the sciences, she discovered her true calling resided in literature. A profound desire for liberty motivated her to seek liberation from social restrictions. This fervent aspiration for autonomy impelled her to actively engage in the intellectually stimulating environment of the university. Despite enduring harassment and social judgments, a pivotal encounter with the poet Mohamed Sghaier Ouled Ahmed

proved transformative. Initially taken aback by his inappropriate advances, Mokhtar's courageous confrontation and subsequent interaction with Ouled Ahmed not only resulted in a sincere apology but also led to her first published article. As she negotiated the complexities of marriage and motherhood, Mokhtar continued to challenge the prevailing gender norms, achieving success as a pioneering cultural journalist and author. Her unwavering perseverance against social prejudices and her dedication to the art of storytelling underscore her belief in the transformative power of narratives. Mokhtar's journey, characterized by defiance and resilience, exemplifies the ongoing struggle for female autonomy and the relentless pursuit of one's true passions in the face of adversity.

In "My Scattered Life," Fatma Ben Mahmoud provides an introspective account of a life driven by a sense of discontent to seek solace in writing. Reflecting on her childhood, she remembers being a sturdy, tousle-haired girl raised in a modest family within a bustling neighborhood. Her passion for reading ultimately led her to discover the power of writing as a tool for self-expression. However, adulthood brought with it a multitude of challenges. The pressures of juggling the roles of mother, wife, teacher, and poet culminated in a profound depression. Despite this, she found renewal in artistic pursuits such as photography, cinema, and radio, endeavors that reignited her creative spark. The Tunisian revolution and the global coronavirus pandemic further influenced her perspective, intensifying her engagement with writing as a tool for confronting and articulating her deepest emotions. Through her struggle with depression, symbolized by the "black dog," she learned to channel her inner turmoil into powerful literary works, both poetry and prose. Activities like chess became metaphors for her ongoing battle and resilience, where even the seemingly insignificant pawn could hold more value than the king, mirroring her own fight for self-worth and identity. Ben Mahmoud's testimony shows a continuous quest for meaning and escape from despair, with writing serving as both a sanctuary and a testament to her unwavering spirit.

The fourth section, titled "Beyond the Permissible: Women Write the

Taboo," offers pertinent examples to the discussion of the intersection between cultural mandates and gender within the literary sphere. It features the testimonies of three women novelists whose publishing careers began at different times. Houda Driss and Hanene Jennene, contemporaries and classmates from their law studies, represent a younger generation compared to Messaouda Ben Boubaker. Driss published her first novel in 2010, while Jennene's debut came in 2016. Ben Boubaker, however, debuted in the early 1990s, with her first collection of short stories appearing in 1994. Despite this difference in publishing timelines, the limitations governing permissible topics in women's fiction persist.

In "The Choices We Make," Driss reflects on the paradox of life's limited choices and the boundless possibilities in fiction. Her passion for storytelling began in a courtroom in 2008, where she envisioned a love story that evolved into her first novel, *Tuyur al-Chari' al-Kabir* (Birds of the Big Avenue). Her protagonist, Najla, a rebellious journalist, embodies Driss's critique of patriarchal structures as she grapples with internal conflicts and societal pressures. Despite initial setbacks in securing a publisher, Driss persevered, ultimately finding a smaller press willing to publish her work, albeit at her own expense. Notably, the novel's critical reception was initially harsh due to its portrayal of a homosexual central character. This experience underscores Driss's unwavering commitment to fostering diverse and innovative narratives in contemporary literature. Her creative vision advocates for a departure from conventional themes, striving for stories that resonate with future generations. Driss's pursuit of authenticity and personal fulfillment finds expression through the power of her literary voice.

Hanen Jannene's testimony, "Breaking Free: My Journey from Purification to Liberation," narrates her transformative journey from a childhood trauma to a fulfilling career as a writer. The sudden death of her father forced her to develop resilience at a young age. It wasn't until her forties that she began to confront the buried emotions from this event. Jannene found healing in documenting her experiences, blurring the lines between reality and imagination. Her debut novel, *Catharsis*,



emerged from this therapeutic endeavor. Despite its success, the novel attracted backlash, with critics targeting her for addressing taboo topics such as virginity and marital infidelity, questioning the propriety of a veiled woman writing about such themes. Despite the controversy, Jannene continued to tackle complex themes of identity and liberation in her subsequent works. *Habb al-Mulook*, which challenges traditional gender roles, sparked debate over its portrayal of a woman's independence and critique of societal pressures on marriage and motherhood. *Thawrat al-Shakk*, inspired by the Tunisian revolution, further cemented her reputation as a bold and fearless writer, but also faced criticism for its unflinching depiction of social and political issues. Jannene's writing, deeply influenced by her experiences and the socio-political landscape of Tunisia, underscores the power of storytelling in achieving personal and collective liberation.

Messaouda Ben Boubaker, in her reflective piece "Walking on Hot Coals: Writing as Perseverance," encapsulates the profound journey of a writer's life, from the initial spark of creative impulse to the enduring commitment required to confront the challenges of self-expression. Through her introspective narrative, Ben Boubaker unveils the intrinsic connection between writing and personal exploration, illustrating how the act of writing becomes a sanctuary where one can forge a sense of identity and belonging in a world fraught with uncertainty and displacement. She explores the complexities of the writer's psyche, navigating the labyrinth of self-doubt, censorship, and societal expectations that often impede the creative process. She confronts the gendered challenges pervasive in the literary landscape, advocating for the empowerment of female voices and the dismantling of patriarchal structures that inhibit their expression. Ben Boubaker's testimony also provides insights into the reception of her novel, *Torshqana*, which broached the taboo topic of transsexuality. She recounts the initial skepticism and resistance faced upon its publication, as some readers recoiled at the audacity of addressing such a sensitive subject matter. Through this novel, Ben Boubaker not only shattered barriers of silence but also ignited important conversations surrounding gender identity and societal acceptance.

The fifth section of the book, titled "Writing Under Siege," reinforces the pervasive notion of a suffocating environment where women writers' acts of resistance and resilience become essential for their artistic survival. Here, the experiences of the two featured novelists highlight the particular challenges posed by familial demands. Their narratives reveal a clandestine initiation into writing, one marked by secrecy and the need to hide their work as if the act of creation itself were a transgression. Hafidha Karabiben even resorted to a pseudonym to be able to write freely and avoid the potential damage writing could inflict upon her family's reputation.

Karabiben, known by her pen name Bint al-Bahr (Daughter of the Sea), describes in "From the Sea, I Kindled My Flame" her childhood growing up in a conservative, tradition-bound society. Raised in the coastal city of Bizerte, she found herself torn between patriarchal values and her innate passion for creativity. Despite the limitations placed on women, Karabiben embarked on a clandestine literary journey, secretly composing stories and poems. This clandestine act of artistic expression foreshadowed Karabiben's future trajectory as a writer who would challenge cultural strictures and patriarchal domination. Through her pseudonym, a symbolic declaration of liberation, Karabiben's literary works, including acclaimed novels like *Durub al-Firar* (Alleys of Escape) and *Al-'Araa* (Out in the Open), became potent critiques of repressive regimes and religious extremism. These novels offer vivid portrayals of individuals engaged in a valiant struggle against oppressive forces, echoing Karabiben's own defiant spirit and her commitment to creative expression.

"Pockets Full of Stones" intricately braids together Rachida Cherni's personal journey, familial influences, and the social struggles that shaped her into the storyteller and woman writer she is today. Her path to literary expression was not without challenges, as familial restrictions and traditional rules, particularly regarding gender roles and artistic freedom, loomed large. Yet, Cherni's dedication to her craft remained unwavering, ultimately resulting in a noteworthy body of published works. Through her writing, she confronts the complex realities of Tun-

sian society, shedding light on themes of oppression, migration, and female empowerment. Cherni's testimony reveals a deep commitment to storytelling as a tool for confronting injustices, reclaiming agency, and transcending the limitations imposed by gendered expectations. Her introspective exploration of creativity and resilience challenges traditional narratives, advocating for the rightful recognition of women writers as equal contributors to the literary canon.

The concluding section, entitled "The Publication Maze," addresses one of the most critical impediments plaguing the contemporary Tunisian literary landscape: the dissemination and circulation of published works. A notable rise in self-publication practices underscores the difficulties inherent in the traditional publishing process. Imed Guida, in his article "The Struggling Lifecycle of a Book in Tunisia," highlights the interventionist role of the State, exercised through the Ministry of Culture, which offers direct support to writers and publishers through bulk purchases for public libraries and paper subsidies. However, Guida argues that this intervention, lacking a robust system of critical evaluation, carries significant repercussions. The function of publishers is largely confined to the printing stage, with minimal to no involvement in distribution networks. This, in turn, negatively impacts authors' financial remuneration. This bleak scenario has driven many towards what Guida terms "pen immigration," a phenomenon where renowned authors "reconsider handing their manuscripts to local publishing houses" due to the "low quality books (in both content and form)" saturating the market (Guida 2023). Consequently, they seek publication opportunities abroad. All sixteen writers profiled within this book either allude to or extensively discuss these publication difficulties. The selection of just three cases within this section merely offers a glimpse into the ongoing struggle, particularly faced by female writers, to persevere in their creative endeavors.

In her essay, "The Enigma of Authorship: To Write or to Be Written," Saadia Bensalem unveils the roadblocks of the domestic publishing landscape. She exposes exploitative contractual practices and a pervasive lack of transparency within the industry. Despite these persistent

frustrations, she demonstrates unwavering commitment to her craft, successfully navigating the demands of academia while pursuing personal fulfillment through writing. Bensalem's narrative underscores the enduring tension between the youthful enthusiasm of the aspiring storyteller and the disillusioning realities confronted by the established writer. Nevertheless, a glimmer of optimism persists, as she envisions a future where Tunisia fosters a flourishing literary environment that genuinely valorizes its authors.

In "Writing as a Form of Alienation," Kahena Abbes examines the multifaceted nature of writing, grappling with both its power for self-discovery and the challenges of expression in a repressive society. Shaped by early experiences of loss, she turns to writing as a refuge and a tool for self-exploration. However, the publishing process is fraught with difficulty, reflecting the limited opportunities for Tunisian literature. The author faces financial burdens to promote her own work, highlighting the commercial indifference towards her writing. This, coupled with the demands of her legal career, leads to a period of writer's block. The assassination of Tunisian politician Chokri Belaid serves as a catalyst, reigniting her passion and prompting a return to writing. Despite renewed efforts to capture the experiences of the revolution in her subsequent book, it fails to gain traction. This final setback compels her to consider publishing outside Tunisia, a form of exile she acknowledges as a necessary sacrifice for artistic freedom.

Titled "Writing the Self and the Other," Najet Bokri's last essay in this book contributes to our understanding of the challenges faced by aspiring authors, particularly those navigating the complexities of publishing outside established literary centers. While the essay chronicles her literary journey, it culminates in a powerful narrative about the challenges of publication. Bokri details her struggles to secure a publisher for her short story collection and the subsequent disappointment with the marketing efforts of her debut novel. Through these experiences, she exposes the limitations inherent in certain publishing models, particularly the potential tension between commercial viability and authorial vision. Ultimately, Bokri's essay offers a valuable perspec-

tive on the intricate relationship between writer, publisher, and audience within the contemporary literary landscape.

By bringing the voices of women novelists exploring the complexities of female experience in Tunisia to a global audience, this project contributes to a more inclusive worldwide literary conversation. It not only encourages active listening and mitigates epistemic injustice, but also opens new avenues for exploration. This collection of testimonies invites further investigation into the power dynamics inherent within the translation industry, particularly regarding the ongoing quest for a more representative world literature. By amplifying these previously unheard voices, *Tunisian Women Novelists* aligns with a future vision of literary exchange characterized by both equity and interconnectedness.

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