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THE ROMAN MAGHRÉBIN IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ARAB SPRING

Nina Wardleworth

ABSTRACT

Numerous articles and essays have been published in French about the events of the Arab Spring in both the Maghreb and the wider Arab World. These works have mainly been authored by French journalists and intellectuals and are aimed as much at the general public as at their academic peers. Less immediately obvious is how these political events have informed and influenced the roman maghrébin. Focusing on three depictions of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and its aftermath, this article will investigate the profiles of the authors and the extent to which such texts have offered women and young authors the chance to represent their experiences. It will also examine the literary formats that such writers have adopted. How has the Arab Spring, and the media coverage of these events, altered the way that authors write and publish their thoughts and emotions? To what extent are they turning to alternatives to the traditional novel, such as blogging, photo diaries and short-stories?

Keywords: Arab Spring; Maghreb; Tunisia; Blogging; Fiction; Media coverage

Abdelkebir Khatibi in *Le Roman Maghrébin* (1968) examined the important role that Maghrebi writers and intellectuals played in the decolonisation process, underlining the contribution that they made towards the revolutionary movements in their home nations during the 1950s and 1960s. As the Maghreb and the wider Arab World have yet again been rocked by political disturbances during the Arab Spring, it is therefore apt to examine the role played by Maghrebi literature at the time of these events and in their aftermath.

The political events of December 2010 and January and February 2011, which have subsequently come to be known as the Arab Spring, profoundly affected the three countries of the Francophone Maghreb as well as their nearest North African neighbours in Libya and Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries such as Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. The extent of the demonstrations and their outcomes varied widely across the Maghreb, with the greatest political upheaval occurring in Tunisia, where President Ben Ali was ousted from power. In Algeria, smaller demonstrations were swiftly quashed by the authoritarian state and in Morocco, the Monarchy and its government sought to appease the protesters by proposing and enacting constitutional reforms. For reasons of brevity, this article will limit its analysis to works about Tunisia. It will look at three texts published within two years of the ousting of Ben Ali (January 2011) which encompass a range of different literary styles (novella, photodiary and compendium of blog entries) that were able to respond to the sense of urgency and immediacy demanded by the revolution. It will consider to what extent these texts were meant for national or international consumption and how the literary style informed the

content. The article will also examine the biographies of the authors to gauge how their existing media and/or literary identities affected their ability to be published.

Numerous articles and essays have been published in French about the events of the Arab Spring in both the Maghreb and the wider Middle East. The majority of these works have been authored by French journalists and intellectuals with professional and personal connections to the area, such as the Algerian born historian of the Maghreb, Benjamin Stora, Radio France and *Libération* correspondent in Egypt, Claude Guibal and Professor of Arab history at Sciences-Po in Paris, Jean-Pierre Filiu. Their professional status confers legitimacy upon their words in the eyes of the major French publishing houses, reviewers and readers, allowing them to secure publishing deals more easily. Equally their names (especially in the case of Stora and Guibal) would attract a wider general readership than those written by less well-known figures. These works have mainly mass market formats. There is a graphic novel (Filiu and a well-known cartoonist (Cyril Pommès), a compilation of radio and newspaper reports from Cairo (Guibal) and Stora's interview with the journalist Edwy Plenel is non-specialist in nature. This demonstrates that such works are aimed as much at the general French public, and a Francophone readership in the Maghreb, as at their academic peers.

Of the three works to be examined by this article, those by the Tunisian authors, Lina Ben Mhenni and Dora Latiri, do not fit these parameters as these authors are generally unknown outside of specialist audiences (young bloggers in Tunisia and the Arab World for the former and academic circles in the UK and France for the latter). The third featured author Tahar Ben Jelloun is, in contrast, generally well-known to French literary audiences. This Moroccan writer and intellectual has lived in France since 1971, following a five year period of imprisonment in his homeland for his political writing and activism. Now very much an accepted part of the Parisian intelligentsia, he has been awarded numerous literary prizes including the Prix Goncourt in 1987 for *La nuit sacrée*, and is known for his outspoken prise de position in the French press on issues such as racism, immigrant rights and Islamophobia.

Literary representations of the Tunisian Arab Spring were undoubtedly influenced by the extensive international media coverage of the events. All the world's twenty-four hour news channels covered the events of the Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia and Egypt. As well as placing journalists on the ground, Alexa Robertson has documented how Al-Jazeera (both its English and Arabic language arms) made extensive use of social media "incorporating tweets and citations from blogs in its narratives, and highlighted the importance of Facebook and Twitter in several reports...and its use of social media could thus be a reflection of its avowed mission of giving a 'voice to the voiceless'" (Robertson 335). The Egyptian activists Wael Ghonim and Adhaf Soueif, in their autobiographical texts about the Arab Spring in Egypt, demonstrate how the use of social media democratised the revolutionary process, allowing women and young people an outlet that the traditional political processes had repressed. Indeed Ghonim describes the Arab Spring in the title of his text as *Revolution 2.0*, echoing the Web 2.0 label.

The first text to be examined – Lina Ben Mhenni's *Tunisian Girl: Blogueuse pour un printemps arabe* – personifies Ghonim's and Soueif's claim about the important role of social media. One of the most prominent Tunisian bloggers during the Arab Spring, Ben Mhenni was a Tunisian student in her early twenties who chose to write under her real name. This was an unusual choice, as autocratic regimes across the Arab World were actively targeting and arresting prominent bloggers. Indeed most of her contemporaries choose to use pseudonyms (Salam Pax in Baghdad, Zeinobia and

Egyptian Streets in Egypt). However, Ben Mhenni claims that paradoxically such openness about her identity, on her trilingual (French, Arabic and English) blog, *A Tunisian girl*, offered her greater protection against arrest. It also allowed the author to challenge claims of inaccuracy and bias often levelled against more anonymous user-generated content (Leach). Ben Mhenni was subsequently nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2011 for her online political and social activism and has received several other awards for her journalism.

The French publishing house Indigène published *Tunisian Girl: Blogueuse pour un printemps arabe* in June 2011. This small independent publishers based in Montpellier specializes in works that attempt to create a dialogue between Western and other cultures, especially through works written by women. The short text (32 pages) is affordably priced at three euros. The relative brevity of the text permitted a relatively short writing to publication period (the first edition was published in June 2011, less than five months after the overthrow of President Ben Ali) (January 14, 2011). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Maghrebi authors had to demonstrate that they were not being left behind by the immediacy of the twenty-four hour news channel's cycles. Ben Mhenni begins her book by stressing that her work was written "quelques mois à peine après les évènements" (Ben Mhenni 3). Such a short release date also allowed the author and publishers to ensure greater media coverage and sales for what might otherwise be seen as a non-mainstream publication.

The text is aimed at a readership which would not normally engage with blogs and other forms of social media, evidenced by the book's page-long glossary of basic terms such as Blog, Facebook and Twitter. The book does not simply reproduce Ben Mhenni's existing blog entries, however, many of these entries are woven into the text, in order to provide an insight into sense of urgency and emotion of the period. This also allows a Francophone audience access to social media content that linguistically may have been inaccessible, because it was originally published in Arabic or English, or logistically hard to discover during the Arab Spring itself, because of state orchestrated censorship or the fast moving pace of coverage. Such entries are placed within a longer narrative which charts Ben Mhenni's journey as a blogger, which started during the 2008 war in Gaza. Ben Mhenni is therefore seeking to inscribe the events of the Arab Spring in Tunisian in a wider (pan-Arab) and longer historical trajectory. Media coverage of the Arab Spring was often criticized for lacking such temporal and geographical contextualisation, preferring to concentrate on dramatic visual montages and fast moving events. Ben Mhenni is therefore using the form of the autobiographical text to provide a more rounded and nuanced analysis of events. This analysis would be too lengthy for the blog posts she continues to author ('Je vous vomis', September 26 2015 about forced virginity testing on women protesters). Ben Mhenni also claims that she would be unable to secure publication for such analysis in the post-revolutionary Tunisian media where there is still no "liberté d'accès à une information non filtrée, non maquillée par les pouvoirs" (Ben Mhenni 31).

The author moves back and forth from the first (often in the plural nous form) to the third person in her narrative. The first person singular sections highlight her own personal journey as a social activist, while the nous is used in relation to the roles she played along with other Tunisian bloggers in their cyberactivisme in the period leading up to and during the revolution. It is also a tool to motivate her readers to become engaged in their own forms of activism, an on-going call to arms, "Il faut nous remettre devant nos écrans. Je le redis: le rôle d'un blogueur ne s'arrête jamais" (Ben Mhenni 31). This echoes her actions in Autumn 2010 when she encouraged other Tunisians to 'start

blogging' (7ell blog means start blogging in the SMS form of transliterated Arabic) on a webpage and Facebook page of the same name (Kallander)

Although her blog is trilingual, Ben Mhenni chose to write her book in French because this allowed her to secure a publishing deal. Appearing in print in France also allowed her to reach out to a different audience than that of her blog. In the last pages of her text, Ben Mhenni reflects upon the role of a cyber-author in revolutionary times. In contrast to Khatibi's focus on the importance of the role of the author in a revolutionary period, Ben Mhenni prefers to focus on the importance of the medium. While claiming that "j'estime que je n'ai pas joué un rôle plus grand que les autres facebookers tunisiens" (Ben Mhenni 31), she highlights the innovative nature of the internet as a tool of social activism:

C'est un incroyable, un incomparable réseau de solidarité: c'est comme ça que nous avons pu faire bénéficier de notre expérience les jeunes révolutionnaires égyptiens, leur dire par exemple comment ils devaient faire pour se protéger contre les gaz lacrymogènes (Ben Mhenni 30).

The internet has therefore allowed young activists and authors to achieve a form of Pan-Arabism that previous generations of Maghrebi and Arab authors could only dream of.

Another female Tunisian author who has documented the revolution is the Brighton (UK) based academic Dora Latiri. Unlike Ben Mhenni she was not present in Tunisia at the time of the uprisings, but instead documents her return to her homeland in the aftermath of these events. *Un amour de tn. Carnet photographique d'un retour au pays natal après la Révolution* is interspersed with the author's own photographs taken during her journey, and Latiri is pictured on the book's cover in a self-portrait taken in a mirror or window while holding a camera. From the very beginning, the author places herself both textually and visually at the center of the action. Latiri consciously reflects on the role of the author in documenting the multiple facets of daily life often missed in news reports on the main twenty-four hour news channels.

The subtitle of the work, *Carnet photographique d'un retour au pays natal après la Révolution*, is a literary nod to Aimé Césaire's seminal denunciation of colonialism. Although the quantity of text is far greater than the number of photographs, the subtitle informs the reader that the notebook will help them to examine and understand the transformative events of the Arab Spring in two ways, through visual images as well as the written word. The use of the term carnet emphasizes the reportage style of the text and photographs. There is a sense of urgency, for it is the thoughts and snapshots of a very distinct, historic and maybe limited period of (post-) revolutionary time ("La Goulette d'après la Révolution et d'avant les élections" (Latiri 42)) that the author is trying to capture. The photographs document multiple facets of life in post-revolutionary Tunisia; from snippets of daily life on the streets to more abstract images of water glasses on newspapers, highlighting the conflict in the text between the need to document momentous events and to reflect upon their significance and the future for Tunisia. There are also photographs of older photographs, which accompany text about the author's early life in Tunisia and which serve to show how the country has changed since Latiri moved abroad.

The figure of Mohammed Bouazizi, whose immolation on December 17 2010 is credited with beginning the uprising in Tunisia, is evoked by Latiri in a short chapter which bears his name. She seeks to emphasize the universality of his story, seeing him in the fruit sellers of her own suburb of Tunis, "A la Goulette dans la lumière très blanche de l'été, les marchands de fruits et légumes envahissent la chaussée dans

l'illégalité...Comment était-elle la balance de Bouazizi?" (Latiri 87). There are no scenes of police intimidation of such sellers, but Latiri recognizes and documents the sellers' residual fears of drawing attention to themselves. The prickly pear seller looks uncomfortable in the photograph and "n'a pas trop envie de parler." (Latiri 88-89 (photograph) 92 (quote)).

While Latiri's and Ben Mhenni's works had a strong autobiographical as well as documentary focus, Tahar Ben Jelloun's 2011 novella *Par le feu* instead fictionalizes the immolation of Bouazizi. This is not to say that Ben Jelloun remains an impassioned observer, for his voice, which spans the divide between the French informed outsider looking in and the Maghrebi participant or observer, is heavily present throughout the text, especially in the fury in tone of its final lines:

L'histoire de Mohamed n'appartient à personne; c'est l'histoire d'un homme simple, comme il y en a des millions, qui à force d'être écrasé, humilié, nié dans sa vie, a fini par devenir l'étincelle qui embrase le monde. Jamais personne ne lui volera sa mort. (Ben Jelloun 50)

Equally the blurb on the novella's back cover claims that the work is a "hommage aux révolutions arabes et à ces millions d'hommes et femmes anonymes descendus dans les rues pour réclamer liberté et dignité dans leur pays".

Ben Jelloun takes Bouazizi from being simply a name or a photograph splashed across news reports or front-pages and makes him both an individual, but also through his relationships with his young male contemporaries, a symbol of the desperation and despair of young men across the autocratic states of the Arab World. This universalism is achieved through several stylistic details. The novella never directly names Tunisia as the setting for the novel, though the publisher does on the book's backcover, as a marketing tool. Equally the currency named (the rial) was the historic legal tender in Tunisia and is used in several countries throughout the Arab world, but no longer in Tunisia itself. Ben Jelloun also uses artistic license, inventing the history degree and the mother's illness, to emphasize that the restrictive nature of Arab regimes for numerous young men across all economic and class divides.

The novella retraces the weeks leading up to the death of the main character Mohamed, detailing his increasing feelings of frustration and despair, that despite having worked hard to gain a history degree, he finds it impossible to get a job. There are high rates of youth unemployment and Mohamed has neither the social connections nor the money needed to bribe his way in. After his father's death, he becomes the family's sole breadwinner and so is forced to take on his father's fruit and vegetable cart to make ends meet. Many details of Bouazizi's life could be gleaned from the numerous newspaper and television reports published internationally after his death, although Lina Ben Mhenni documents how the Ben Ali regime banned all coverage in the Tunisia press. However, Ben Jelloun's novella gives the reader an important and touching insight, through long passages of dialogue, into the more intimate life of a young unemployed man in the Arab world: the relationship with his girlfriend, Zineb, who he is unable to marry because of a lack of job and money; the conflicts between himself and younger siblings and the close relationship he has with his ill mother.

The length of this text, however brief, is in direct comparison to the media reports of the Bouazizi's death. This therefore allows the reader, especially those in Francophone communities outside the Maghreb, to empathize with the constant struggles that he faced. Mohammed suffers especially at the hands of the Tunisian police, from whom he receives threats, demands for money and acts of violence on a

daily basis. Ben Jelloun, in an interview with Agence France Press, underlined the resonances of the book for Western readers, “Les gens peuvent s’identifier, ils sont touchés par cette histoire humaine et par les mots. Les suicides des gens stressés par leur travail en France, cela passe aussi par la même désespérance” (*L’Express*). So for Ben Jelloun the role of literature is to create a climate for cross-cultural human empathy.

The title itself demonstrates the text’s ability to conduct a more detailed and nuanced investigation than that in the media. *Par le feu* refers not only to the manner of Bouazizi’s death, which is common knowledge, but also to the frustrated burning of his history degree certificate, the event which opens the novella, suggesting that Ben Jelloun feels that it is important to look for the root causes of Mohamed’s death, which the media reports had neither the air-time nor the interest to discover. The novella ends with a stinging criticism of the national and international media who are willing to prey upon a family’s grief:

Les télévisions du monde entier affluent dans le pays et rendent visite à sa famille. Un producteur de cinéma vient même les voir... Il se baisse et murmure à l’oreille de la vieille femme en larmes:

- Surtout ne parlez à personne; n’accordez aucun entretien à des journalistes; je vais vous aider; c’est moi qui raconterai l’histoire de Mohamed...

La mère ce comprenait rien à ce que disait cet individu. Mais ces deux filles, elles, avaient bien saisi: ce type achète la mort de notre frère pour faire du fric! Quelle horreur, quelle horreur absolue! (Ben Jelloun 49-50)

Are these final paragraphs of the text meant to encourage the reader to make a comparison between the self-seeking media and the more detailed, and maybe more altruistic work of an author? Ben Jelloun has been criticized by reviewers (Emmanuel 2011, Toumi, 2011) for the brevity of this novella, and therefore the supposed haste in which it was written, in an attempt to cash in on political events. The same reviewers also highlight the fact that the novella’s release was scheduled for the same days as a book-length *essai* on the events of the Arab Spring, *L’Étincelle*, therefore suggesting that the inexpensive novella (seven euros) could be used to draw readers’ attention to a more expensive and harder-to-sell work of non-fiction.

These three works about the Arab Spring and its aftermath in Tunisia highlight the interplay between media coverage and longer texts. They all examine and question the role that should be played by an author in a period of great political change. The relatively short publication timeframe of Ben Mhenni’s and Ben Jelloun’s texts suggest a desire amongst a Francophone audience to access supposedly authentic analyses of the Arab Spring and a willingness of French publishers, both mainstream and independent, to invest in such works. Although the most well-known of these texts was written by a male literary establishment figure, there has also been an increasing number of texts authored by women, echoing the important role they played in the events across the Arab Spring.

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