

Moroccan Francophone Literature in Translation: Abdellatif Laâbi's In Praise of Defeat & Abdelkebir Khatibi's Tattooed Memory

As works of Morocco's most famed writers are being translated for English readers to discover, Khalid Lyamlahy explores how translators have sought to capture the full range of nuance and diversity in their volumes, offering a new perspective on Moroccan identity and culture.

What can an Anglophone reader learn from Moroccan Francophone literature? At a time when multilingualism is threatened by the resurgence of identitarian discourses, to what extent can English translation open new perspectives for (re)reading Moroccan history, culture and politics? These questions seem to be increasingly topical given the surge in the number of translations of Moroccan Francophone literature into English. If, as recently outlined by **Matthew Reynolds**, translation "is in some respects the enemy of languages, a flattening and homogenizing power", it is also "the lover of languages: it discerns and values difference, and spurs linguistic innovation" (p.119). In the Moroccan context, where the linguistic landscape combines and spans Berber and Bedouin languages, "Darija" or Moroccan Arabic, Classical Arabic, as well as French, Spanish, and English, translation is an everyday practice. For an Anglophone audience, reading English translations of Moroccan literary works could be seen as just another way to inhabit the vibrant and creative multilingual space of Moroccan culture. In Morocco, where the very idea of diversity is enshrined in linguistic and cultural practice, translation could only provide an interesting lens through which to (re)examine the role of literature and the position of writers.

Last year, Olivia Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio edited **an anthology** offering for the first time English translations from the Moroccan journal of culture and politics *Souffles-Anfas*. Founded in 1966 by a group of Moroccan poets and artists, the journal started in French and became bilingual with the launch of its Arabic counterpart *Anfas* in 1971. One year later, chief editor and Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi was arrested and the journal censored. A few months after *Souffles-Anfas* celebrated the **50th anniversary** of its foundation, two fundamental and long-awaited translations, published respectively in the US and France, offer an outstanding opportunity for Anglophone readers to delve back into the Moroccan literary production of the second half of last century.



The first, *In Praise of Defeat*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, is a massive 824-page bilingual collection of selected poetry by Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi, which covers a wide range of his poetic writings from the late 1960s to 2014. The second, *Tattooed Memory*, translated by Peter Thompson, is one of the most important and foundational autobiographical works in postcolonial Maghreb published initially by Moroccan writer Abdelkébir Khatibi in 1971. Interestingly, both Laâbi and Khatibi took part, though to different extents, in the ground-breaking experience of *Souffles-Anfas*. One could consider that Laâbi and Khatibi are, in the former's words from his prologue to the first issue of the journal, "less continuers than they are initiators" (Harrison & Ignacio, 19), as both devoted their respective lives and productions to framing two distinct yet complementary approaches to Moroccan modern literature, culture and politics. Indeed, while Abdellatif Laâbi led the experience of *Souffles* as a chief editor and was committed to overt political activism in the Moroccan Left during the *Years of Lead*, which resulted in arrest, torture, and exile to France in 1985, Khatibi embodied the figure of a prolific postcolonial thinker and developed a manifold oeuvre that includes poetry, novels, literary essays and volumes on Moroccan and Islamic Art, as well as Maghrebi and Arab culture and politics. There is certainly more than one link between Laâbi's poetic and political commitment and Khatibi's intellectual and interdisciplinary contributions. The respective trajectories of Laâbi and Khatibi shed light on the role of Moroccan writers in resisting tyranny, demystifying tradition, promoting alternative values and opening up new perspectives towards a modern and multidimensional Moroccan identity. As Khatibi puts it in one of his articles from *Souffles*, "what a writer must understand is that culture is not the will of solitary men, but the construction of a set of values and ideas in the interest of a greater liberation of man" (Harrison & Ignacio, 58). In Morocco, a country that still faces high rates of illiteracy, especially in rural areas, the construction of ideas and ideals is nothing but a persistent urgency that requires substantial and redoubled efforts, not only from politicians and educators but also from writers and intellectuals. Each in their own manner, and as witnessed by the recent translations of their works, Laâbi and Khatibi have contributed to these efforts and initiated some productive and thought-provoking ways to reshape Moroccan identity and culture in the postcolonial era.

In his foreword to the translation of Laâbi's volume of selected poetry, Pierre Joris aptly notes that the Moroccan poet "writes with a quiet, unassuming elegance that holds and hides the violence any act of creation proposes" (p.iii). This contrast between quietness and violence, elegance and

resistance, love and revolt, is one of the most central features of Laâbi's poetry. *In Praise of Defeat* offers an impressive view of how this contrast has evolved throughout Laâbi's career. Starting with his early poems from the period of *Souffles*, marked by a disrupted and disorientating syntax, the poet is already aware of the social and political impact of his creation as he writes: "now I know what power inhabits me / peoples run through my language" (p.5). A space of collective subversion, awakening and renewal, poetry serves the revolutionary project of "building a kingdom / of insubordination" (p.11). A few years later, in "the citadel of exile" (p.21) that is prison, the poem becomes a space of resistance through the vital act of writing. Laâbi celebrates "the miracle that consists in living, transforming oneself" (p.35) beyond the ordeal of physical pain and psychological destruction. In 1976, from the prison of Kenitra, he writes with a firm determination: "My people are on the march / and I exist / rebel" (p.45). The poetry from the years of prison calls out to family and friends, pays tribute to tortured comrades, stands up to tormentors, and celebrates the fragile yet regenerative power of love and freedom. After his exile in 1985, Laâbi looks back at his unhealable "rifts" (p.109), investigates his persistent wounds, and questions both the future of and the relationship to Morocco. In "Casablanca Spleen", a Baudelairian title that captures his overwhelming and melancholic reunion with the country, Laâbi's quest for his homeland is caught in what he calls "the tough job of returning" (p.325). In the subsequent poems, the cry that originates in Laâbi's poetry remains firm and vivid as he writes: "Here I am / on the fringe that is my lot / holding in my hand / my flower / grown in concrete" (p.385). If writing is henceforth associated with "fragments" (p.357) and "perishable poems" (p.439), the power of poetry remains unbroken. In Laâbi's words, poetry is "just a way / to tune the instruments of the soul" (p.481), explore the sensuality of human bodies, and respond to terror and injustice, from Jerusalem to Madrid and Bagdad. In the volumes of the last ten years, Laâbi's poetry achieves what Pierre Joris names "the clarity of an innocence regained" (p.v): exile and melancholy leave room for self-questioning and new reflections on the miracle of life and love which can only take place in the poem, culminating in Laâbi's tribute to his wife Jocelyne: "I belong to you / You belong to me, in a way / just as in the poem" (p.777).

This question of belonging to the other resurfaces in Khatibi's *Tattooed Memory* in relation to language. In his introductory note, the late Algerian writer Nabile Farès defines this translation as the connection of Berber, Arabic, and French "sources" with "a new end point" (p.7), English. Peter Thompson, who acknowledges the difficulty of the original text, warns the reader that his translation "'reads like a translation' and it does so because it is meant to" (p.9). For Khatibi's autobiography is an intricate and multi-layered construct, "a polyphonic text" notes **Debra Kelly** (p.226), which superimposes not only narrative voices but also intercultural signs, drawn from Moroccan and Western references. All these signs converge towards the metaphorical image of a "tattooed memory" which, like the tattooed Berber body, bears the marks of both individual and collective histories. Khatibi's text travels between Moroccan cities (El Jadida, Essaouira, and Marrakesh), reconstructing the years of childhood under the French Protectorate and evoking the formational experiences of adolescence in the wake of the country's independence in 1956. By grounding his work in the interwoven streams of personal and cultural memory, Khatibi delivers a fascinating and puzzling text through which a Moroccan postcolonial subject seeks to reconstruct his own identity, as suggested by the opening lines: "Long I have guarded the sacred ritual of my birth. They put a little honey on my lips, a drop of lemon on my eyes, the first gesture to free my gaze toward the universe and the second to invigorate my mind, to die, to live, die, live, doubled upon my double – what, was I born blind to myself?" (p.13). This quest for the self, rooted in the sacred signs and symbols of memory, sheds light on the subtitle of the original text, "Autobiographie d'un décolonisé" (Autobiography of a decolonised subject), which has been surprisingly dismissed in the translated version. The process of decolonising oneself through writing remains fundamental throughout the text, and takes even a further turn in Paris where Khatibi moved to study sociology at the Sorbonne and discovered a vibrant scene of cultural and literary encounters. Europe is then depicted in a succession of brief notes from Khatibi's travels to London, the city that displays "its balance, its precision, its mask;" (p.125), but also Berlin, Sofia, and Cordoba. Khatibi, who would later call himself "un étranger professionnel" (a professional stranger), writes about the enriching experience of alterity, the moving encounter of East and West in the travelling text and memory: "what fable could retell my movements? Furtive exchange, a whim, an equation of visions that make me drift – where differences meet – toward my own divining" (p.139). Significantly, Khatibi's text ends with a dialogue between the writer and his

double in which autobiography becomes more suspicious, caught in the space between the returning call of the past, the persistent question of the “current identity”, and the pressing idea of “*becoming*” (p.147).

To what extent do both translations render the complexity and the energy of the Francophone original texts? How is it possible to reproduce Laâbi's unsettling vocabulary and syntax from his early poems or to recreate the convoluted descriptions of Khatibi's autobiography, which becomes, in his own words, “a little novel with several voices” and even “a theatrical work” (p.157) ? Isn't there something untranslatable, embedded in the French language, which keeps resisting the effort of translation and mediation for the Anglophone reader? What is certain, however, is that translating Moroccan Francophone literature, especially from the 1960s and 1970s, is a challenging task that often takes the risk of missing or misrepresenting some structural or linguistic aspects of the original text. One example from *Tattooed Memory* would be Thompson's translation of “Série hasardeuse I et II”, the titles of the two sections, as “High Risk Series I and II”, while the word “hasardeux” in French means also “uncertain, random”, which would have been more convenient to Khatibi's fragmented writing and random reconstruction of memory. The translator, like the postcolonial writer himself, should be aware of what Khatibi terms the “frightening autonomy of words, which, deployed about the body and the world, know how to betray [...]” (p.157). But one could also argue: isn't translation essentially about sharing and spreading the pleasure of reading beyond cultural and linguistic boundaries? For if translation “reveals and relishes difference while also bridging it” (Reynolds, 120), the pleasure of sharing this dual process ultimately outlives the questions of fidelity to and betrayal of the original text. Laâbi would certainly agree. In “Writing and the New World Disorder”, a vibrant text that closes his bilingual volume of poetry and whose title finds particular resonance with the recent political developments across the world, Laâbi compares his writing to the gesture of his father who used to distribute “a great quantity of loaves” in the Moroccan city of Fez when there was a death to mourn in his family. Writing is nothing but sharing the loaves of life, hope, pleasure, and tolerance. For, as Laâbi tells the world, “the greatest failure would be to lose your face some day – your *human face*” (p.824).

Note: To read other translations, see for Laâbi *The Rule of Barbarism* (New York: Island Position, 2012), *The Bottom of the Jar* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2013) and *Beyond the Barbed Wire* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2016), all translated by André Naffis-Sahely. For Khatibi, see *Love in two languages* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1990), translated by Richard Howard, and *Open Correspondence: An Epistolary Dialogue* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2011), translated by Safoi Babana-Hampton, Valérie K. Orlando and Mary Vogl

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