



Diasporic Sexualities and Identities in French-Maghrebian Creation

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The socio-political and cultural complexity of Maghrebian countries means that the presence of sexualities considered marginal in artistic-literary production continues to be anecdotal. In this article we seek to give a platform to courageous and committed voices from different generations that, often from the cross-Mediterranean diaspora, place these issues at the core of their works. We will depict a brief panorama that will range from social action to artistic-literary and film expressions, with special emphasis on the works by the Tunisian filmmakers Nouri Bouzid and Mehdi Ben Attia. The controversial *L'homme de cendres* (1986), shot in Tunis over 30 years ago by Bouzid, is undoubtedly a milestone. Ben Attia addresses in his film *Le fil* (2010) the issue of homosexuality experienced as a paralysing secret in a middle-class society.

In the collective imaginaries, Mediterranean and, particularly, Maghrebian countries are traditionally territories inclined to eroticism, often exotic, or even homoeroticism, and to some practices linked to female or male prostitution, more or less concealed or socially accepted depending on the contexts. However, they are societies where a long tradition of prohibitions and rejections persists. This situation especially concerns the expression of non-normative, marginal or transgressive sexualities, among which we could include highly censored female sexual practices, such as relations before marriage or the stigmatisa-

tion of single mothers, as well as underage sex, often with adults. This reality corresponds to a notable lack of visibility and social demands and an inexistent feminist or LGTBI association movement.¹

In 2010, the journal *L'Année du Maghreb* devoted a monograph to “Sexualities in the Maghreb” from a sociological point of view. The coordinators emphasised that it was the first time in 50 years that this journal had carried out research on sexuality. This does not mean sexuality has not been present in the sociological studies on the Maghreb but that it has often been used to stir the debate on

1. For further information, see Pujante González, Domingo, “Désir et sexualités non normatives au Maghreb et dans la diaspora”, *Expressions maghrébines*, 16-1, Tulane University, 2017, pp. 1-19.



the confrontations between the western and Muslim discourses, mainly in terms of women, diversity and equality. This reductive dichotomy between “western modern hedonism” and “ethics in keeping with Islamic traditions and values” has contributed to “essentialising highly diverse social behaviours, norms and codes of conduct.”²

In March 2016, the French weekly news magazine *L'Express* devoted a monograph to “Islam and sex”. The introduction states that “denying that sexuality, and through it the status of women, is the clearest line of fracture between Islam and the West would be pure ideological blindness. As well as reducing Muslim countries to a monolith inaccessible to any form of modernity.”³ We should add to women all the minorities that represent sexualities that are deemed marginal. The reality is, therefore, highly complex, full of chiaroscuros. To demonstrate this porosity and the mutual influences between cultures and ideologies from both sides of the Mediterranean, it would suffice to mention the Tunisian laws that have prohibited polygamy since 1957 or the Moroccan laws that have allowed women to file for divorce since the 2000s. These contrasts are also clear within a society in which the acceptance of some sexual practices before or outside marriage will depend on the social context in the city or the rural environment.

In this respect, the Egyptian journalist Shereen El Feki pointed out in 2013 in her essay on sexuality in the Arab world (*Sex and the Citadel*)⁴ the intensity of the conflict existing in Arab Muslim societies between the religious precepts, the patriarchal tradition often linked to them, and the aspirations of the individuals

to freely express their sexuality. It is not anecdotal that the reconstruction of the hymen is such a widespread practice in this context. Communication technologies, fast contacts via Internet and mobile apps are contributing in our globalised world to the increasingly wider gap between the social reality, in which sex education is almost inexistent, and the growing desires of a young population that dreams of emancipation.

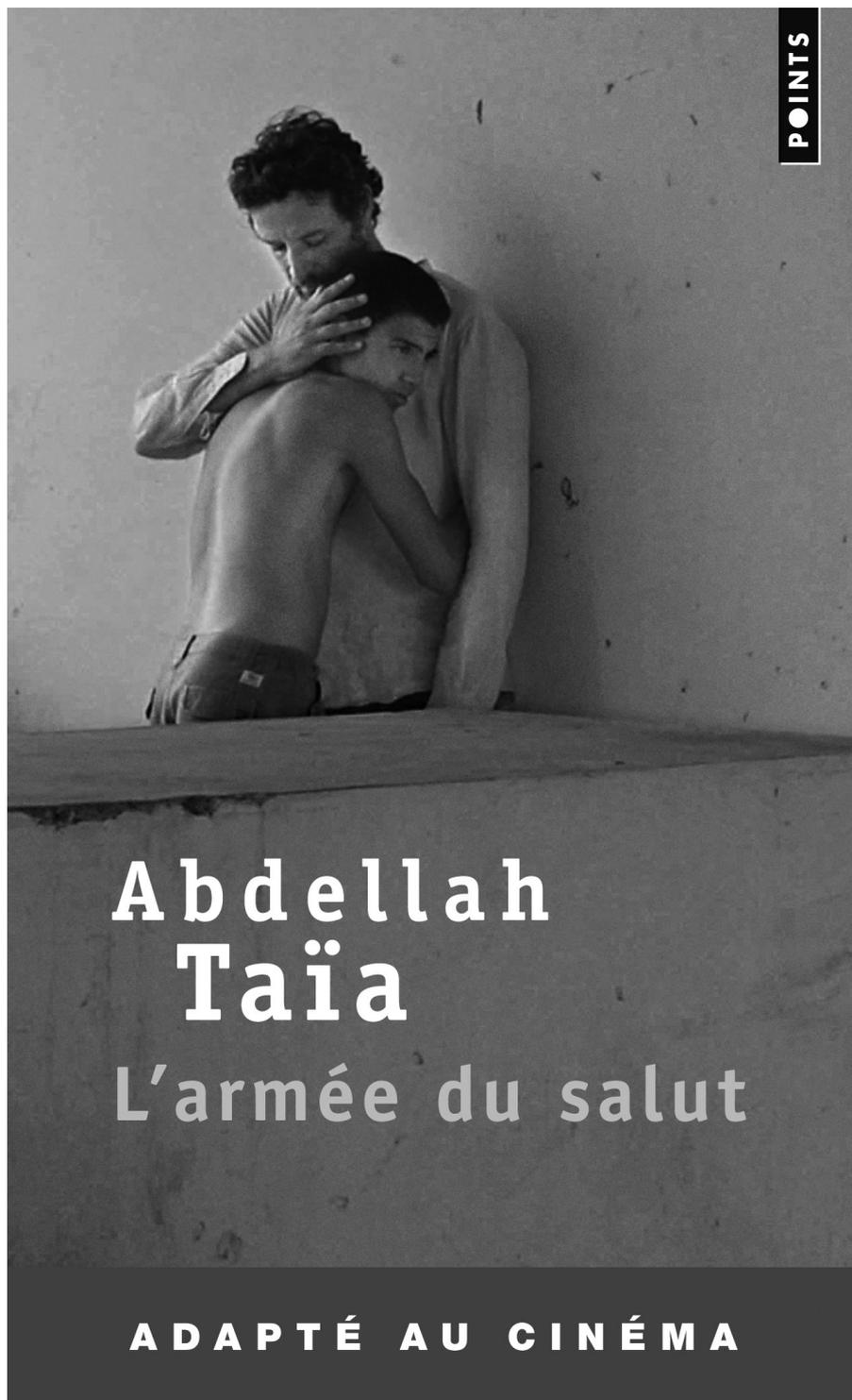
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Women often react more visibly to this precariousness. This is the case of the Moroccan militant Acha Ech-Chenna, who since 1985 has led the association *Solidarité féminine* in support of single mothers, who symbolise the most absolute shame in this country. She contributed to the recent abortion legalisation in some cases although this and openly speaking on television about it and other taboos such as incest have resulted in a fatwa being issued against her by the religious authorities, which shows how far control of the female body is at the epicentre of the debate on sexuality. In this respect, it is significant that the actress Lobna Abidar, the protagonist of *Much Loved* (2015), by the French-Moroccan filmmaker Nabil Ayouch, dealing with the issue of prostitution in Morocco, has had to take refuge in France.

2. Beaumont, Valérie, Cauvin Verner, Corinne and Pouillon, François, “Sexualités au Maghreb”, *L'Année du Maghreb. Sexe et sexualités au Maghreb. Essais d'ethnographies contemporaines*, VI, 2010, p. 6.

3. *L'Express*, special issue “L'islam et le sexe”, 3377, 2016, p. 42.

4. We have used the French translation: El Feki, Shereen, *La révolution du plaisir. Enquête sur la sexualité dans le monde arabe*, Paris, Autrement, 2014.



**Abdellah
Taïa**
L'armée du salut

ADAPTÉ AU CINÉMA

L'armée du salut by Abdellah Taïa (Éditions du Seuil).

The long-standing Algerian activist Wassyla Tamzali, born of a Spanish mother and who on 8 March 2012 signed the manifesto of Arab women for dignity and equality with seven other Arab women, denounces the taboos that enchain women and how religious literature has shaped a “Muslim eros” focused on men’s pleasure. However, she acknowledges that this “phallus religion” is not specifically Muslim but is deeply anchored in Mediterranean culture, whether in the south (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) or north (Spain, Italy and, to some extent, France).⁵

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Moreover, the doctor of anthropology of religions and homosexual imam Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, the first French Muslim to marry a man in a religious ceremony, as it says on the back cover of his autobiographical story *Le Coran et la chair*, has attempted to show that from a historical and religious point of view “the homosexuality or femininity of some men were not condemned or rejected violently as such in the early centuries of Islam.”⁶

However, from an anthropological and psychosocial point of view, “the current rise in homophobia in the Arab Muslim world is

due to some extent to the profound denial of a certain expression of femininity. A femininity degraded because of its intrinsic association with a partially guilty passivity, as it is considered a weakness today when some Muslims think, rightly or wrongly, that Islam is being attacked from all sides.”⁷

This socio-political complexity means that the literary, film and artistic creation directly linked to marginal, non-normative, sexual practices, or that directly deals with sexuality outside marriage or far from heterosexual orthodoxy, continues to be quite minimal in Maghrebian cultural production, even less so in the context of the diaporas of these Maghrebian communities on the other side of the Mediterranean. In this respect, Khalid Zekri, professor at the University of Meknes, sets out a series of key questions that can be useful as a starting point for reflection: “How do the ambivalences of desires work in a culture trapped between tradition and modernity as in the Maghreb? What are the manifestations of the new ‘desiring’ subjectivities in the Maghreb and, by extension, in the Arab world?”⁸

In this shifting field of diasporic sexualities and identities, we must acknowledge the importance of Moroccan writers such as Mohamed Leftah, Rachid O.⁹ and, above all, Abdellah Taïa¹⁰, without forgetting the French-Tunisian Eyet-Chékib Djaziri and, in the French-Algerian context, Nina Bouraoui and her exploration of homosexual identity in feminine or the figure of the transsexual woman

5. Tamzali, Wassyla, “Un moment historique calamiteux”, views compiled by Claire Chantier, *L'Express*, 3377, 2016, p. 46.

6. Zahed, Ludovic-Mohamed, *Le Coran et la chair*, Paris, Max Milo, 2012, p. 22.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Zekri, Khalid, “Le ‘genre’ en littérature maghrébine et arabe : Une déconstruction productive”, *Expressions maghrébines*, 16-1, Tulane University, 2017, p. 23.

9. At present two novels by Rachid O. have been translated into Spanish: *Varias vidas*, Madrid, El Tercer Nombre, 2005, and *El niño deslumbrado*, Madrid, El Tercer Nombre, 2007.

10. Within the issue of identity and homosexual desire, Abdellah Taïa (or Abdelá Taia) is the best known Moroccan writer in Spain both in Spanish and Catalan and Basque. See *El Ejército de Salvación*, Irun, Alberdania, 2007; *Una melancolía árabe*, Irun, Alberdania, 2009; *Mi Marruecos*, Barcelona, Cabaret Voltaire, 2010; *El día del rey*, Irun, Alberdania, 2011; and *Infieles*, Barcelona, Cabaret Voltaire, 2014.

Marie-Pierre Pruvot (known as Bambi), born in Algeria and about whom the French filmmaker Sébastien Lifshitz made a documentary film in 2013. This list should be completed with a new generation of writers that left Maghreb to settle in France and are beginning to publish short stories or novels focused on the issues at hand. This is the case of the Moroccan Hicham Tahir and the Algerian Brahim Metiba. On the issues of the status of women and female sexuality linked to prostitution and its social rejection, we could cite the novels by the Moroccan female writers Noufissa Sbaï *L'Amante du Rif* from 2004, freely adapted for the cinema in 2011 by her daughter; the Moroccan filmmaker Narjiss Nejjar; Souad Bahéchar (*Ni fleurs ni couronnes* from 2007); and Saphia Azzeddine (*Confidences à Allah* from 2008).¹¹

Nouri Bouzid and his L'homme de cendres, made in Tunis over 30 years ago, is undoubtedly a milestone. Bouzid places us in the city of Sfax, in a modest setting, and tells the story of Hachemi and Farfat, two friends raped by their boss Ameur when they were adolescents

In the field of artistic creation we could point out the figure of the French-Moroccan Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, who poses a series of challenging and distancing performative strategies of cultural, religious and gender identities.¹²

With respect to film production, non-normative sexualities are at the centre of the concerns of several Maghrebian filmmakers, from the French Tunisian director and militant Nadia El Fani, who addresses the issues

of female bisexuality and homosexuality as well as the power of religion, to the French-Algerian Nadir Moknèche. In *Viva L'aldjérie* from 2004, Moknèche depicts a young homosexual, the son of the protagonist's lover, who tries to survive in a repressive culture and a family in full decomposition. As a pioneer and key figure in this militant cinema we should note the Tunisian filmmaker Nouri Bouzid and his *L'homme de cendres* (1986). This committed film, made in Tunis over 30 years ago, is undoubtedly a milestone. Bouzid places us in the city of Sfax, in a modest setting, and tells the story of Hachemi and Farfat, two friends raped by their boss Ameur when they were adolescents. The consequences of this violent act, which has become a painful secret, are expressed differently by each of the protagonists, and thus we move from the anguish and flight of the former to the rebellion and freedom of the latter. Bouzid is often interested in initiation rites, such as the passage from youth to adulthood, in which the decisive moment of marriage shows the fragility of some male characters, prisoners of a society in which the law of virility prevails. The director also addressed the issue of young gigolos or hustlers who sell their bodies to European tourists in his film *Bezness* (1992). Here sexual relations between Arabs and white Westerners, often older, are seen by young Tunisians as a way of surviving and getting a visa to Europe.

Patricia Caillé, in an excellent article on homosexuality in North African cinema, notes that the relationship between Maghreb and the West "has been displaced from the intensified eroticism, linked to the relations between whites and Arabs, whether Maghrebian or

11. Saphia Azzeddine is a successful writer in France, quite controversial and with an extensive media presence because of her personal "feminist" stance. Some of her novels have been translated into Spanish: *Confesiones a Alá*, Madrid, Demipage, 2011; *Mi padre es mujer de la limpieza*, Madrid, Demipage, 2012; and *El viento en la cara*, Barcelona, Grijalbo, 2017.

12. See Martínez Oliva, Jesús, "Ceci n'est pas une femme musulmane": Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's Daring Defiance of Gender, Religious, and Cultural Identities", *Expressions maghrébines*, 16-1, Tulane University, 2017, pp. 151-168.

French of Maghrebian origin, through the exoticisation of some ethno-racial categories, in the construction of homosexuality in Maghreb or Arab countries, thereby creating a new questioning of the construction of crossed gazes between the Maghreb and the West.”¹³ This new identity foundation often occurs in the context of a temporary return to the country of origin. This is the case of the film *Le fil* (2010) by the Tunisian filmmaker Mehdi Ben Attia. It is a French-Belgian production subsidised by the government of Tunisia on the condition that it was not screened in this country. The film relies on two very powerful actors: the Italian-Tunisian Claudia Cardinale, who was born and spent her adolescence in Tunis, and the French actor of Algerian origin Salim Kechiouche, who embodies the prototype of the Arab man with strong sexual prowess and plays the role of Bilal, the gardener, who has just returned to Tunisia.

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Despite a somewhat stereotyped and idealised vision that tends to Orientalism, the film introduces us to a social fiction about the Tunisian middle class, infrequent in the cinema of this country. However, this militant film, according to the director, distances itself from the social criticism that characterises Tunisian cinema by merging the psychic and social dimensions. The title *Le fil* is a metaphor for

the bonds to the origins and for the return of an only son, Malik, to his mother’s house in Tunis, after a long stay in France. Although she constantly repeats that he is free, this invasive mother, who has also felt excluded for being Christian and having married a Muslim, tries to get him to integrate into upper Tunisian society by organising meetings with women that he rejects. Malik, played by the French-Indian actor Antonin Stahly, closes himself in his own silence unable to drive transformation of the social view of homosexuality and participating in furtive sexual practices and encounters until he is discovered by his mother in the arms of the gardener Bilal.

Homosexuality is therefore experienced as a paralysing secret in a middle class society that, nevertheless, seems to adapt quite well, seeking strategies of protection and concealment guided by double standards. The most important obstacle would therefore be the self-censorship born out of the concern to conform to the social order. As Caillé notes, the issue of difference in social class between the two lovers will be superimposed on the sexual dimension as this is in fact the major obstacle between the two protagonists. In this respect, to some extent the class difference would replace the man/woman difference in a heterosexual relationship.

To conclude, we would like to highlight that the cultural production and research that deal directly with the issue of so-called marginal or non-normative sexualities in Africa in general and the Maghreb in particular and are committed to the deconstruction of a derogatory image of women and against homophobia or transphobia are rare. In this respect, I will quote the words of Olivier Barlet, editor-in-chief of the prestigious journal *Africultures*,

13. Caillé, Patricia, «Homosexualité dans les cinémas d’Afrique du Nord», *Africultures. Homosexualités en Afrique*, 96, 2013, p. 99.



which in 2013 finally devoted an issue to “Homosexualities in Africa”: “The explicit or implicit hostility to those who feel love or have sexual preferences for individuals of the

same sex and/or express a gender different from that which was assigned to their sex at birth is a form of ostracism and a crime against humanity.”¹⁴

14. Barlet, Olivier, “Privilégier la pensée”, *Africultures. Homosexualités en Afrique*, 96, 2013, p. 3.

