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**Narratives of exile and return: Francophone
women's identities in the aftermath of the 2011
Tunisian revolution**

NICOLA PEARSON, BA (Hons)

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We have become weightless- as light as our dwellings in distant winds.

We have, both of us, befriended the strange beings in the clouds.

We have both been freed from the gravity of the land of identity.

What shall we do?

What shall we do without exile

and long nights of gazing at the water?

~ Mahmoud Darwish

Introduction

On 14th January 2011, President Ben Ali was forced to flee Tunis after twenty-three years in power. The revolution began in December 2010 with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young fruit-seller who was acting in protest against the repressive and corrupt regime. The overthrow of the dictatorship went on to influence uprisings across the Arab world, and these became known in the West as the 'Arab Spring'. Since 2011 Tunisia has witnessed a surge in creative production, and the role of art itself has been an important feature of the country's political revolution.¹ This thesis seeks to open up a new field by focusing on the literary output of two female travel writers of Tunisian origin, Colette Fellous and Dora Latiri, who both produced works of travel literature based on their journeys back to their homeland in the wake of the revolution.

Fellous and Latiri have spent most of their adult lives living in Europe, having been exiled from Tunisia when they were young women. In Latiri's *Un amour de tn: Carnet d'un retour au pays natal après la révolution*², photographs are woven into a fragmented and very personal narrative which highlights not only visions of contemporary Tunisia, but

¹ See Charles Tripp's talk: 'Culture, Creativity and Non-Violence in the Arab Spring', delivered on 1 May 2012 at the University of East London, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening-charles-tripp/event-culture-creativity-and-non-violence-london-may-1st>> [Article accessed 31/01/16].

² Dora Latiri, *Un amour de tn: Carnet d'un retour au pays natal après la révolution* (Elyzad, 2013). All subsequent references to this title refer to this edition.

also the narrator's difficult memories of her childhood. *La Préparation de la vie*³ by Fellous, similarly charts the narrator's journey back to post-revolutionary Tunisia and brings to light the little-known phenomenon of the exile of Jewish communities in Tunisia following the Arab-Israeli Six Day War in 1967. Both writers are haunted by feelings of dislocation from Tunisia yet seem compelled to keep returning to it.

Un amour de tn is Latiri's first published literary work, yet she has focused some of her recent academic research on the life-writing of Fellous, along with the history of the Jewish minorities in Tunisia. This direct link between the writers, along with the fact that they are both returning to their homeland in the wake of the revolution and working with text and image, provides an interesting basis on which to analyse them in a comparative framework. The literature of these writers also has an intricate relationship with many contemporary debates related to cultural identity. I will draw on postcolonial theory to explore and compare the different ways in which Fellous and Latiri represent their journeys back to Tunisia, analysing how the genre of the travel narrative incorporating photos enables them to articulate their complex relationships to it as their homeland and their identities as Tunisian women.

In an effort to address this question I will firstly consider both writers' presentation of their exile from the homeland. In the first chapter

³ Colette Fellous, *La Préparation de la vie* (Paris : Gallimard, 2014). All subsequent references to this title refer to this edition.

I will explore the historical factors that influenced their decisions to leave Tunisia. In reference to their separation from their birth country, both writers personify Tunisia as a 'lover'. I will analyse their use of this metaphor and the ways in which it might help them to explore and convey their difficult and complex emotional relationships to country. I will discuss the extent to which both writers' narratives are marked by a sense of rupture from the homeland and also explore the degree to which they use their narratives as a way of revisiting their past and coming to terms with their exiled identities.

The second chapter will build on the previous one by analysing the extent to which, in spite of their exiled identities, both writers reconnect to a sense of national identity at this transformative moment in their birth country's history. I will discuss the extent to which the 2011 revolution may have opened up a space for the two writers to renegotiate a sense of national identity and to partake in debates of national political importance.

Following the country's independence from France in 1956, the government of the postcolonial nation state, led by President Bourguiba, wished to foster a sense of nationalism that would unite citizens around a fixed concept of Tunisian identity. As in many other postcolonial nation states, nationalism was important in Tunisia in the post-independent era as the country sought to define itself as an autonomous nation that had its own culture and language. The decision to promote Arabic as the official language and Islam as the official religion stemmed from a desire to unite

Tunisians around an Arab identity that was distinct from that of the former French colonial authority. The first article of the 1959 constitution reads : ‘La Tunisie est un État libre, indépendant et souverain, l’Islam est sa religion, l’arabe sa langue et la République son régime’.⁴ In chapter three I will therefore discuss the ways in which both authors’ identities, constructed on the margins of postcolonial Tunisia, may be seen to challenge these dominant narratives about Tunisian identity. Drawing on the theory of syncretic identity, I will discuss the extent to which Fellous and Latiri articulate plural and dynamic identities which are made up of many different cultural components. I will also explore the degree to which they embrace and celebrate their arguably multivalent identities.

Building on the previous chapter, chapter four will discuss the significance of gender in both authors’ articulations of their syncretic identities. I will discuss the extent to which they challenge traditional views about gender in Tunisian society, exploring how they represent their girlhoods in Tunisia and what life was like for them prior to their exiles. Furthermore, at the time that these works were published, the post-revolutionary Ennahdha government was attempting to curb the rights of Tunisian women by changing the constitution to say that women are complementary to men.⁵ I will therefore evaluate the extent to which

⁴ See the full text on the website of the Imprimerie Officielle de la République Tunisienne, <http://www.iort.gov.tn/WD120AWP/WD120Awp.exe/CTX_15500-2-uyFNNWvhpG/ConstitutionAncien/SYNC_-718815437> [accessed 13/05/2016].

⁵ Cited in: Maaïke Voorhoeve, ‘Women’s rights in the new Tunisian constitution’, *OpenDemocracy*, 11 March 2014, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/maaike-voorhoeve/women%e2%80%99s-rights-in-new-tunisian-constitution>> [accessed on 21/01/2016]

Latiri and Fellous are engaging with contemporary political discourse and their identities as Tunisian women.

While a limited number of scholars have begun to address the literary output of Fellous (e.g. Robert Watson, Guy Dugas, Samia Kassab-Charfi, Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, Ewa Tartakowsky and Latiri herself), *La Préparation de la vie* is yet to be discussed critically. Nina Wardleworth has recently published an article which briefly engages with Latiri's *Un amour de tn*, however her analysis is limited to a short article which focuses on the way in which it can be read as a document of the revolutionary moment. As such, scholars have yet to engage with the complex and shifting relationship between the narrator and her host country.⁶

Furthermore, in recent decades there have been important evolutions in the genre of 'photo-biography' in French and Francophone studies. Contemporary theorists have been contributing to debates on this genre. For example, Fabien Arribert-Narce, Akane Kawakami, Jan Baetens, Andy Stafford and Ari J. Blatt. My thesis seeks to contribute to this existing field, while bringing it together with that of postcolonial studies. Indeed, scholarship has gone a long way in applying postcolonial theory to literature, for example in the work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Recent studies by Siobhan Shilton have also applied these theories to Tunisian visual art and the 'Arab Spring'. My thesis seeks to

⁶ Nina Wardleworth, 'The Roman Maghrébin in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 20, 1 (2016), 141-149.

break new ground by bringing these perspectives together to document the postcolonial histories that are contained in two untapped works of intermedial Tunisian travel narratives.⁷

Francophone literature from Tunisia has largely been ignored by scholars within the field of French studies, and where scholars do address the country's francophone literary output, they tend to ignore the contribution made by women.⁸ Furthermore, as Andrew Hussey, states, 'Tunisia has undoubtedly been the most visited yet least known of all the countries in French-speaking North Africa.'⁹ My thesis will be the first detailed study focusing on contemporary Tunisian women's life writing written in French. The aim of this dissertation is to illuminate the identity dilemmas that arose out of the specific problems that Fellous and Latiri encountered when they responded to their exile from Tunisia. We need narrative- the very process of putting a story together- to make identity meaningful and comprehensible. By addressing these two recent life-narratives that have come out of the immediate wake of the 2011 revolution, we can begin to map the ways in which Tunisian women, writing from the margins of the Tunisian nation, are contributing to debates about identity at this pivotal moment in the country's history.

⁷ See: Siobhan Shilton, 'Art and the 'Arab Spring': Aesthetics of Revolution in Contemporary Tunisia', *French Cultural Studies*, 24 (2013), 129-45.

⁸ For example, Belinda Jack usefully outlines the history of Francophone writing from Tunisia, however her summary only references one female writer, Hélé Beji, thereby ignoring the important contribution made by female writers to the francophone Tunisian literary scene. See: Belinda Jack, *Francophone literatures: an introductory survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.204.

⁹ Andrew Hussey, 'Tunisia: Order and Disorder', *Francosphères*, vol 4, no. 2 (2015), 125-139 (p.125).

Chapter 1:

Exiled Identities

In his essay 'Reflections on Exile', Edward Said writes that exile 'is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place'.¹⁰ He claims that the condition 'is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place' and that 'what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both'.¹¹ Historically, the idea of exile has denoted political banishment, however the concept has evolved to include different types of experiences and rifts between citizens and their homelands which are not only physical but also mental. Unlike expatriation, which is usually a voluntary relocation, we can think of exile as an involuntary separation marked by narratives of displacement, solitude and loss.

Karla Zepeda argues that exiled individuals 'maintain an emotional and psychological connection to the native land, but it is an ambiguous relationship'.¹² In their narratives of return to Tunisia, Latiri and Fellous

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p.137.

¹¹ Said, *Reflections on Exile*, p.149.

¹² Karla P. Zepeda, *Currents in Comparative Romance Languages: Exile and Identity in Autobiographies of Twentieth-Century Spanish Women* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), p.9.

arguably explore the 'unhealable rift' and sense of loss inherent to their bonds with their native land. In this chapter I will explore the ways in which they represent their ambivalent relationships to their homeland and discuss the degree to which they articulate 'exiled' identities. Do both writers suggest that they left Tunisia involuntarily and, if so, how do they express their separation from the homeland? To what extent does the act of photography help them to convey their sense of exile? Does the camera reinforce the separation and sense of exile, acting as a barrier between the authors and the homeland, or does it facilitate a reconnection with the prohibited spaces of the 'lost home'?

Exiled individuals often have problematic relationships to the past and many are haunted by difficult memories of their separation from the homeland. Fellous and Latiri's narratives may illustrate how self-writing can be employed as a therapy. The ways in which they translate their own subjective experiences of exile into pieces of literature arguably shows how one might 'write through' the past and come to terms with the severance from the homeland. As Theodor Adorno puts it in his memorable metaphor of exile: 'In his text, the writer sets up house [...]. For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live'.¹³ Similarly, Michael Seidel states that 'the expression of the desire for home becomes a substitute for home.'¹⁴ I will therefore evaluate the extent to which Fellous and Latiri use their narratives as sites of self-

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia, Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: N.B.L, 1974), p.87.

¹⁴ Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), p.11.

negotiation in which they revisit their separation from their homeland and attempt to make sense of their exiled identities.

Exiled identity in 'Un amour de tn'

Early on in the text, in the third chapter, Latiri writes that her family banished her for having a lover who was not Tunisian: 'Nous avons été bannies par 2 aussi, les 2 sœurs à avoir exogamé, c'est peut-être pour ça que c'était comme si nous étions mortes? Des années plus tard, un cousin chéri me dit on ne pouvait pas demander de tes nouvelles je me demandais ce que tu avais fait' (pp. 21-22). The use of the term 'exogamé' indicates that the author and her sister both had romantic relationships outside of their culture, however Latiri initially provides no further detail about the circumstances of the banishment. Later we learn that she had a lover who was not Tunisian and that her father whipped her after intercepting one of his love-letters (pp. 51-52). Latiri recalls these painful memories of physical violence in the narrative: 'Je tombe en essayant de fuir, sa rage tombe. Sous la douche mes cuisses sont zébrées de bleu, ça saigne par endroits' (p.51). In reference to her separation from Tunisia, she says: 'Je suis retournée à Londres pour y vivre, pour fuir une histoire qui se passait mal, pour commencer une autre histoire' (pp.100-101). In a recent interview that I conducted with the author, she commented on the circumstances of this exile:

J'ai été marginalisée parce que je me suis mariée hors des normes de la tradition. C'est-à-dire, je me suis mariée deux fois, une fois

avec un chrétien libanais et une fois avec un anglais. Chaque fois, ça a été suivi par des rejets, par une espèce de mort symbolique, mort sociale, mort familiale. C'était très douloureux pour moi.¹⁵

In *Un amour de tn*, Latiri explores these emotions related to her exile by referencing themes of familial rejection in Francois Truffaut's iconic new-wave film *Les 400 coups* (pp. 84-85).¹⁶ Truffaut's young protagonist, Antoine Doinel, has a turbulent relationship with his mother and stepfather. When he is sent to a correction centre for troubled youths, his mother visits to tell him that she will not accept him back into the family because he is a troublemaker and his stepfather no longer cares for him. Antoine is visibly afflicted by his mother's rejection of him and, in the final scene of the film, we see him escaping from the centre and running towards the sea. Latiri includes a photograph of this final scene which is displayed on her laptop (p.85). Significantly, she states: 'The difficult relation with the mother in the autobiographical film is important to me. I had a difficult relation with my mother and it is finding its way into my writing.'¹⁷ The link between Truffaut, Latiri and Antoine is further made explicit in the final passage of the chapter in which Latiri states: 'Nous regardons dans les yeux d'Antoine Doinel...Jean-Pierre Léaud a pris le visage de Truffaut... Je sais que j'ai ce visage aussi' (p.84). By invoking

¹⁵ Dora Latiri, interview with the author (17/06/2016). Interview conducted on Skype in English and French.

¹⁶ Sue Harris argues that the mother figure in the film is 'a fictional construct whose character, behavior and rejection of her son are rooted in the young filmmaker's own childhood experiences.' See: Sue Harris, "Lives out of sequence": maternal identity in François Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* (1959) and Claude Miller's *La Petite Voleuse*, *French Cultural Studies*, 14 (1988), 299-309 (p.299).

¹⁷ Interview with the author (17/06/2016).

Truffaut's emotive final scene, and comparing her own face to that of Antoine, Latiri gestures to the fact that she was similarly rejected from her family and forced to leave home. In this way, she evokes the uprootedness and instability that was at the origin of her exiled identity. Through her use of the present tense in the final line, 'j'ai ce visage aussi', Latiri indicates that the sense of banishment and rejection is not only a memory; it still forms a core part of her identity.

Latiri's use of photography also helps to convey a certain detachment of the author from her homeland. For example, the image of the red slip drying on the balcony (p.55) is taken from behind a window. Latiri took this photograph when she visited the apartment block in which her family friend, Khemayiss, lives. The window panes are dirty, preventing the camera from focusing on the slip, and the wooden frames of the window are also shaped like a cross, creating a further barrier between the viewer and the scene beyond. Latiri writes that some old women who live in the apartment block were unhappy about her taking photos of their building (p.59). The reference to the hostile reception that she received and the framing of the photograph contribute to a sense of distance between the author and her native land. Furthermore, in the image of the market (p.37), Latiri chose to take the photograph from behind an open door. Whereas the market is in the light, the photographer is standing in the shadows, reinforcing the separation of the photographer from the scene that she depicts. Both of these photographs can be read in relation to Said's comment that exile is 'a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal

habitation.’¹⁸ Latiri’s use of imagery here suggests her otherness and separateness from scenes of everyday local life in Tunisia.

In addition, Latiri includes a photograph of herself as a child which acts as a catalyst for her to reflect on the time in her life before the exile (pp.44-45). The image, depicting Latiri smiling happily at a family birthday, gestures to a time before the banishment and the rupture from both her family and her homeland. Indeed, in the text which follows the photograph, Latiri remembers a happy memory when she had felt a close bond with her father. He had woken her up late one night to show her a newly-born gazelle. Indeed, *Un amour de tn* is saturated with memories which emerge through a stream-of-consciousness style narrative. The title of the work, *Un amour de tn*, can be read as an intertextual nod to Marcel Proust’s *Un amour de Swann*.¹⁹ In this canonical work of French literature, Proust explores the idea that involuntary memories, or flashbacks, contain the essence of the past. This intertextual reference suggests that she is also meditating on the connection between her memories and the past. Photographs of familiar places in Tunisia, and also ones from her childhood, are woven into the narrative and act as catalysts for the narrator to meditate on her exile.

Latiri’s narrative weaves sinuously between the memories of the past and her present day reality, and this demonstrates the ability of the past to impose on the present through memory. Just as there is no clean

¹⁸ Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 140.

¹⁹ Marcel Proust, *Un amour de Swann* (Paris : Gallimard, 1954).

rupture between the past and the present in the narrative, Zepeda argues that 'well-defined geographic borders fail to produce a clean rupture' for exiled people.²⁰ Furthermore, according to Michael Ugarte, 'The here of one in exile persistently recalls the space of a there, and vice versa. The result is an existence which resides somewhere between now and then, here and elsewhere.'²¹ Latiri's first chapter shows how she is mentally travelling between the adopted country and the imagined homeland. The narrator describes how she is in Lewes in the UK and is looking at the rain on the river Ouse, a photograph of which is included on the following page (11). In the shape of the river, she recognises 'la ligne du littoral de la terre natale' (10). She then proceeds to personify the image, describing how the sea is 'un sein abondant' and the coastline 'le ventre gravide' (10). With the geography of the homeland metamorphosing into that of the host-country in the imagination of the author, we can see how the native land is ever-present in her mind. Furthermore, by comparing the homeland to a pregnant womb, the author suggests that she has a maternal bond to Tunisia.

As Zepeda writes, the geographical spaces of the homeland and the host country 'coexist and transpose continually in everyday being' in the minds of forced expatriates.²² This relates to what Said describes as the 'fusion of time (past and present) and space (homeland and adopted land)'

²⁰ Zepeda, *Exile and Identity in Autobiographies*, p.9.

²¹ Michael Ugarte, *Shifting Ground: Spanish Civil War Exile Literature* (Durham: Duke UP, 1989), p.22.

²² Zepeda, *Exile and Identity in Autobiographies*, p.9.

in the exilic experience, with life in the host country inevitably occurring 'against the memory of these things in another environment. Both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.'²³ As such, the author's expression of her subjective experience is characteristic of the type of exiled identity to which Said, Ugarte and Zepeda refer.

Latiri's perception of the homeland in the image of the adopted land is reminiscent of an anecdote concerning Aimé Césaire and which is linked to his canonical poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. While still a student in Paris in 1935, Césaire spent some time at a friend's house in the former Yugoslavia. He remembers looking out at an island that he later learned was named 'Martinska'. Like his homeland Martinique, this means St Martin's Island. As Mireille Rosello notes, 'Césaire interpreted the coincidence as a sign that wherever he went, he found Martinique.'²⁴ *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* was first published in 1939 and Martin Munro has argued that the poem is a 'document of grief related to return'.²⁵ Latiri's subtitle, 'Carnet photographique d'un retour au pays natal après la révolution', is an intertextual nod to Césaire. The similarity between the subtitle and the title of Césaire's poem, and also between Latiri's opening chapter and the anecdote, suggests that the author

²³ Said, *Reflections on Exile*, p.146.

²⁴ Mireille Rosello, 'Introduction' in Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (Tartet: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), 9-68 (p.30).

²⁵ Martin Munro, 'Exile, Return and Mourning in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and Dany Laferrière's *L'Enigme du retour*', *Irish Journal of French Studies*, Vol 13, 2013, 87-109 (p.87).

identifies strongly with Césaire's poem and his similarly complex relationship to his homeland in a situation of exile.

Although Latiri's title, *Un amour de tn*, could refer to a real person, a lover, there is arguably a correspondence between the figure of the lover and the homeland itself. The author's working translation of the title into English is 'Tn in love'²⁶, suggesting that the country is itself in love. She also states : 'C'est un rendez-vous d'amour, tn et moi, moi et tn' (p.16) and describes her love for her homeland when she arrives in the airport of Tunis : 'j'ai commencé à trembler dès que j'ai respiré l'air de tn... *voilà, tu vois ce que ça fait l'amour du pays...*' (p.16). She furthermore articulates the frustration that she feels as a result of her relationship with 'l'amour de tn' : 'J'ai mal à l'amour de tn qui n'appelle pas, ne fait pas signe, ne dit plus rien, je suis ébranlée...' (p.98). I argue that the relationship between Latiri and the elusive figure of 'l'amour de tn' should be read as an allegory for her ambiguous relationship with Tunisia. It is employed by the author as a means to convey the complex feelings she associates with her exile: separation, rejection and longing for the homeland. She also suggests that she experiences a degree of guilt for having this relationship, referring to a scene in which she is taking a photo and her taxi driver has driven down the street with all her belongings. She remembers thinking: 'c'est bien moi de tenter de drôles d'expériences ordaliques comme ça, peut-être pour me punir de l'amour de tn' (p.97). If 'l'amour de tn' is a reference to her bond

²⁶ The working title for the English translation of the text is indicated here: <<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/study/humanities/news/a-photographic-journey>> [accessed 18/05/2016].

with the country itself, we can infer that her guilt is a consequence of maintaining a relationship with a homeland which had previously banished her. By exploring her own identity as a 'lover' of her native land, she is able to articulate the specificity of her exilic condition, which shifts between emotions of love, frustration and guilt.

Latiri arguably uses her narrative as a way of coming to terms with these complex emotions. In the penultimate chapter, 'Ma très chère sœur', she describes a scene in which she visits the local synagogue and meets with Daniel, a rabbi. She asks him to pray for her family and, while he is doing so, she says that she secretly prays for 'l'amour de tn'. After her visit to the synagogue, she visits the Catholic church and says she was very moved when she realised that the title of the service was 'the mysteries of separation and return' (pp.109-110). Sister Albina invites her to write down the names of her loved ones for the prayers and Latiri gives her a piece of paper with the name of 'l'amour de tn'. She also writes her own name in Arabic (p.110). In an earlier chapter, Latiri tells us that her middle name in Arabic is Aïda: 'C'est un prénom qui signifie en fête, joyeux, ça veut dire aussi qui revient, parce que les fêtes sont cycliques' (pp.83-84). 'Return' therefore forms a part of her name and, by choosing to write her name in Arabic, the author suggests that she identifies with a cyclical and dynamic identity. She also gestures to the fact that the act of return to Tunisia is deeply connected to her sense of identity. The prayers for the members of her family, 'l'amour de tn' and herself, although ambiguous, can be read as a final symbolic act in which Latiri suggests that she has, or

is trying to, come to terms with her problematic relationship with both her family and her homeland.

Exiled identity in 'La préparation de la vie'

Fellous' autobiographical travel narrative is not only a personal story of exile but also a collective one as she engages with the departure of Tunisia's Jewish communities. In a period bookended by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 Six Days War, Jews in Tunisia experienced heightened levels of marginalisation and discrimination. As a result, the vast majority left Tunisia to settle in either France or Israel.²⁷ Indeed, the departure of the French authorities in 1956 left the Jewish population in an uncertain position in Tunisian society. Although the Jewish population had benefited from certain privileges while the country was under French rule from 1881 until 1956, it suffered structural discrimination after Tunisia became independent. In the previously mentioned first article of the 1959 constitution, Jews were written out of the national narrative of Tunisian identity and did not have a clearly defined space within Tunisian society. Furthermore, when the French left, many Jews were also encouraged to leave. As Robert Watson remarks:

The Jews' vertical alliances with colonial administration and even more importantly with the métropole had come to replace traditional horizontal ties with Muslims. The Jewish investment in

²⁷ Paul Sebag, *Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie: Des origines à nos jours* (Paris : Harmattan, 1991), p.259.

serving French power during the Protectorate became a liability, even a mark of disloyalty, after independence.²⁸

In 1961, France's refusal to evacuate its soldiers from its strategic naval base in Bizerte caused a deadly battle and, as Colette Zytnicki remarks, this led to further tensions within Tunisian society as many Jews were accused of giving assistance to the French troops.²⁹ The tension between Jews and Muslims in Tunisia was further exacerbated by the conflict in Israel and Palestine.³⁰ During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, there were violent riots in the streets with attacks on Jewish shops and the Grande Synagogue in Tunis, events which the young Fellous witnessed from the window of her family's home. Watson argues that 'these traumatic events signaled the end of the long-standing Jewish presence in Tunisia and the beginning of a new diaspora. For Fellous and her co-religionists, the question of where they belonged and who they were became unavoidable.'³¹

Fellous uses her life-writing as a way of engaging with the Jewish exile and her own place within it. Firstly, she explores the way in which the 1961 conflict between the French and Tunisians at Bizerte contributed to her own story of exile. The author remembers that she was eleven years old at the time of the battle and that, in the summer of 1961, she had

²⁸ Robert Watson, 'Cities of Origin, Cities of Exile: Maghrebi Jewish Diasporic Life-Writing in French, 1985-2011', Unpublished doctoral thesis, Vanderbilt University (2012), (p.xl)

²⁹ Colette Zytnicki, 'Les juifs de Tunisie à l'heure des choix', *La Tunisie mosaïque : Diasporas, cosmopolitisme, archéologies de l'identité*. Ed. Jacques Alexandropolous and Patrick Cabanel (Toulouse : Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2000) 157-169, p.166.

³⁰ Richard Ayoun, 'L'exil des Juifs d'Afrique du Nord à l'époque contemporaine', *Insaniyat*, 31 (2006), 90-105 (p.97).

³¹ Robert Watson, *Cities of Origin, Cities of Exile* (p.viii).

heard her neighbour discussing the traumatic events: ‘...les hommes mouraient le long de la route, il disait que c’était la dernière guerre avec la France mais que c’était sanglant, pas beau à voir’ (p.115). As a result of this battle, all Fellous’ school friends and their families began to leave Tunisia:

Le jour de la rentrée, on avait remarqué que les hirondelles s’étaient rassemblées sur les fils électriques pour quitter le pays, mais étaient parties aussi précipitamment toutes mes petites amies avec leurs familles. Les Schneider, les Bailly, les Grillo. Elles avaient disparu de la cour de récréation... (p.116)

The author remembers that she did not understand what was happening at the time because ‘personne ne nous avait rien expliqué’ (p.116). The narrative shows how the process of exile was painful for the young Fellous who did not comprehend the complex implications of being a Jew in Tunisia at this time. The sadness of this key moment in her childhood is further evoked in an image of some swallows included much earlier in the text and which echoes the above passage (p.71). Fellous and Latiri both incorporate images of swallows into their narratives. Swallows have a migratory instinct and travel long distances; before they begin their long journeys, they can be observed waiting on wires for the signal to leave. As such, the metaphor of the swallow echoes the identities of Fellous and Latiri. Like the swallows, both writers also travel between different geographical spaces with no fixed sites of belonging.



Image 1 : *Un amour de tn* (p.7)



Image 2 : *La Préparation de la Vie* (p.71)

Fellous' image of swallows is in fact a photograph of a drawing published in a children's 'cahier' entitled *Leçons de choses, Cours élémentaire*. We know that the picture came from this original source because Fellous states where she found the image in the *Crédits Photographiques* section at the back of the book (p.205). In the original source, which I was able to find online and which is reproduced below, there is some accompanying text which reads:

Souvenez-vous. Au mois de juillet pouviez-vous jouer dehors plus tard que maintenant ? Faisait-il plus chaud ? Étiez-vous habillé de la même façon ? Observez autour de vous. Voyez-vous encore des hirondelles?³²

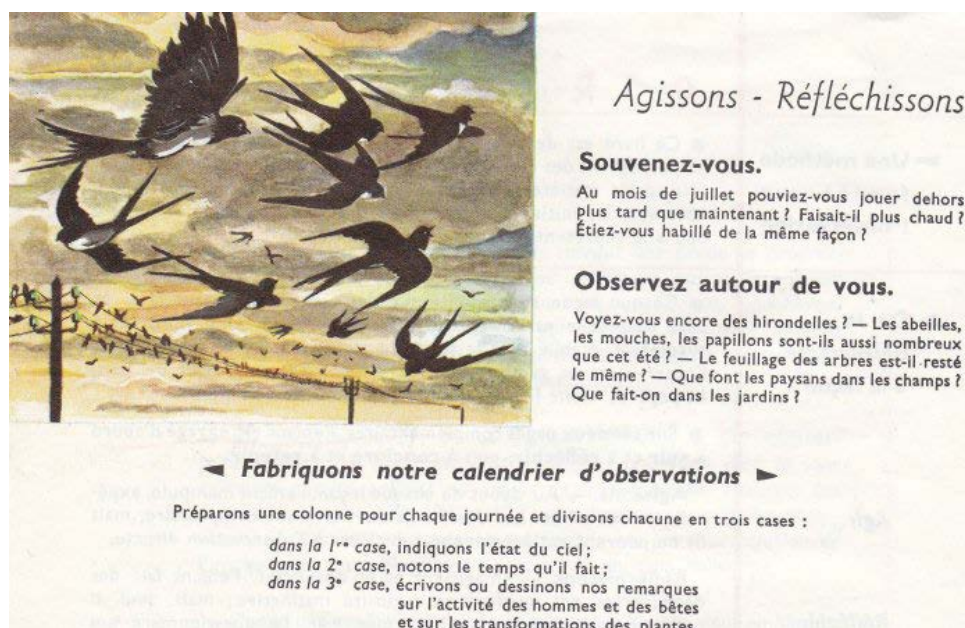


Image 3: *Leçons de choses* (p.2)

³² Marcel Orieux and Michael Everaere, *Leçons de choses, Cours élémentaire* (Paris : Classiques Hachette, 1952), p.2. Accessible here : https://3.bp.blogspot.com/-R_9BSzPruGY/T6GLPBHDwI/AAAAAAAAADmI/1wCeEEQX9w/s1600/page+002.jpg [accessed 01/06/2016].

As such, the image reproduced in Fellous' narrative is imbued with irony as the author's memories of her summer in 1961 clearly do not share the same innocence of the passage in the children's 'cahier'. In fact, Fellous describes a very different childhood summer :

Les vacances s'étaient prolongées jusqu'à la fin du mois d'octobre mais elles avaient perdu leur lumière et leur insouciance, les grains de raisin avaient bruni et s'étaient amollis, les grenades qu'on attendait tous les ans avec grande impatience nous étaient devenues indifférentes...tout était incertain, on commençait à grelotter et ce n'était pas normal de grelotter dans ce paysage d'été.
(p.116)

The image of the swallows thus possesses a dual sense of loss: the loss of her 'petites amies avec leurs familles', but also the loss of her childhood 'insouciance' (p.116), thereby marking the beginning of the author's awareness of her own exiled identity.

In a swift temporal leap from 1961 to 1967, the narrator proceeds to describe the tragic events which finally forced her own family to leave Tunisia. It is significant that the narrator does not start a new paragraph or chapter to describe these events. By combining her experiences of 1961 with those of 1967 in the same paragraph, she suggests these two historical events are linked in the process of her own exile. In 1967, the year of the Arab-Israeli war, she witnessed angry attacks on Tunis' Grande Synagogue from her bedroom window:

...la foule avait scandé mort aux juifs et, en fermant les persiennes, en une secousse, j'ai vu la colère, la haine et la menace monter jusqu'à nos visages stupéfaits... J'ai vu les yeux brûlants d'un homme se poser brutalement dans les miens, avec sa main qui montrait son cou pour me dire que c'était par là qu'il nous ferait disparaître... (p.116)

As a result of this violence she writes :

C'est là que j'ai compris, en quelques secondes, que j'étais une étrangère dans ce pays. Ce pays que je croyais être le mien. Et j'ai préféré regarder ailleurs, vers les livres, la philosophie, le cinéma, la danse, l'amour. Bientôt Paris, bientôt la liberté et bientôt très loin d'ici. Il valait mieux oublier ce que j'avais vu entre les lattes de bois, il était temps de partir et de préparer enfin ma vie, ma vraie vie (p.117).

She describes how the Jewish families felt forced to leave due to the unbearable hostility they experienced, 'Trop de tracasseries, de non-dits, de tensions, d'humiliations souterraines', and the final necessity of departure: 'maintenant il faut partir' (p.150).

Fellous furthermore remembers the pain that she experienced when she realised that her family, like more than one hundred other Jewish families leaving Tunisia in exile, had been the victim of a crook named 'M. Osanna' whose 'escroqueries étaient célèbres' (p.150). She remembers that her father had paid 'une très grosse somme' for the family's furniture and other belongings to be sent from their home in

Tunisia to Paris. As it had been illegal for the Jewish people to take their goods with them, Mr Osanna had made a business out of pretending to facilitate 'le départ de toutes ces familles qui n'avaient pas le droit de sortir leurs biens de Tunisie et qui savaient que leur avenir n'était plus dans ce pays.' (p.150) The narrator remembers that, while waiting with her father at the Gare de Lyon in Paris, she pinched her cheeks to stop herself from crying when she understood that the family's goods were never going to arrive. She describes the pain of this moment when the family begins to realise the full extent of their exiled condition : 'Mon père tenait son cœur comme s'il allait se détacher de lui et essayait de se calmer, je ne trouvais aucun mot pour le rassurer, la réalité était si cruelle...' (p.151).

In a self-conscious narrative style which draws attention to its own construction, Fellous writes : 'En racontant cette scène, je ne peux pas m'empêcher de retrouver la crainte qu'avait Barthes de trop dire, de commenter, de faire du sentiment, de tomber dans le ridicule, la facilité, le babil'(pp.151-152). Although she believes Barthes would have encouraged her to 'suggérer la scène... c'est-à-dire raconter uniquement ses grands traits' (p.152), Fellous poses an important question :

Mais comment écrire sans faire face à ces moments qui restent intacts dans la mémoire parce que justement ils portent une émotion qui a perdu son nom mais qui raconte en accéléré une blessure et une histoire collective qui courent sur des années et des siècles (p.152) ?

She suggests there are times when autobiographical literature has to be frank and direct as the writer must address the painful memories which torment her. The use of the word 'blessure' also conveys the pain of the experience which continues into the present moment, unresolved and unhealed. Her free-floating narrative voice, never anchored in one time or one place, allows her to give an experiential account of the departure of the Jewish communities and to articulate a very personal story of exile which is also bound up in her identity. Furthermore, just as Adorno writes that the text can be like a 'house' or 'home' for the exiled writer, Fellous states that her writing is like a room: 'Les absents, les disparus, les introuvables. Ils seraient tous là, conjugués au présent, dans la chambre du livre, tous retrouvés' (p.155). In this sense, her writing project is a way for her to explore her exiled identity and to create a space in which she can 'prolonger les traces' (p.148) of those who have been erased by the history books: 'Je me devais de le faire, pour que notre présence ne disparaisse pas tout à fait, les manuels d'histoire nous avaient déjà effacés' (p.117).

Fellous writes that she would like to 'recueillir tous les gestes furtifs qui ont déclenché de grandes ruptures amoureuses, de grandes séparations, de grands départs' (p.162) and her narrative can be read as an attempt to capture and work through some of the key moments which contributed to her own separation and exile. The listing in this sentence also implies that, for the author, there is a correspondence between the end of a love affair and an important departure or separation. Like Latiri, Fellous suggests that her exiled identity is similar to that of a lover who has experienced a break up. For example, she says: 'A chaque voyage, je

me dis que c'est fini, que je ne reviendrai plus. Et je reviens toujours. C'est plus puissant qu'un amour' (p.122). She also states that returning to her house in Tunisia is like rediscovering 'un amour clandestin' (p.124). The use of the adjective 'clandestin' here suggests that she feels a sense of guilt about her continued attachment to Tunisia and her return trips home. Through invoking language usually associated with a romantic relationship, Fellous articulates the ambiguity of her bond to Tunisia and the sense of guilt inherent in this relationship. We can infer that Latiri, like Fellous, feels a sense of obligation to reject the country which has rejected her and her family. Although the author suggests that she has thought about trying to separate herself definitively from her homeland when she asks herself '...je vais peut-être me séparer vraiment de ce pays, le quitter, ne plus jamais y revenir?' (p.78), she implies that she is unable to separate her identity from her birth country: 'C'était ma terre de naissance, je l'aimais à même le corps' (p.54). She also expresses her fear about losing her connection to Tunisia when she says 'Quand on aime, on se dit toujours que c'est peut-être la dernière fois' (p.78).

Indeed, although it seems that Fellous had been perfectly set up for a life in France, her narrative suggests she is unable to separate herself fully from her homeland. On the surface, the narrative suggests that she was able to turn towards France easily as she had received a French education in Tunisia. She attended a French lycée in Tunis, the Lycée Carnot (p.90), and French is her mother tongue. This education system was a product of the former colonial system and her parents' decision to give her such an education further suggests the strong cultural ties

between the Jewish community and the former coloniser. However, the narrator seeks out psychological help in Paris because she claims that she has developed difficult relationship with French: 'je n'étais pas très à l'aise dans ma langue maternelle' (p.86). She also says that she had always felt 'une immense culpabilité' because she was not able to speak Arabic when growing up in Tunisia (p.89) and admits that she had chosen a Lebanese psychiatrist because 'il connaissait l'Orient et comprendrait sans doute mieux que personne ce lien aux langues multiples qu'on abritait sans le savoir sous sa langue maternelle' (p.90). However, she is disappointed with the therapy session and the response of the psychiatrist. She writes him a letter to tell him that she would stop trying to understand her difficult relationship with her language: 'je choisissais de rester dans mes incertitudes et mes questionnements' (p.91). Finally, she states that she will turn to writing instead: 'Je renonçais à comprendre, je le ferais d'une autre façon: je choisissais d'écrire' (p.91). As such, Fellous makes explicit the link between therapy and the act of writing, or indeed 'scriptotherapy'³³, when trying to come to terms with her complex and ambiguous relationship with Tunisia and her sense of linguistic exile.

A few days after her final therapy session, she takes the plane to Tunis to photograph all the familiar sites of her homeland (p.93). In this way, she demonstrates how photography, like writing, is a therapeutic act. For exiled individuals, the homeland is, to borrow Pierre Nora's term, a

³³ For discussion of scriptotherapy, see: Helen Vassallo, *French and Francophone Studies : Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France : Life as Literature*, ed. by Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 141-153 (p.142).

highly charged *lieu de mémoire*.³⁴ And for Fellous, Tunisia is redolent with memories of her childhood and the painful process of exile. Photography arguably allows her to mediate her relationship to this challenging space. In her article on travel writing and visual culture, Margeret Topping asks if 'the camera facilitates an encounter that is more manageable or more contained by virtue of being literally and metaphorically framed?'³⁵ Furthermore, Christine Jordis argues that some travellers prefer intercultural contact to occur via the distance of an instrument of mechanical reproduction: 'La mécanique a remplacé l'organe visuel, une photo au lieu d'un souvenir, la solidité du papier contre l'image évanescence.'³⁶ The camera is a form of prosthesis that renders the encounter with alterity 'plus sûr'.³⁷ After writing a long list of all the places that she photographs, Fellous claims: 'J'avais fait le tour de ma vie ancienne' (94). She then describes how the act of photography brings her relief:

Et je suis revenue à Paris, soulagée. J'avais l'impression d'avoir réappris à parler. Comme si ma langue avait été contenue dans tout ce que j'avais photographié. Ma vie ancienne était devenue un objet et j'allais pouvoir m'en servir. (94)

³⁴ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7-24 (p.7).

³⁵ Margaret Topping, 'Travel Writing and Visual Culture' in: Carl Thompson (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 2015), p.82.

³⁶ Christine Jordis, *Bali, Java, en rêvant* (Paris : Gallimard, 2005), p.96.

³⁷ Christine Jordis, *Bali, Java, en rêvant*, p.92.

The camera gives the returning traveller a sense of mastery over her environment. By framing and containing her 'vie ancienne' in a physical 'objet', she re-gains control over the difficult relationship with her homeland. The therapeutic act of photography renders her experience more manageable and 'plus sûr'. As such, Fellous' description of her use of the camera helps to evoke her exiled identity and ambiguous bond to Tunisia.

Fellous furthermore uses the image of the sea as a metaphor for the complexity of her identity. It is an image that comes up repeatedly in the narrative, both textually and visually. The narrator describes how, as a child, she used to gaze longingly at the sea and that being on the beach was her 'première université'(p.108). She remembers that she did not really understand where Tunisia was in relation to the rest of the world, referring to this feeling as 'la confusion géographique' (p.108). She says : ' Je ne savais pas exactement où se situait ce pays dans lequel j'étais née mais la mer était le prolongement de mon corps, elle m'apprenait à apprivoiser cette vie fragile, faite d'incertitude, de confusion, de modestie et de grande beauté, d'une beauté capiteuse (p.109).' Fellous also includes a photograph of the sea that she had taken from her terrace in Sidi Bou Said. This image prompts her to think of a line from the poem *Barbare* by Arthur Rimbaud: 'bien après les jours et les saisons et les êtres et les pays' (p.63). In ancient times, the Greeks developed the onomatopoeic expression 'barbare' as a way of designating what they deemed to be the 'uncivilized' foreigner who did not speak Greek. Furthermore, the barbarian foreigner was often compared, as Christopher

Delante Bravo remarks, to a 'chirping swallow' in classical works of Greek literature which expressed prevalent xenophobic attitudes. As we saw earlier, both authors use the motif of the swallow to evoke their exiled identities. Furthermore, Fellous' decision to include the title of the *Barbare* poem suggests that she identifies with the sensation of being the 'foreigner' and also the linguistic alienation that she describes as a result of not being able to speak the 'official' language of Tunisia (pp. 87-88). As the photograph of the sea and the line of Rimbaud's poetry are found on the same double page spread, it is possible that the author is inviting the reader to read them as being in correlation with each other. The image of the sea can be read in relation to Rimbaud's line of poetry as it has a similarly transcendent quality and the poem is about a metaphysical space 'beyond'. Indeed, later in the text, Fellous goes so far as to suggest that the sea offers her a form of escapism from her daily reality:

Quand je la regarde comme ça la mer, de cette maison labyrinthe
suspendue, que je viens retrouver comme on retrouve un amour
clandestin, par-dessus les taches de feu des bougies, le moteur des
hors-bord et le bruit des chiens qui se disputent derrière les arbres,
j'oublie Souad, j'oublie la Tunisie, je n'ai plus d'âge, plus de nom.
C'est peut-être mon seul lien au monde cette mer large et nue...
(124)

Whereas the land is connected to borders, nations, continents and fixed sites of belonging, the sea is a fluid 'in-between' space. In this way it has a liberating potential for the narrator who feels conflicted about her sense of

belonging. Just as Rimbaud's poem evokes transcendence, the sea allows Fellous to forget Tunisia and even to forget her own name. The sea is for both authors a metaphor of freedom, but for Fellous it is also a poetic image which permits her to find a form of escapism and transcendence that frees her from the burden of questioning her sense of (un)belonging, and the pressures related to performing an identity.

Latiri also contrasts the fluidity and freedom of the sea with man-made territorial borders. For example, she includes a photograph of a barrier on the beach (79) and, looking at this photograph, the author describes how her friend Ayed is unable to visit the sea because of Israeli border restrictions:

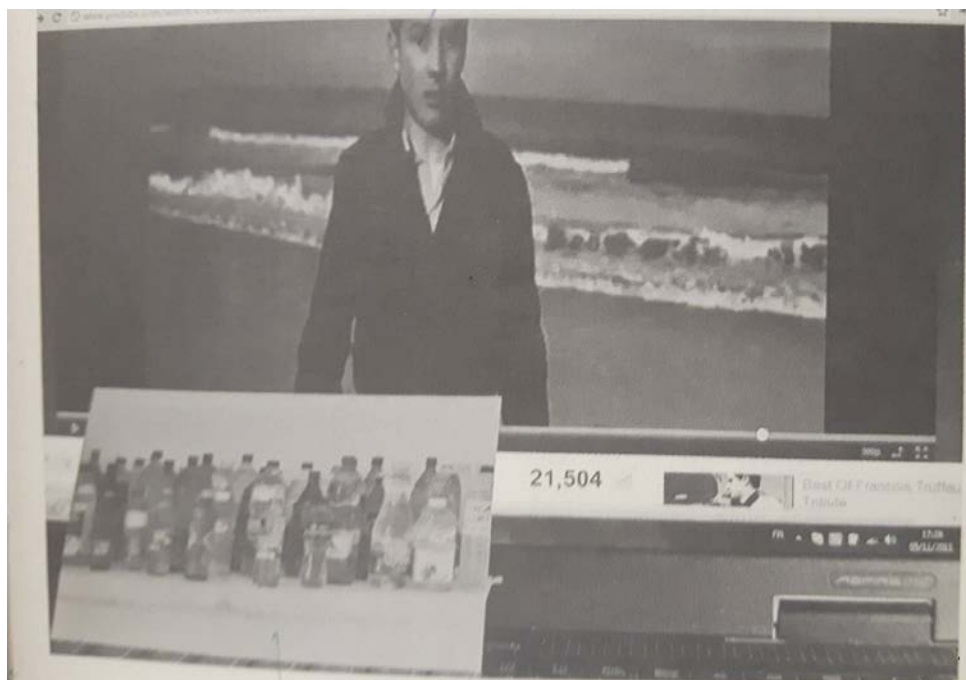
Ayed voudrait bien voir la mer, c'est à une heure de Ramallah mais ce n'est pas possible, il se fait envoyer de l'eau de mer de partout, l'eau arrive dans des bouteilles comme celle-ci; les habitants de Ramallah ne peuvent pas aller vers la mer, la mer viendra à eux.
(p.82)

Her friend's artistic project is an installation of bottles filled with seawater from many different parts of the world. In Latiri's anecdote, we can see that Arafah attempts to overcome the Israeli border restrictions by having the sea delivered to him in Ramallah. By incorporating this reference, and the photographs of the barrier on the beach, the author seems to be reflecting on the absurdity of modern territorial conflict and interrogating the very nature of man-made frontiers.



Image 4: Ayed Arafah's installation taken from his website.³⁸

This anecdote, with its references to the sea, also relates to the previously discussed image of Truffaut's film. The camera follows the character as he breaks through the fence of the centre and runs toward the sea in an emotive scene of escape and liberation.



³⁸ Artist website of Ayed Arafah : <http://ayedarafah.portfoliobox.me/installations?image#4> [accessed 03/09/2016].

Image 5: *Un amour de tn* (p.85)

The film clip is displayed on the laptop with a photograph of Arafah's art installation placed directly in front of the screen. The association of the two images in the photograph places emphasis on the similarities between the two works of art. The clip of Antoine's escape from confinement to the beach echoes the way in which Arafah is confined by territorial border restrictions and longs to travel from Ramallah to the sea. Indeed, the repetition of this image in both Fellous and Latiri's narratives suggests its importance for both narrators who, in their conditions of exile, identify with the sea's fluidity and freedom from national borders and fixed sites of belonging.

It is important to highlight the fact that both writers point to the ways in which their identities have been influenced by the conflicts and questions surrounding identity and exile in Israel/Palestine. While Fellous does not discuss the details of the 1967 war, her narrative focuses on the way in which her own life and identity were directly affected by this conflict, forcing her away from the Arab world and towards Europe. By engaging with her own place within the exile of Jewish communities from Tunisia, she recuperates an important narrative which had been silenced by official Tunisian history. Latiri also engages with the questions that the conflict raises about religion, national identity, origins and homelands. She includes references to four different Palestinians in her narrative: Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Ayed Arafah and the Palestinian who she met on the plane. She also features herself wearing a PLO scarf on the front cover

of the book, indicating her support of the Palestinian people who have been chased from their homeland. These references to Palestinians in exile and the PLO imply that the relationship between geographical spaces and nations is an important one for Latiri. If she did not believe in the bond between peoples and homelands, the displacement of Palestinians would not be such an issue of importance for the author. While Fellous suggests her allegiance to neither Israel nor Palestine, her narrative focuses on the way in which this territorial conflict directly influenced her own ostracisation and eventual displacement from Tunisia. As such, her narrative arguably has important echoes and intersections with the narratives of exile of both the Israelis and the Palestinians, as each group understands what it means to be cut off from one's homeland. Exile has no meaning without the belief that there is a connection between an individual and a place, and we have seen that both Latiri and Fellous show a continued connection to their homeland in spite of their separation from it.

In this chapter I have been particularly interested in exploring the ways in which Fellous and Latiri translate their exiled identities into autobiography. We have discussed in some detail how their separations from Tunisia were influenced by historical factors and social pressures. Fellous turned towards France as a result of the discrimination towards the Jews in Tunisia at this time, while Latiri left Tunisia because she was rejected by her family after marrying outside of her religion and culture. We have seen how both writers' autobiographical journeys enable them to address and come to terms with their difficult memories of the past. By

writing their life-stories, they are arguably able to give form and shape to their exiled identities and construct a new home in writing. While the focus of this chapter has been to draw out the ways in which they articulate their personal experiences of exile, we can now turn to the ways in which Latiri and Fellous react to the events of their country's 2011 uprisings. In the next chapter I will address how both writers explore their relationships to their national Tunisian identities in the wake of a seismic national revolution.

Chapter 2: National Identities

The title of this chapter may firstly appear to be in opposition to that of the preceding chapter which dealt with exiled identities. National identity evokes a sense of unity and belonging, whereas exile suggests rupture and separation from one's native national culture. Nevertheless, when returning to their homeland in the wake of the 2011 revolution, both exiled authors arguably articulate a sense of Tunisian identity by engaging with debates of national importance and suggesting their unity with the Tunisian people. Indeed, in my interview with Latiri, she stated that the death of Bouazizi was an important moment for her personally. It caused her to ask herself if she may have *abandoned* her country, leaving others to fight the cause for positive change. She stated: 'Il y a des gens qui se sont battus, un homme qui est mort. Je devais avoir ce courage-là, je dois avoir ce courage de parler. Écrire- c'est ce que je sais faire, je sais écrire.'³⁹ In this chapter I will therefore discuss the extent to which both authors, returning to Tunisia in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings, use their autobiographical narratives as a way of exploring and reconnecting to their national identities.

³⁹ Interview with the author.

While national identity was previously seen to be a fixed and unchanging essence, something that one is born with, theorists emerging out of the postmodern movement argued that identity is much more fluid and dynamic. For example, Jacques Derrida famously argued that identity can never be reduced to a fixed essence or original meaning. The subject is always changing and evolving, and as such people have no common traits; they are endlessly different or, in Derrida's terms, *différent*.⁴⁰ In addition, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari developed the notion of the 'deterritorial', celebrating nomadic and transnational identity which they saw as liberating the subject from the restrictions of national identity.⁴¹

In her pioneering study *The Dialectics of Exile*, McClennen has argued that we should view exile literature as being grounded in very specific historical conditions.⁴² As such, the postmodern view that identity is atemporal and liberated from the national is problematic for McClennen as the exile's identity is always deeply rooted in a specific national context.

In a similar approach to that of McClennen, Elleke Boehmer has argued that it is possible to find an articulation of national identity *within* transnational identity in the literature of many contemporary women writers from postcolonial contexts. She also challenges the assumption that postcolonial identity should be equated with transnationalism.⁴³ In

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1967), pp.5-10.

⁴¹ Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *L'anti-Oedipe : capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris : Éditions de minuit, 1972).

⁴² Sophia A. McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures* (Purdue: Purdue UP, 2002), pp.1-4.

⁴³ For further discussion of the equation between postcolonial theory and transnationalism, see: Om Prakash Dwivedi and Martin Kich, *Postcolonial Theory in the Global Age: Interdisciplinary Essays* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2013), pp.9-20.

her book, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, she asks if, historically speaking, 'the nation's exclusion of women has contributed (along with postmodern theories of identity as fluid and multiple) to the retreat of the nation and the rise of the transnational as a horizon of expectation for postcolonial women writers and critics?'⁴⁴ Boehmer questions the notion that postcolonial women's literature is normatively transnational by exploring the ways in which many postcolonial writers do in fact engage with nationhood. Indeed, she asks how nationalist concerns may 'cut across, disallow or co-operate with the transnational?'⁴⁵ The nation, she argues, continues to be an important model for social grouping and organisation, especially for women as it constitutes an arena in which they can find solidarity with one another and a platform to voice their concerns. It also provides an alternative to the domestic sphere in which women may be subject to more extreme versions of patriarchy.⁴⁶

Boehmer and McClennen argue that postcolonial and exiled writers do not always lose their ties to their national cultures. I propose that Fellous and Latiri's narratives can be read in light of these contemporary theories about postcolonial and exile literature. This chapter will discuss the extent to which, in this highly charged post-revolutionary context, both authors engage

⁴⁴ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.190.

⁴⁵ Boehmer, *Stories of Women*, p.188.

⁴⁶ Boehmer, p.6.

with contemporary political questions in Tunisia and foreground the importance of their *national* identities. I will evaluate the degree to which the 2011 revolution opens up an opportunity for both writers to reconsider their sense of belonging and to claim new spaces for themselves within the post-revolutionary nation.

Political engagement and national identity in *La Préparation de la vie*

Fellous tells us that she set out to write a book about contemporary Tunisia in the wake of the revolution, yet her narrative is at times difficult to follow as it shuttles between different temporal frames and geographical contexts. Impressions of contemporary Tunisia emerge mostly through snippets of conversation with others that are woven into the narrative. For example, she records many conversations that she had with her friend Souad, a highly educated, liberal and independent Tunisian woman. Souad was born in 1956, the year that Tunisia gained its independence from France. At this time, the country effectively became a one-party state led by President Bourguiba. He initiated wide-ranging reforms to 'modernise' Tunisia and these included banning polygamy and encouraging women's education and civil rights.⁴⁷ Fellous presents the character of Souad as a product of postcolonial Tunisia; she represents the modern, postcolonial Tunisian woman who is defensive of her country's secular values and rights for women.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Hussey, 'Tunisia: Order and Disorder' (p.133).

⁴⁸ The character could be compared to Salman Rushdie's character of Saleem in the well-known postcolonial novel, *Midnight's Children*, as this character is also exactly the same

Much of what we learn about the contemporary political situation in Tunisia emerges not through Fellous' authorial voice but through the narrative voice of Souad who is extremely politically active and is staunchly against Ennahdha. The party remained in power from October 2011 until January 2014, and during this period many Tunisian people were worried about the political direction that the country was going in, fearing that the political situation would be 'comme avant mais à l'envers'(119). Indeed, many Tunisians feared that the style of leadership of Ennahdha would be the same as the previous repressive dictatorships. Monica Marks has also highlighted the fact that many Tunisians feared the party was linked to Salafist groups who propagate an extreme version of Islam.⁴⁹ The theme of anti-Ennahdha sentiment is prevalent throughout the narrative and the author goes to some lengths to evoke the fears and concerns of the Tunisian people vis-à-vis this Islamist and patriarchal government. For example, Souad despairs that there is too much violence in the country and, in reference to the Ennahdha party, she says that 'on ne peut plus accepter ces fantoches, qu'ils repartent tous en exil, qu'ils nous rendent notre pays' (p.193). She also views the Islamist government's values as an attack on her own conception of Tunisian identity: 'L'art, l'intelligence, la culture, la fête de vivre, le plaisir, ils les diabolisent'

age as the newly independent India. The character of Saleem is presented as an allegory for the postcolonial Indian nation. See: Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

⁴⁹ Monica Marks, 'Tunisia's Ennahdha: Rethinking Islamism in the context of ISIS and the Egyptian coup', Working paper, Rethinking Political Islam Series, Brookings Institution (2015), 1-12 (p.2). Accessible here: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Tunisia_Marks-FINALE.pdf?la=en > [accessed 01/06/2016]

(p.192) and fears that they might be re-elected: 'ils pourraient se multiplier, rien n'est gagné, ils pourraient être réélus' (p.193). Indeed, Fellous is arguably stating her own political opinions through the voice of Souad.

A photograph of the daily newspaper, *Le Temps*, furthermore acts as a visual form of proof of the national scale of the concerns voiced through Souad and other characters in the narrative (p.180). Significantly, the Ennahdha government had attempted to take control of the daily newspaper in an effort to limit the freedom of the press in Tunisia. Fellous' decision to include an image of this newspaper can thus be read as a challenge to the government. Combined with her narrative which is highly critical of Ennahdha, the photograph foregrounds the author's own freedom of expression and can be read as a challenge to any proposals to reintegrate strict censorship laws in Tunisia.

The headline of the newspaper reads 'Que cachent les feux d'artifice?' in reference to the explosions that had been taking place in different parts of Tunisia over a two-year period from 2013 until 2014. The explosions were commonly referred to as 'les feux d'artifice' and Tunisians were very worried about the mysterious explosions that were set off systematically at the same time each week in different locations across the country. Many people believed that the explosions were the product of terrorist training camps. The subtitle of the newspaper, 'Irritation, interrogations, inquiétudes des citoyens' clearly states the overwhelming political frustrations of the Tunisian people towards their government. In the top left hand corner of the newspaper, the heading

reads 'Une école fermée à Sfax par les services de sécurité' and the subtitle explains that the school was closed because it was 'soupçonnée de liens avec le courant salafiste'. The article refers to the Islamic school in the Cité Al Ons in Sfax, which many believed to be financed by members of the Ennahdha party. The government were forced to close the school down after local citizens and members of the ATDDE, l'Association tunisienne de défense des droits de l'enfant, had raised the alarm about the extremist tendencies of the educators and campaigned for the school's closure. By drawing our attention to the the Tunisian citizens' fears about extremism, the image of the newspaper serves as visual 'slice of life' that documents national debates and concerns at this key moment in Tunisian history.

The newspaper lies in front of a ceramic pot, and a house plant is just visible in the background; the combination of these different elements in the photograph suggests that, on Fellous' return trip home, national debates and national narratives are slowly starting to infiltrate her personal and domestic sphere. A younger Fellous had preferred to construct her own narratives of Tunisia that ignored its darker and more painful reality, preferring instead to romanticise and exoticise the country : 'Je m'amusais à le présenter et le déplier comme un beau livre d'images, même si je savais que la matière du pays était différente...elle n'avait pas ces couleurs-là, quelque chose de plus mystérieux, de plus sombre, grave, rauque, violent et complexe y était logé' (p.54). She used to purposely distance herself from the reality of Tunisia's political situation and claims 'j'avais peur de l'approcher davantage' (p.54). The photograph of the newspaper draws the reader's attention to the political situation of

Tunisia, suggesting that the author is in some way beginning to engage with the present-day harsh reality of her country's situation and her own sense of national identity.

The narrative nevertheless suggests a certain distance between the narrator and Tunisian politics. In the text which follows the image of the newspaper, Fellous describes how she had spoken to her friend and street-seller, Moez, about the French writer Marcel Proust. The conversation begins with them discussing the fireworks and explosives that had been let off near the Ennassr mountains. They both discuss the possible explanations for the explosions, including the idea that there are terrorist training camps in the mountains for those that want to go and fight in Syria. Yet Moez gives Fellous the following advice: 'bouche toi les oreilles ma fille, c'est « calonnies » tout ça, ça n'existe pas' (p.181). Interestingly, Fellous tells him that he is right and that she prefers to read Proust instead. This is not the first time that we have seen Fellous turn towards French culture as a way of escaping the harsh reality of life in Tunisia; we can think notably of how she turned to France in 1967 after witnessing the anti-Semitism towards her Jewish community: 'Et j'ai préféré regarder ailleurs, vers les livres... Bientôt Paris, bientôt la liberté et bientôt très loin d'ici' (p.117). This suggests that Fellous sees French culture and the French language as a form of escape from the difficulties of her homeland. In light of the continuing conflicts in Israel and Palestine, and the memory of her Jewish community's exile from Tunisia as a result of the 1967 Six Days War, Fellous may feel uncomfortable when considering the contemporary threat posed by Islamist extremism in Tunisia.

After the narrator tells Moez a little bit about Proust and the importance of memory in his work, the conversation comes full circle with Moez bringing the conversation back to Tunisian politics. He responds that he would prefer Proust to be the leader of Tunisia rather than the current Ennahdha officials. Fellous is amused by his suggestion, claiming he is crazy because Proust died nearly one hundred years ago. Moez nevertheless explains himself in an even firmer voice:

Ceux du gouvernement, ils sont incultes, ils ont perdu la mémoire. Ils étaient en prison, en solitude pendant dix ou quinze ans, tu peux pas gouverner avec ça dans ta tête, ça dérange la tête la solitude, dans un placard ils sont restés et maintenant, ils font pareil que Ben Ali, c'est pas du travail, j'aurais aimé mille fois mieux votre Monsieur Proust, il a une bonne mémoire au moins. Au palais de Carthage il aurait été bien. (pp.181-182)

Moez is here highlighting the important relationship between historical memory and politics. He believes that, in spite of the revolution, the Ennahdha government is propagating a similar style of politics to that of the Ben Ali dictatorship and that the government officials' time spent in prison, coupled with what he believes to be their lack of education, is a recipe for bad leadership. Like the newspaper, the snippets of conversation from Souad and Moez serve to give the reader a slice of life of post-revolutionary Tunisia. Yet Fellous's reluctance to fully participate in the debates, and her decision to record the speaker's political convictions rather than her own opinions, suggests a certain distance between the narrator and contemporary politics.

Nevertheless, as Tunisian political references become ever more prevalent as the narrative progresses, Fellous begins to engage increasingly with questions of national importance. A real turning point in the narrative comes when she learns of the assassination of Chokri Belaid, one of the leaders of the main opposition party, the left-secular *Mouvement des Patriotes Démocratiques*, on 6 February 2013. Belaid was very critical of the Ben Ali regime and the Ennahdha party. His assassination provoked a political crisis in Tunisia, with many thousands of citizens taking to the streets of Tunis and in other cities across the country to demand the dissolution of the government.⁵⁰ Fellous was in Tunisia at the time of his assassination and she tells us: 'Le choc de la nouvelle avait atteint en quelques minutes le corps de chacun, hébétude dans tout le pays, son nom répété partout en boucle, à la télé, à la radio, dans la rue, dans les maisons, c'était le premier assassinat politique depuis l'Indépendance' (p.118). This is the first time in the narrative when Fellous openly lays claim to a strong sense of Tunisian national identity. She explains how she felt after hearing news of the assassination: 'Toute la semaine j'ai vécu ce deuil national, je suis restée à l'intérieur, hébétée moi aussi, choquée, je buvais du café, je n'avais envie de voir personne. On avait tous perdu la voix. Silence, incompréhension, terreur, scandale. (pp.118-119)' Significantly, she states that she was experiencing and partaking in *national* grief and the use of

⁵⁰ Éric Gobe and Larbi Chouikha, 'La Tunisie politique en 2013: de la bipolarisation idéologique au «consensus constitutionnel»?', *L'année du Maghreb*, 11 (2014), 301-322 (p.38).

the subject pronoun 'on' further reinforces her solidarity with her fellow citizens. She also includes a photograph of her local street on the day of Belaid's funeral, claiming that she had never seen it looking so empty (p.119). The sombre photograph of the deserted street, with the rain clouds in the sky, evokes the wide-scale grief of the Tunisian people at this time. These references are significant as they indicate that the narrator, in this historical moment, feels a sense of unity with her fellow Tunisian citizens against the threat of Islamist extremism to the stability of the country.

Before the publication of *La Préparation de la vie*, Watson criticised Fellous for her lack of political engagement with the 2011 Tunisian revolution, claiming that she came to report on the events as a 'foreigner, a French journalist' rather than as a Tunisian woman.⁵¹ In this work, however, Fellous shows a very different engagement with the revolution. Text and image combine to relay a very personal reaction on the part of the author vis-à-vis political events in Tunisia. Here Fellous is clearly reacting to the events as a national citizen rather than as a tourist or as an objective 'French journalist'. Indeed, Watson's perception of Fellous' relationship to Tunisia fails to acknowledge that her work as a radio journalist is separate from her literary project. Contrary to her journalistic work, Fellous's life-writing reveals something of her emotional connection

⁵¹ Robert Watson, 'Secondhand Memories: Franco-Tunisian Jewish Women and the Predicament of Writing Return', *Life Writing*, 10, 1 (March 2013), 25-46 (p.43).

to her homeland, clearly positioning the writer within the Tunisian nation, experiencing the unifying power of national grief.

Yet despite these key elements in the text that suggest her connection to a sense of national identity, we could nevertheless question her commitment to this identity. At times the narrative voice is ambiguous and we are not sure if it is Souad or Fellous who is speaking. For example, following news of Belaid's assassination Fellous writes:

Pendant ce temps, on condamne à la prison ferme pour une caricature, une offense à un policier, une femme qui clame sa liberté, les paroles d'une chanson, un camera-man qui a filmé des manifestants en train de jeter des œufs sur un ministre. Il y a plusieurs justices dans le pays maintenant, dit Souad. Comme avant mais à l'envers. On laisse courir des assassins et on arrête un jeune garçon qui écoute une chanson de Weld El 15 dans sa voiture, on condamne à trois mois de prison une jeune fille qui a brandi une pancarte avec des mots jugés hostiles et insultants par la ministre de la Femme. Plusieurs justices est-ce que c'est la justice ? La justice doit être indépendante, un pays n'existe pas sans justice. Il faut que tout change. (p.119)

The ambiguity of narrative voice may indicate Fellous' hesitance when it comes to fully participating in national debates. Perhaps considering Fellous' conflictual relationship with the country, linked to the historical exile of Jews from Tunisia and her own sense of unresolved national identity, she is keen to maintain a safe distance between herself and the Tunisian nation. Nevertheless, with the repetition of anti-Ennahdha

rhetoric throughout the narrative, I would argue that author is expressing her political opinions.

Indeed, at times she employs her first-person narrative voice to reveal her dislike of the government which she perceives to be repressive and unrepresentative of secular Tunisian values : 'D'ici, dans le silence et le vide de la mer, j'entends mieux les menaces, les ragots, les pleurs, les procès injustes, les interdictions et les nouvelles peurs qui se sont installées depuis deux ans, peu à peu, les nouveaux diktats religieux' (p.191). She also states: 'J'écris pour que tout change' and 'J'écris pour être ensemble. Et pour le plaisir de faire face' (p.121). In light of these statements, we can infer that writing becomes for Fellous a medium through which she can engage with Tunisian political affairs and show her solidarity with the Tunisian people; she explores her national identity through her identity as a writer. In the previous chapter we applied Adorno's theory of writing as an alternative home for the writer to Fellous's text. By stating that she writes 'pour être ensemble', she also shows how writing about national affairs brings her a sense of unity with her homeland in spite of her exile. Returning then to Boehmer's question of whether the national continues to be significant for postcolonial women writers, Fellous' narrative suggests that nationhood can in fact be an important facet of postcolonial identity.

Political engagement and national identity in *Un amour de tn*

Turning now to *Un amour de tn*, we must firstly acknowledge that Latiri is writing in a slightly earlier context to that of Fellous; she returns to

Tunisia to document a very distinct historical moment and in a particular place: 'la Goulette d'après la Révolution et d'avant les élections' (p.42).

Whereas Fellous was engaging specifically with the politics of the Ennahdha government, Latiri's narrative documents the period in which there is a vacuum in Tunisian politics and uncertainty is rife. She therefore reports on the limited and historically specific moment in which Tunisia is coming to terms with its new status as a democracy. In her article entitled 'The Roman Maghrébin in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring', Nina Wardleworth emphasises the documentary focus of Latiri's narrative and the author's urgency to capture the events of post-revolutionary Tunisia. Wardleworth claims that '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* emphasises the reportage style of the text and photographs.'⁵² By this reckoning, Wardleworth suggests that Latiri's narrative has an explanatory and journalistic function, helping the reader to understand the political events that have come to pass. However, she fails to examine the author's complex and shifting relationship to her national identity and the frequently ambiguous treatment of contemporary political and social themes. To address this gap I will now consider the extent to which Latiri presents a personally engaged, rather than objective and reportage-style,

⁵² Nina Wardleworth, 'The Roman Maghrebin in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring' (p.145).

representation of political events in Tunisia, and the extent to which this may belie a sense of national belonging and identity.

Firstly, let us consider Latiri's engagement with the Ben Ali regime. She articulates her support for the 2011 revolution when she says:

Sous Zaba⁵³, bâillonnements, résistances, petits accommodements pour tenir, petites humiliations de chaque jour qui s'accumulent, le bâillon serre, on dit beaucoup de gros mots, ça racle dans le sens contraire de la censure, on fume pas mal, souvent on mange trop aussi. Les marchands de bouffe partout, une abondance étalée, pas pour tous, au marché une dame en sefsari achète juste une aile de poulet. (p.36)

She also focuses on the inequalities in Tunisian society through her depiction of the woman who presumably can only afford to buy one chicken wing at the market despite the 'abondance étalée'. By evoking the daily humiliations and injustices that the Tunisian people had to put up with under the Ben Ali dictatorship, Latiri suggests that she has a strong foundation of knowledge about life in Tunisia and indicates her support for the revolution.

The author also pays homage to the national martyr of the Tunisian revolution, Mohamed Bouazizi, in a chapter which bears his name.

Bouazizi was the young fruit seller who set himself on fire in December 2010, an event which set the Tunisian revolution in motion and which

⁵³ Zaba is a colloquial term that refers to the former Tunisian dictator, Zin El Abidine Ben Ali.

inspired uprisings and revolutions across the Arab world. The 26-year-old man had resorted to selling fruit in Sidi Bouzid as a way of dealing with his unemployment. He was the bread-winner for his family of eight and therefore urgently needed to find a way of making a living. However, like many others, Bouazizi did not have a licence to sell fruit on the street. As a result, his goods were seized on 17 December 2010 and a policewoman fined him 10 dinars (equivalent to a good day's earnings). Not satisfied with giving him the fine, the policewoman then slapped the young man and spat in his face. Humiliated by this act, Bouazizi went to the provincial headquarters in hope of filing a complaint against the policewoman, but they refused to see him. Later that day, in an act of desperation, Bouazizi drenched himself in fuel and set himself on fire, eventually dying a few weeks later in hospital. As Ali Ek Sakhawy states, 'the youth were shocked into action by Mohamed Bouazizi's death, a warning message to the generation of the lack of prospects to look forward to. Soon, it became a mass, revolutionary movement, all spurred by Bouazizi and his tragic act.'⁵⁴

Wardleworth claims that, in the chapter on Bouazizi, the author is seeking to emphasise the universality of the young man's story by seeing him in the fruit sellers of her own suburb of La Goulette. Latiri states : 'dans la lumière très blanche de l'été, les marchands de fruits et légumes envahissent la chaussée dans l'illégalité. Les clients sont contents, c'est pas

⁵⁴ Ali El Sakhawy, 'Is the Arab Spring Enough?', *Peace Review: A journal of Social Justice*, 27 (2015), 363-370 (p.363).

cher...' (p.87)⁵⁵ We also get a sense that she is trying to retrace his footsteps and empathise with the young man as she imagines what his weighing scales would have looked like: 'Comment était-elle la balance de Bouazizi?' (p.87). Whereas, before the revolution, the iconic photograph of the dictator was omnipresent in Tunisia, Latiri chooses to privilege the face of the every-citizen by including a photograph of a fruit seller who she meets on the street. The link here with Bouazizi is undeniable (pp.88-89). This photograph is reminiscent of 'Artocracy', the 2011 photography project lead by the French artist JR and a group of Tunisian artists in which they plastered photographs of Tunisian citizens in public spaces.⁵⁶ The faces of Tunisian people replaced the omnipresent image of the dictator, with their visual presence in the streets reifying the democratic values of the revolution. The project was criticised by some because of the religious belief, held by some orthodox Muslims, that the portrayal of human faces constitutes a form of iconography that violates Islam.⁵⁷ As such, in the context of rising orthodox Islamist sentiment in post-revolutionary Tunisia, Latiri's decision to include the photograph of the fruit-seller can be read as an affirmation of her secular and democratic values.

⁵⁵ Wardleworth, 'The Roman Maghrebin' (pp. 145-146).

⁵⁶ JR, 'Inside Out- Artocracy in Tunisia' (2011), <<http://www.insideoutproject.net/en/group-actions/tunis-tunisia>>, [accessed 01/06/2016].

⁵⁷ Cited in Yasmine Ryan, 'Art Challenges Tunisian Revolutionaries', *Al Jazeera* (26 March 2011), <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/03/201132223217876176.html>> [accessed 01/06/2016].

Furthermore, the author criticises the social inequalities that were born out of the corrupt Ben Ali regime. After buying some 'figues de barbarie' from the fruit sellers, she becomes upset because she realises that the men are not getting a fair price for their fruit: '...ça ne coute rien, j'ai mal parce qu'ils ne savent pas compter leur travail, les fruits poussent tout seuls. Ils ne savent pas compter leur temps, leur travail' (90).

Although her political engagement is not explicitly conveyed at the level of narrative discourse, it emerges through these fragments of every-day life, both textual and visual, that the reader must assemble to create an overall picture. Henri Lefebvre argues that 'daily life is the screen on which our society projects its light and its shadow, its hollows and its planes, its power and its weaknesses.'⁵⁸ Latiri's text and imagery advocate a politics of the everyday, revealing the author's knowledge of the inequalities that persist in Tunisian society in the aftermath of the revolution.

Indeed, the end of the chapter suggests Latiri's awareness that the country still has a long way to go in addressing its problems. She describes 'les contractions puissantes qui disent que ça a commencé, l'accouchement' (p.92) and this line can be read in relation to the passage at the beginning of the book in which Latiri imagines her birth country to be a fertile and pregnant land: 'le ventre gravide, fécond' (p.10). But now the metaphors of pregnancy and birth are clearly connected to the revolution itself, as they are found within a passage devoted to Bouazizi.

⁵⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Trans. John Moore (New York: Verso, 1991), 64-65.

Through these themes of fertility and renewal, Latiri indicates her optimism for the outcome of the revolution and the country's transition to democracy, while also hinting that this might be a painful transition through her evocation of childbirth.

As with Fellous, Latiri also engages with the theme of rising Islamist extremism in her narrative by making a reference to the *Pietà brune de Bentalha* (p.110). She dreamt that her photograph of 'la Vierge bleue de La Goulette' became 'la *Pietà brune de Bentalha*' (110). The *Pietà brune de Bentalha* is the name given by Western journalists to an iconic photograph taken in 1997 following the massacre of a community in Bentalha, a town in Algeria, that was carried out by an Islamist terror organization called the 'Groupes islamiques armés' (GIA). A photo-journalist, Hocine Zaourar, went to the local hospital where the victims had been taken, and photographed a woman who had just lost several members of her family in the executions.⁵⁹ This photograph was widely circulated across the world and quickly became an iconic image, with western journalists giving it the controversial name of the *Madone d'Algérie* or *La Pietà brune* (in reference to Michelangelo's depictions of the Virgin Mary). By invoking this reference, Latiri subtly suggests her own fears about the rise of Islamist extremism in Tunisia.⁶⁰ Fellous is more vocal than Latiri about her opposition to religious extremism, however we

⁵⁹ Martin Evans, John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007), p.243.

⁶⁰ Latiri confirmed in our interview that the reference was linked to her fears about Islamic extremism in Tunisia.

must remember that the former is writing at a slightly different historical moment and this may have influenced the degree of involvement that each writer expresses vis-à-vis national debates. Fellous is engaging directly with the Ennahdha government and its conservative, Islamist values whereas Latiri is writing in an earlier context of the period just before the nation voted in its constituent assembly. While Latiri gestures to the social injustices of the former regime and suggests her support for the revolution, her narrative does not explicitly engage with the discourse of Ennahdha. Her reference to the *Pietà brune* does however suggest an awareness and concern for rising extreme versions of Islamist sentiment in the country. Fellous, on the other hand, demonstrates a clearer political voice because of the contemporary context in which she is writing. Her national identity emerges in the narrative against a backdrop of Islamist terrorism, two political assassinations and the threat posed by the government to Tunisian women's rights.

Just as Fellous states her intention to write '*pour être ensemble*' and to '*faire face*' against Ennahdha, Latiri's narrative can be read as a way for the author to engage with the 2011 revolution. Writing is a way for them both to participate in the events and express the uniqueness of their national identities in a society which had previously limited diversity and imposed silence on its citizens.

Indeed, in this chapter I have shown how postcolonial exiled authors can address issues of belonging that also have national resonance. Fellous and Latiri are both postcolonial women writers intent on exploring their identities through narrative, yet have been previously hard-pressed

to find a space for themselves within or even on the margins of the postcolonial nation. While we previously focused on exile from the homeland and the destabilising effect that this had on both writers' identities and relationships to Tunisia, we have seen in this chapter how, in spite of their exile, they maintain an interest in questions of national concern. Indeed, at times they express themselves in resolutely nationalist terms, suggesting their unity with the Tunisian people in the wake of the revolution. Furthermore, by foregrounding the political opinions and images of every day citizens, they evoke the nation's democratic potential. Significantly, they also show that cultural identity is deeply connected to history and one's specific social context and, in this respect, they subvert certain postmodern theories that would view identity as totally fluid, free-floating, multiple and anti-historical. However, we have seen that neither writer commits herself totally to a Tunisian national identity. As a result of their experiences of exile, they maintain complex, ambiguous and shifting relationships to their homeland. In the next chapter I will therefore attempt to draw out the arguably dialectical nature of both writers' cultural identities. For example, are there oppositions and contradictions between national identity and transnational identity in their writing? While in this chapter we have seen how Fellous and Latiri articulate a sense of unity with their fellow Tunisian citizens, to what extent do both writers' conception of 'national identity' differ to official political narratives about national identity?

Chapter 3: Syncretic Identities

In the last chapter we saw the ways in which both authors articulate their affiliation to a Tunisian national identity in spite of their exiled identities. However, we have also seen that they articulate ambiguous and shifting relationships to their homeland and to their sense of national identity. Indeed, in the last two chapters we have seen how they shift between feelings of exile and dislocation to a sense of national belonging. In this chapter I will delve deeper into the specifically dialectical nature of the works. Using the concept of 'syncretism', I will discuss the extent to which Fellous and Latiri represent their identities as dynamic and fluid, shifting between diverse points of cultural identification. The concept of syncretism is traditionally linked to the fusion or interrelatedness of different religious practices. In its application to identity, syncretic theory allows for the 'co-existence of components whose precarious... identities are mutually modified in their encounter, yet whose distinguishing differences, as such, are not dissolved or elided in these modifications, but strategically reconstituted in an ongoing war of position.'⁶¹ As such, syncretic identity implies that when different cultural elements come into conflict, it is possible for these differences to be held in tension. It also

⁶¹ Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti, 'Elements of Vogue', *Third Text*, 16,17 (Autumn/Winter, 1991) 65-81 (p.69).

allows for identity to be continually performed and renegotiated in light of new and shifting cultural relationships.

The concept of syncretic identity has emerged out of postcolonial theories of hybrid identity. As Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, cultures are not monolithic, discrete entities but hybrids which are comprised of overlapping and intertwined histories.⁶² In addition, for Homi Bhabha, the third hybrid space challenges the notion that culture and identity are monolithic and pure essences. Within the third space, which is similar to a border zone, cultural components, histories and signifiers 'can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew'.⁶³ Further engaging with the theory of hybridity, Stuart Hall argues that diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves 'through transformation and difference'.⁶⁴ Despite Hall's identification of hybridity as fluid and dynamic, there has been debate over the usefulness of the term. Having originated as a term signifying the biological union of two pure forms to make a mongrel third, hybridity has been problematic for some scholars when applied to culture and identity. For example, Jean Fisher criticises the term for inherently implying the 'resolution' of two opposing and untainted cultures.⁶⁵ However, Mark Crinson remarks that 'Bhabha's hybridity is more intractable, relating to qualities he links to Walter Benjamin's understanding of the impossibility

⁶² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), 56.

⁶³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37.

⁶⁴ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-237 (p.235).

⁶⁵ Jean Fisher, *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Blackwell, 2005), 223-241 (pp.238-241).

of translation between cultures.’⁶⁶ If the term ‘hybridity’ is still problematic, implying for some a harmonious resolution of difference, syncretic theory is a useful alternative that helps to nuance the term and our understanding of cultural identity.

If Fellous and Latiri represent their identities as syncretic, to what extent do their narratives of selfhood, constructed on the margins of the nation, clash with dominant contemporary ideas about identity in Tunisia? Following the country’s independence from France in 1956, the government of the postcolonial nation state, led by President Bourguiba, wished to foster a sense of nationalism that would unite citizens around a fixed concept of Tunisian identity. As in many other postcolonial nation states, nationalism was important in Tunisia in the post-independent era as the country sought to define itself as an autonomous nation that had its own culture and language. The decision to promote Arabic as the official language stemmed from a desire to unite Tunisians around an Arab identity that was distinct from that of the former French colonial authority. In the first article of the 1959 Tunisian constitution, national identity became a category that alienated non-Muslim citizens and those who did not speak Arabic. Furthermore, following the 2011 revolution, the Ennahdha party proposed to make Sharia law the essential source of law.⁶⁷ Yet on 20 March 2012, more than 25,000 people demonstrated

⁶⁶ Mark Crinson, *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* ed. by Amelia Jones (Blackwell, 2006), 450-469 (p.458).

⁶⁷ Yadh Ben Achour, ‘Religion, Revolution, and Constitution: The Case of Tunisia Lecture’, delivered at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, Boston, 17 September 2012. Full transcript accessible in French and English here:

against these proposals which many felt expressed militant religiosity. The president of the Ennahdha party, Rached Ghannouchi, officially announced the withdrawal of his party's plans regarding Sharia law on 25 March 2012, remarking that the first article was sufficient to affirm the presence of Islam in Tunisian national identity.

Fellous and Latiri are therefore writing in a context in which debates about the relationship between national identity and religion are extremely topical and important; in the wake of the revolution, Tunisians had to decide what being Tunisian meant to them and what kind of national identity should be inscribed in the constitution. However, the dominant and prevailing concept of national identity was that Tunisia is an Arabic-speaking and Muslim nation.⁶⁸ The identities that Fellous and Latiri present in their autobiographical narratives are arguably at odds with this monolithic model which attempts to restrict national identity to a fixed and inflexible category. In this chapter I will evaluate the type of postcolonial or indeed 'post-postcolonial' identities that Latiri and Fellous articulate.⁶⁹ Drawing on the concept of syncretic identity, I will explore their representations of their 'migrant' identities and the different cultures that both writers engage with. I will evaluate the extent to which both writers embrace the 'plurality of vision' that they have gained as a result of their experiences of exile. Do they seem at ease in their multivalent

<<http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/9831-religion-revolution-et-constitution-specialement-d-apres-l-exemple-tunisien>> [accessed 20/08/2016].

⁶⁸ The first article of the 1959 constitution was maintained in the 2014 constitution.

⁶⁹ See the use of this term in: Bruce King, 'Towards the Post-postcolonial?', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 43 (2007), 100-105 (pp.4-5).

identities or, alternatively, is there a sense of irresolvable conflict between different cultural components which produces anxiety about identity?

With a backdrop of contemporary political debates championing fixed and monolithic national identity in Tunisia, I will furthermore analyse the degree to which both authors' narratives of the syncretic and fluid nature identity can be seen to challenge or reject official narratives.

Syncretic identity in *Un amour de tn*

The first chapter of *Un amour de tn* brings to the fore the way in which the narrator occupies an in-between space between different cultures. It is entitled 'Je suis d'ici', however we do not know the exact geographical location to which the author is referring. The subtitle of the chapter is also ambiguous: 'Je suis d'ici Je suis de là-bas. Je suis de là-bas Et j'ai des souvenirs. (9)' In linguistics, spatial deixis refers to words and phrases such as 'here' or 'there' that cannot be fully understood without additional contextual information. Latiri's subtitle produces a double deixis whereby the locations of 'ici' and 'là-bas' cannot be identified, and this deliberately elusive use of language helps to suggest the ways in which the author has an ambiguous and fluid identity. She either belongs to more than one geographical space, or indeed to nowhere.

Latiri had an upbringing that was mixed with different cultural influences and languages; she came from a Muslim family but her parents

sent her to a Catholic school.⁷⁰ There are many references to both Catholic and Muslim culture in the text and these are also mixed in with references to the author's research on Jewish minorities in Tunisia. In the penultimate chapter she goes to the Jewish synagogue in La Goulette and recognised a 'similarité soudaine' between the Jewish 'chants de la Hilloula', and the Muslim 'prière Allah Allah Allah' (108). From a linguistic perspective, the phonetic mirroring of the 'l' and 'a' sounds in 'Hilloula' and 'Allah' cause the narrator to see a convergence between the Muslim prayers and the Jewish hymn. In this way, she suggests there is a level of porosity between the two religious traditions. After visiting the synagogue, she goes to pray at the Catholic church with Sister Albina. By travelling through different religious spaces, and engaging with diverse religious traditions, Latiri shows her identification with these different, but arguably interrelated, faiths.

The author furthermore gestures to the fact that angels are a shared tradition of all three main religions in Tunisia. She states that 'une cousine très douce au voile léger' came to the family home in Tunisia and advised her to take down the photographs of her late mother which were 'trop dénudées' because 'les anges ne viendraient pas' (41). Latiri asks herself 'Quels anges? Ceux qui posent joufflus, les fesses à l'air sur les tableaux reproduits dans les livres qui peuplent la bibliothèque du salon? Ceux qui viennent vers nous la nuit du 27?' (41-42). The night of the 27th is

⁷⁰ Dora Latiri, 'A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating'. Paper delivered as part of 'Arabs at Home and Abroad: Politics, Society, and Art' conference, University of Manchester, 27/06/2016.

a reference to 'Laylat al-Qadr', which translates into English as the Night of Decree or the Night of Power.⁷¹ This is a night at the end of Ramadan when Muslims celebrate the time when the first verses of the Quran were revealed by the archangel Gabriel to the Islamic prophet Muhammad. They believe that the blessings and mercy of Allah are abundant on this night; sins are forgiven and the annual decree is revealed to the angels who descend to earth. Significantly, the archangel Gabriel is revered as an important figure in Christianity, Islam and Judaism. As such, Latiri subtly draws our attention to her knowledge of a shared aspect of these religions.

Latiri further invokes the shared history of the Abrahamic religions when she refers to a quote from Victor Hugo's poem 'Booz endormi': 'Quelque chose de bleu qui paraissait une aile (42)'.⁷² 'Booz endormi' is based on the Book of Ruth, a work of scripture found in the Old Testament. The book tells the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman, who left her own community to glean in the fields of Boaz, an elderly Israelite man. While Boaz was sleeping, he had a prophetic dream that an oak tree grew from his belly, a genealogical tree with a singing king (David) at its root. In the line of Hugo's poem quoted by Latiri, the narrator describes how angels passed through the sky while Boaz was sleeping. When he awoke he found Ruth beside him and they came together in sexual union to begin the new royal Judaic line. According to the scripture, Ruth and Boaz were the grandparents of the prophet King David who is recognised as an important

⁷¹ Marston Speight, 'The Nature of Christian and Muslim Festivals', *The Muslim World*, 70, 3-4 (October 1980), 260-66 (pp.260-62).

⁷² Victor Hugo, *La Légende des siècles* (Paris : Édition Hetzel, 1859), p.36.

prophet in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Hugo's poem therefore invokes a moment of *shared* religious scripture that Christians, Jews and Muslims can all relate to. In a context in which, as Woodhull notes, growing Islamist movements have been trying to 'dehistoricise religion and culture'⁷³, Latiri points to the interrelatedness of the three Abrahamic religions, thereby inviting her reader to question notions of religious or cultural purity. Ultimately, these references allow the author to affirm her syncretic identity that has been shaped by different religious cultures.

We can also state that her intertextual reference to Hugo shows the impact of French culture on the author, and this is furthermore reinforced by her previously discussed references to Truffaut, Césaire and Proust. However, she also indicates that she has been influenced by an eclectic range of artists and writers beyond canonical Francophone culture, including Said, Darwish, the Arabic linguist Sibaway and her Palestinian artist friend, Ayed Arafah. In this sense, *Un amour de tn* can be seen to articulate literary and artistic syncretism, the form of which reflects the author's own identity.

The reference to Hugo's poem also has internal echoes with the author's syncretic identity as it relates to a section in which the narrator describes how she had fallen in love with a man who was not Tunisian (p.52). Indeed, Hugo's poem refers to the story of a Moabite woman who married an Israelite man despite the fact that, for much of Hebrew history,

⁷³ Winifred Woodhull, *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (London: Arnold, 2003), 211-220 (p.214).

the Israelites were commanded to treat the Moabites as their enemies. As Alicia Ostriker states: 'Ruth and Boaz represent boundary crossing...What is unacceptably transgressive becomes, in this story, welcome.'⁷⁴ The story can in fact be read as a celebration of mixed marriage and Latiri's reference to this story is, I wish to propose, not accidental but suggests a deliberate move on the part of the narrator to invite the reader to consider the oppressive nature of the Islamic law which states that a Muslim woman is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim. Indeed, as we have previously seen, Latiri's familial and social exile was specifically linked to the fact that she married a non-Muslim man who was not Tunisian. Significantly, the story of Ruth and Boaz is an understated clue which gestures to the fact that intercultural marriage and religious syncretism actually form a part of Islamic history. In this way, the author can be seen to subtly subvert dominant narratives in Tunisia which advocate the purity of religious and cultural identities.

Just as she shows the interrelatedness of religious cultural identities, Latiri also draws our attention to the syncretic nature of languages. Although Latiri's text is written predominantly in French, the narrative is constantly shuttling between French, English, classical dialectical Tunisian Arabic and Arabizi (the transliteration of Arabic into Latin script and Arabic numerals).⁷⁵ This corresponds to what Foued

⁷⁴ Alicia Ostriker, 'The book of Ruth and the love of the land', *Biblical Interpretation*, 10, 4 (2009), 343-359 (p.353).

⁷⁵ Mohamed Al-Badrashiny, Nizar Habash, and Owen Rambow, 'Foreign words and the automatic processing of Arabic social media text written in Roman script', *EMNLP* (2014), 1-10 (p.5).

Laroussi calls 'alternance emblématique': the choice of language and the switching between them is a way for an individual to assert their complex cultural identity.⁷⁶ In Latiri's text, the languages intersect and intertwine in a sinuous manner and this can be read as a formal expression of the author's own cultural identity which is plural and mobile.

In relatively recent trends in linguistics, scholars have focused on the effects of globalisation and transnationalism on the relationship between language and identity. Emi Otsuji and Alistair Pennycook claim that we should move away from the idea that languages are separate and countable systems. They argue that we should focus rather on their hybrid and dynamic qualities, thinking in particular about how they emerge from contexts of interaction. Their concept of 'metrolingualism' refers to how people:

use, play with and negotiate identities through language; it does not assume connections between language, culture, ethnicity, nationality or geography, but rather seeks to explore how such relations are produced, resisted, defied or rearranged...⁷⁷

As Priti Sandhu and Christsina Higgins note, metrolingualism 'challenges the very ontology upon which language is based. Just as metro-sexuality is not the reallocation of male and female attributes, but instead a questioning of those very attributes, metrolingualism... foregrounds a

⁷⁶ Foued Laroussi, 'Frontières linguistiques et pratiques langagières : Le Cas tunisien', *Bretagne linguistique*, 10 (1996), 133-142 (p.135).

⁷⁷ Emi Otsuji and Alistair Pennycook, 'Metrolingualism: fixity, fluidity and language in flux', *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 7, 3 (2010), 240-254 (p.246).

practice-based understanding of language that begins not with identifying codes, but with analysing social practices that are at the heart of identity construction.'⁷⁸ In this sense, the concept of metrolingualism allows us to see language as a practice and draws out the way in which languages are not separable codes but are in themselves *syncretic* and dynamic.

Indeed, the concept is particularly useful when considering the way in which Latiri uses language. Her narrative shifts between different languages very fluidly and she does not use punctuation or line breaks to separate the different languages. Indeed, she frequently mixes different languages and types of calligraphy in the same sentence, often also switching from Latin to Arabic characters. In this way, she is able to foreground her syncretic linguistic individuality. Indeed, by showing the ways in which she shuttles easily between different languages, her narrative can be seen to challenge the idea that languages are fixed and separate structures. Instead, her narrative rather draws out the fluidity of linguistic experience.

Furthermore, by incorporating the language of 'Arabizi' into her narrative, she draws our attention to the creative and dynamic nature of language. Arabizi is, as pointed out by Mohammad Yaghan, a term coined from the two words 'arabi' (Arabic) and 'englizi' (English).⁷⁹ As such, it is

⁷⁸ Priti Sandu and Christina Higgins, 'Identity in post-colonial contexts' in Sian Preece, *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2016), 179-195 (p.186).

⁷⁹ Mohammad Ali Yaghan, "Arabizi': A Contemporary Style of Arabic Slang', *Design Issues*, 24, 2 (2008), 39-52 (p.39).

an amalgamation of two languages and cultures traditionally viewed as separate. Arabizi sprang spontaneously and organically from the Arab people before the revolutions across the Arab world in 2011-2012.

Beginning as a method of digital communication, as earlier mobile phones did not have Arabic characters on the keyboards, it became very popular among young people during the 2011 revolution. Many used it as a way of bypassing the strict censorship and cyber policing of the Ben Ali regime. It is also a marker of globalisation, as Yvez Gonzalez- Quijano remarks: 'writing in Arabizi became a status symbol among young urban, Western-educated Arabs to show- and sometimes to show off- their modernity, often a correlate of a critical attitude towards their parents' conservative values...'⁸⁰ The language of Arabizi arguably resonates with the author's own identity which is creative, dynamic and influenced by her interaction with different cultures.

Latiri's multilingual narrative can be read in relation to Jacques Derrida's argument that languages do not belong to individuals, nations or geographical spaces. In his work *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin* he states: 'I only have one language; it is not mine'. Derrida was a Jew who grew up in Algeria speaking the language of the French coloniser. As Maria-Daniella Dick argues, Derrida became aware in this way that language was a 'political structure' because he realised that colonialism places the colonial subject in a position of being mastered

⁸⁰ Yvez Gonzalez- Quijano, *Media Evolution on the Eve of the Arab Spring*, ed. by Leila Hudson, Adel Iskandar, Mimi Kirk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 159-166 (p.165).

through language. Derrida questions the idea of 'being-at-home' in language because if one feels that a language 'belongs' to them or is their 'home', one is unable to perceive the mastery and subordination at play in language use. By emphasising that languages do not belong, he breaks the link between language, geographical space and national identity. Derrida also argued in the same text that languages are always involved in political tension with one another: 'Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations'. By this he means that culture is always an imposition; the monolingualism of the other is about the primacy and superiority of one language over another.

Drawing on Derrida's theory that languages do not belong, we can see that Latiri's narrative subverts the idea that languages *belong* to fixed geographical territories or to fixed national identities. Furthermore, the plurality of Latiri's linguistic identity can be seen to be at odds with the national identity outlined in the first article of the constitution which promotes the idea that Tunisia is first and foremost an Arabic-speaking nation. It is important to acknowledge that Latiri does choose to write the majority of her narrative in French and, in her paper delivered in Manchester in 2016, she stated that this was because French, rather than Arabic, was her mother tongue and it was the language with which she felt she could achieve literary creativity.⁸¹ Latiri's decision to use the language

⁸¹ Dora Latiri, 'A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating'. Paper delivered as part of 'Arabs at Home and Abroad: Politics, Society, and Art' conference, University of Manchester, 27/06/2016. Dora Latiri, 'A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating'.

of the former coloniser is not linked to an engagement with Tunisia's colonial history. In the wake of the 2011 revolution, we can think of Latiri as writing in a 'post-postcolonial' moment in which her decision to use French stems from more contemporary motivations. Her use of French is a way of challenging the supremacy of Arabic in Tunisia, rather than challenging the authority of the former coloniser. Indeed, while the first article of the Tunisian constitution does not officially claim that Tunisia is a monolingual nation, there is no mention of any other languages apart from Arabic. The author's use of a multilingual/metrolingual narrative, incorporating not only formal Arabic but also the Tunisian dialectal form of Arabic, Aribizi, French and English, suggests a promotion of and celebration of linguistic diversity in Tunisia.

Indeed, Latiri has stated that the first article 'denies the cultural and linguistic diversity among Tunisians.'⁸² She argued that the 'code-switching' in her writing validates the linguistic practices at play in Tunisian society and questioned the counter-revolutionary positions of the coalition government which had been unable to acknowledge the linguistic usages and linguistic needs in post-revolution Tunisia. Her decision to include different languages in her text was an acknowledgement of her own particular voice that summarises her linguistic individuality that is also political.⁸³ By including words taken from the Tunisian dialectal form of Arabic, she also challenges the

⁸² Dora Latiri, 'A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating'.

⁸³ Dora Latiri, 'A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating'.

importance placed on classical Arabic in the constitution: 'The vernacular, the Tunisian dialect, which can be described as a creole Arabic, and is the language of the majority of Tunisians and which has generally low status, has yet to be recognised as the first language of most Tunisians.'⁸⁴

Shirley Geok-lin Lim claims that autobiographical narratives written in more than one language can help to convey the complexity of bilingual subjectivity:

Recounting, narrating again and again, our experiences as bilingual humans, stretching for a new aesthetics of modes of imagination and literacy that encompass two tongues, two language nations, two cultures, we may finally be able to write our lives outside the imperial centers of monolingual discourse, moving away from the ideal of singular, Latinate lives toward stories of fractured, bilingual, and dialogical relations.⁸⁵

In *Un amour de tn*, Latiri shuttles between different written languages, and also between visual and verbal languages. This creates a type of bricolage effect that helps to 'represent the interiority of living simultaneously in a plethora of languages'.⁸⁶ As such, her use of multilingualism within the text helps to reflect her syncretic linguistic identity.

⁸⁴ Dora Latiri, 'A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating'.

⁸⁵ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, ed. by Isabelle de Courtivron (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 39-48 (p.47).

⁸⁶ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Lives in Translation* (p.46).

Although the author suggests she is at ease when translating between different languages and cultures, there are some occasions when she acknowledges her inability to translate between them. For example, Latiri meditates on the fact that it is difficult to translate the French term for the Pacific ocean, *l'océan Pacifique*, into Arabic because '*Pacifique en arabe ça évoque la guerre plus que la mer*' (83). Similarly, she tells us that she encountered the word 'rabbitha' but admits: '*je ne savais pas demander ce que ça voulait dire*' (p.56).⁸⁷ She also remembers that she didn't know how to say the word 'synagogue' in Tunisian Arabic (p.105) and describes a scene when she encountered the word 'guergueb', meaning 'figue de barbarie', for the first time when she hears a local fruit seller use it: '*Il dit haw el guergueb voilà les figues de barbarie, je ne me souvenais plus de ce mot guergueb pour l'écrire*' (p.87). The fact that she acknowledges her own lack of facility with the Arabic language and the Tunisian dialect is significant here. Like Fellous, Latiri also grew up in a minority community in which French was the first language. While Fellous was deeply affected by her inability to speak any Arabic, Latiri shows that she has a good grasp of the language but that she is not totally fluent in it. Although we have previously focused on the way in which Latiri draws our attention to the syncretic relationship of Tunisia's three main religions, her relationship with language here also shows that identity is a dynamic process that allows for an element of conflict and untranslatability

⁸⁷ Rabbitha can be translated into English as 'raised'. It can be employed in the sense of raising a child or an animal.

between disparate factors. Her narrative holds various cultural and linguistic elements together, often in tension, while gesturing to both the permeability of cultures *and also* to the ways in which elements of culture can be untranslatable.

Syncretic identity in *La Préparation de la vie*

In the first chapter we discussed the painful separation that the narrator of *La Préparation de la vie* experiences as a result of different historical factors, particularly the social exclusion of the Jewish communities from Tunisia in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the Jewish communities in Tunisia had benefited from certain privileges while Tunisia was a protectorate, the aforementioned first article of the 1959 constitution caused them to suffer structural discrimination after Tunisia became independent from France in 1956. In this socio-political context, we can see how a young Fellous may have felt like she did not belong in this national culture that defined itself as Arabic-speaking and Muslim. Indeed, she reveals that her upbringing in a Jewish community in Tunisia strongly influenced her sense of self, leading her to appropriate a predominantly Western and French identity. Indeed, the author points to her French cultural influences and her monolingual French education. She also gestures to the way in which her mother's Jewish family came from Italy to Tunisia. In her research into Tunisia's Jewish history, Latiri writes that there are two distinct Jewish communities in Tunisia: the Grana and the Twansa:

The Grana community, having migrated to Tunisia through Europe was always westernised. With the instauration of French Alliance Israelite Universelle and the French Protectorate in the late 19th Century, the Grana community in Tunisia became enthusiastically French-educated and French-speaking; on the other hand, the indigenous Twansa were always similar to the local population (first the Berber then the Arabs)...⁸⁸

Indeed, in *Avenue de France*, a previous work of life-writing by Fellous, the narrator reveals a 'hiatus entre le monde du père, juif tounsi tendre et affectueux, mais assez fruste, maîtrisant mal la langue française, et l'infinie subtilité de la mère, juive Grana imprégnée de culture italienne et d'opéra'.⁸⁹ While Fellous does not refer explicitly to these differences within her family's Jewish heritage in *La Préparation de la vie*, she does invoke her Italian heritage that stems from her mother's Grana Jewish line. For example, the narrator remembers times spent abroad in Italy; when she was twenty years old she was on holiday in Naples and went to Rome (p.96). She also includes a photograph of a trip to Venice (p.74), remembers listening to Italian opera on the beach as a girl in Tunisia, references Sicilian cooking and tells us that she had 'une grand-mère italienne' (p.90). Given the fact that she was exiled from Tunisia, the references to Italy could be an attempt on the part of the author to

⁸⁸ Dora Carpenter-Latiri, 'Harissa.com: narrative(s), code-switching and nostalgia - a case study' in *Code-Switching, Languages in Contact and Electronic Writings*, ed. by Foued Laroussi (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 15-32 (pp.17-18).

⁸⁹ Samia Kassab-Charfi, 'Architecture et histoire chez Colette Fellous', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 3 (2009), 397-406 (p.404).

reconnect with her Italian heritage. Indeed, the author goes to some lengths to show her affiliation with European culture, however there are no suggestions that she actually identifies with the religious traditions of the Jewish faith. Although there are times when the author suggests some unity with the Jewish communities, for example when describing her place within their collective exile from Tunisia, she seems to want to distance herself from a specifically Jewish identity that history imposed on her. Indeed, her secular identity is determined by her primary allegiance to French and European culture.

Fellous also describes in some detail her trip around the former Soviet Union in 1974 (pp. 139-144), remembering in particular that she visited Bukhara, an ancient city and center of Islamic culture that is found in the modern day Uzbekistan, a part of the former Soviet Union. She says 'Un dimanche après-midi, à Boukhara, une fête en notre honneur avait été donné, la musique ressemblait à celle d'un mariage que j'avais vu à Mahdia il y a très longtemps (pp. 142-143).'⁹⁰ The fact that the dances in both places were similar points to the existence of shared cultural traditions across the Arab world. The correspondence between the two dances also suggests that her identity is in fact anchored in Tunisia as she meditates on these connections. Fellous narrator remembers that she used to feel embarrassed when she watched the highly charged and erotic movements of the female dancers in Mahdia: 'J'avais treize ans, j'ai fermé les yeux, je

⁹⁰ Mahdia is a Tunisian coastal city south of Monastir.

suis sortie sur la terrasse' (p.143). However, when witnessing the dancing in Bukhara, the narrator remembers that she felt a sense of liberation:

Ici, à Boukhara, sur la terrasse du Kolkhoze, c'était la première fois que j'osais danser ainsi, j'étais tellement loin que j'osais braver le ridicule et la danse était bien plus dépouillée, plus claire, plus franche. En sortant, vers la fin de l'après-midi, sur la place du marché, il y avait encore d'énormes pastèques entassées dans des camionnettes, les tissus et les visages m'étaient peu à peu familiers, un nouvel Orient apparaissait. (p.144)

Significantly, the narrator remembers that she was able to connect to an aspect of Arab culture that she previously felt disconnected from back in Tunisia. She explains that it was because she was 'tellement loin' that she was able to express herself through oriental dancing and this anecdote serves to reveal how the narrator was able to reconnect to an Arab identity through reproducing the 'gestes très anciens' that she had witnessed as a child in Tunisia. Fellous' variable identity can here be analysed in relation to Jonathan Okamura's concept of 'situational ethnicity' in which an individual's identity changes depending on the situation and social relationships formed.⁹¹

Although Fellous describes how she had abandoned Tunisia in favour of a French identity earlier in the narrative, we can see in this passage that she does still feel connected to an aspect of Arab culture.

⁹¹ Jonathan Y. Okamura, 'Situational ethnicity', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 4 (1981), 452-465 (p.463).

Indeed, the fact that she reconnects with this Arab dancing in Bukhara suggests that she is in some way linked to a pan-Arab identity that transcends the Tunisian nation. The images of Fellous dancing (p.143) also help to evoke the movement of the dance which, like her identity, is temporal, dynamic and performative. Furthermore, the use of the expression 'nouvel Orient' also indicates that she is discovering a new Arab culture which is similar to that of Tunisia but different. Although Fellous comes from a Jewish family, she is hinting at the fact that you can be *both* Jewish and Maghrebian at the same time. In this way, she reveals the nature of her own identity which is composed of different, and sometimes conflicting, associations.

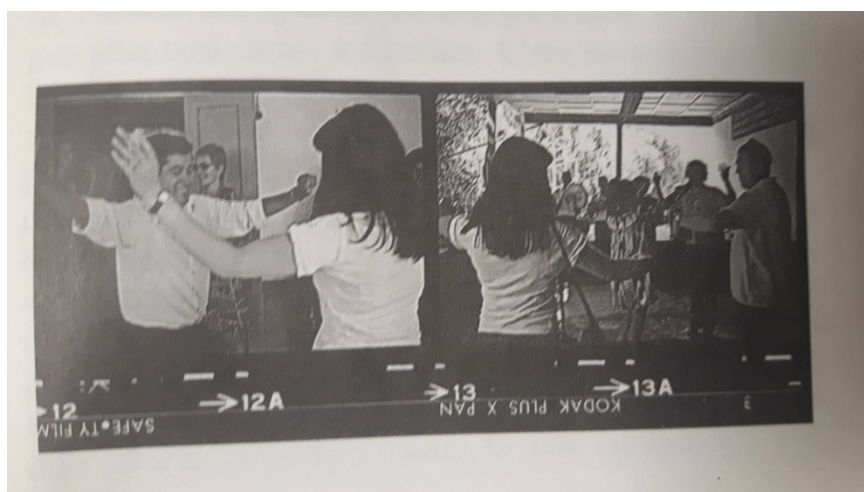


Image 6: *La Préparation de la vie* (p.143)

Like in *Un amour de tn*, there are certain parts of Fellous' narrative in which she openly celebrates Tunisia's syncretic cultural identity by gesturing to the diversity of its populations and heritage:

Là, le café des Nattes, là les thermes d'Antonin, la cathédrale Saint-Louis, les ports puniques...les chants du Malouf... Je les introduisais dans des fêtes de mariage et des cérémonies de transes, j'expliquais

les marabouts, les nuits de noces, les bijoux traditionnels...
l'héritage turc, la trace des Andalous et des Berbères, les esclaves
noirs et la présence juive depuis la destruction du temple de
Jérusalem, l'histoire de Kahena, celle de Didon (ou Elyssa), la
fondatrice de Carthage. (p.53)

She also describes how she took her French friends to a Muslim religious
festival at Sidi Bou Said:

J'aimais regarder leurs yeux aux mille et cent questions devant les
rituels de possession pendant la fête de Sidi Bou Said, à la mi-août,
les hommes en transe avalaient des bouts de verre dans la cour de
la mosquée, se roulaient dans le cactus et faisaient jouer la lame des
sabres sur leurs corps, j'offrais des bouquets de jasmin que
j'achetais à Bacca... (pp. 53-4)

The use of the verb 'offrir' is significant here as it suggests that Fellous
actually took part in the Muslim ceremony as opposed to taking the role of
an outside observer. Like Latiri, Fellous also shows that she participates in
other religious traditions which are outside of her family's religion and
culture. This anecdote, combined with the description of her participating
in the Arab dancing at Bukhara, serve to show that Fellous is not
completely cut off from the Arab-Muslim culture of Tunisia. Although she
was raised in a Francophone Jewish community that was seemingly
separate from the Arab-Muslim population, she shows that in fact she did
have some dialogue with their cultural traditions.

It is furthermore significant that when she later goes to visit the psychiatrist in Paris, she describes the syncretic nature of her identity, picking out different positive aspects of Tunisian culture which have shaped her:

J'avais dessiné très vite ma position dans l'histoire de la famille... puis ma position dans ma famille élargie qu'était la France. J'ai décrit brièvement la Tunisie, les fêtes juives, mais aussi les gâteaux du Mouloud, la fête du Prophète, ces petites crèmes parfumées aux graines de pin, j'ai nommé le Malouf, le cinéma égyptien, la grand-mère italienne, le lycée Carnot, la danse, la Sorbonne... (p.90)

While at times the author celebrates the cosmopolitan character of her homeland and her own identity, she does not seem to be able embrace the diversity of her own identity. The narrative works to reveal the tensions and conflicts that the narrator experiences as a result of her exile from the homeland and her attempt to assimilate to a French identity. For example, she describes how she associated Tunisia with her past and France with her present: 'J'avais vingt-deux ans, la Tunisie était mon passé, je n'en avais plus vraiment besoin, il fallait plutôt bâtir chaque seconde du présent, quelques jours en été me suffisaient pour ne pas me séparer tout à fait du pays et de ses sensations indélébiles qui m'avaient formée et dont j'étais tatouée, mais jamais davantage' (pp.51-52). This suggests that the narrator is not able to easily relate to a hybrid identity in which *both* cultures form a part of her identity. Rather, she seeks to compartmentalise the two as separate from one another.

Indeed, Fellous openly states that she prefers to see the country through the exoticising eyes of the foreigner and suggests that her identity is conflicted. For example, she describes how she took her French friends to visit Tunisia : 'Je jouais à la touriste quand j'y retournais, je faisais visiter Carthage, Salammbô, Djerba ou Tozeur aux amis...' (p,53) and 'je préférais me promener dans un exotisme que je découvrais à travers les yeux des étrangers' (54). Robert Watson argues that Fellous occupies a position on her return trips home that is 'between native and foreigner'.⁹² Through appropriating the gaze of a tourist, she is able to chase away and mask 'la moindre pointe de mélancolie' (p.53). She also acknowledges that the country's diverse cultural identity is also at times a conflicted space:

[La Tunisie] n'avait pas ces couleurs-là, quelque chose de plus mystérieux, de plus sombre, grave, rauque, violent et complexe y était logé. J'avais grandi dans cet étrange tissu qui gardait la trace et le goût de familles juxtaposées, venues de tout le bassin méditerranéen, mais aussi la trace de combats, de silences, de secrets politiques, de larmes cachées et d'humiliations. Le pays ne se donnait à voir que par éclats et sensations fugitives, j'avais peur de l'approcher davantage, je ne faisais que le sentir, peur d'y trouver des conflits qui me pousseraient à ne plus y revenir et je

⁹² Robert Watson, 'Secondhand Memories: Franco-Tunisian Jewish Women and the Predicament of Writing Return', *Life Writing*, 10, 1 (March 2013), 25-46 (p.34).

l'aimais trop pour pouvoir supporter ce qui aurait été une perte, un arrachement. (55)

The author situates herself within Tunisia's cosmopolitan society, acknowledging how she had grown up in the 'étrange tissu' of juxtaposed cultures. But here, rather than celebrating its diversity, she draws out the darker side of Tunisia's culture and the conflicts inherent to the society. Significantly, she also suggests that her inherited syncretic identity is a source of anxiety for her: 'Je remettais donc toujours à plus tard la confrontation crue avec le passé, ce n'était pas le moment, je n'avais pas le temps, tout était trop enchevêtré, l'histoire familiale autant que l'histoire du pays. (55) These tangled, or indeed syncretic, histories had caused the author to distance herself from her homeland. However, when she returns to Tunisia in the wake of the revolution, she acknowledges that she feels anxious about her identity: 'Belle chance d'être là, oui, même si en réalité je suis perdue, je ne sais plus qui je suis, pulvérisés mes sens. Le pays vacille, difficile de ne pas vaciller avec lui' (85). As such, Fellous conveys the way in which she feels a degree of insecurity about her identity. She also draws an important correlation here between her own unstable identity and that of Tunisia. In the previous chapters we have seen that Fellous, like Latiri, also articulates a sense of national identity. Her sense of self is also marked by a sense of loss and instability due to her exile from Tunisia. In this chapter I have focused on the ways in which Fellous simultaneously celebrates the syncretic nature of her identity, referring to all the diverse, and sometimes opposing, cultures which have shaped her, and also shows a degree of anxiety as a result of it. As in Latiri's *Un amour*

de tn, there is a dialectic in Fellous' narrative which shuttles between different points of cultural identification.

Both Latiri and Fellous' autobiographical narratives demonstrate an awareness of and an engagement with many different cultures, not just those of the homeland and the host country. Fellous shows a closer engagement with the culture of the former coloniser, France, than does Latiri. She describes how she abandoned Tunisia as a young woman to adopt a French identity. Yet Fellous also signals that she belongs to a wider diasporic Jewish community, while her references to time spent in Italy and to her Italian ancestry show that she identifies with a plural identity that exceeds Tunisia and France. The description of her oriental dancing in Bukhara, and to the various Muslim cultural traditions that she experienced while a child in Tunisia, further reinforces the idea that the narrator is connected to a form of Arab culture that bypasses the Tunisian homeland. The narratives do not create a space in which differences are resolved; rather they draw out the tensions that the narrators feel towards different aspects of their identities. There is a focus on the complexity and intractability of cultural identity, with both writers alluding to the complex web of cultural and religious factors that have shaped their subjectivities. As McClennen argues, dialectical tensions between national and transnational identities and feelings of belonging and dislocation are common features of the literature of exiled individuals. She argues for a 'dialectics of exile' in which the contradictory concepts coexist in

tension.⁹³ Indeed, writers such as Latiri and Fellous contribute to discussions on the consequences of migration, globalisation, and of living within and between different cultures. Importantly, their autobiographical narratives also show that the concept of national identity, enshrined in the Tunisian constitution, also alienates citizens who do not identify with Arabic or Islam. Their syncretic narratives call for new ways of thinking about identity in Tunisia and demonstrate the need for a new model which recognises the plurality and diversity in Tunisian society. Although we have seen in this chapter that different cultural and national elements intersect in the narratives to evoke syncretic postcolonial identities, my reading of identity within the texts has thus far failed to specifically address the question of gender. In the next chapter I will therefore address the way in which gender might inform the 'syncretic mix' of both authors' representations of their identities.

⁹³ McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile*, p.2.

Chapter 4 : Feminist/Feminine Identities

Feminist scholars have contested the idea that a person's biological sex determines their gender⁹⁴, with Judith Butler famously arguing that gender is a performative aspect of identity.⁹⁵ If gender is a mobile category, it therefore shares similar qualities to the categories of nationality and religion that we have previously discussed; all of these concepts can be seen to be performative and dynamic as opposed to being essential and fixed aspects of identity. They are of course also categories which intertwine and cut across each other, especially in the Tunisian context in which religion and traditional gender roles are strongly connected to one another, as well as to politics and debates about national identity. As the question of gender is central to the question of identity, it is important to address it when exploring the syncretic nature of identity within both texts.

In this chapter I will investigate both authors' engagement with gender roles and the position of women in Tunisian society. Colette Fellous and Dora Latiri both grew up in Tunisia at a time when the country

⁹⁴ Simone De Beauvoir distinguishes between the terms 'sex' and 'gender' in her groundbreaking work *Le deuxième sexe*. She famously argued that 'On ne naît pas femme, on le devient'. See: Simone De Beauvoir, *Le Deuxieme Sexe, Vol II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p.13.

⁹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.25.

was experiencing a total revolution of women's rights. After Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956, President Bourguiba introduced many reforms in family law that enabled Tunisian women to acquire some of the most advanced legal rights in the Arab world.⁹⁶ The Code of Personal Status (CPS), introduced in 1956, gave women significant rights through the abolition of repudiation and polygamy, the right to judicial divorce, and equality in terms of child custody. Furthermore, Tunisian women gained the right to vote and to stand as candidates in elections in 1957 and education was universalised in 1958.⁹⁷ However, scholars have since claimed that Tunisian women's rights reforms were not based on a genuine desire to address gender equality but were based on a strategy that would enable the Bourguiba regime to stay in power. For example, Mounira Charrad argues that the reforms to family law were seen as a way of creating a 'new nation state in which tribal allegiances would no longer serve as a basis for political action.'⁹⁸ Similarly, Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués' study on gender equality in Tunisia states that Bourguiba viewed female labour primarily as a way of stimulating economic growth, while Ben Ali used women's rights as a way of co-opting regime critics and gaining favour with the West.⁹⁹ While Amel Grami recognises the important contribution that Bourguiba made to advancing

⁹⁶ Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués, 'Gendering the Arab Spring? Rights and (in)security of Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan women', *Security Dialogue*, 44, 5-6 (2013), 393-409 (p.397).

⁹⁷ It was only made compulsory in 1991.

⁹⁸ Mounira Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (California: University of California Press, 2001), p.232.

⁹⁹ Johansson-Nogués, 'Gendering the Arab Spring?' (p.397).

women's rights in Tunisia, she is also keen to highlight the fact that they were often used as 'political commodities to be traded and exchanged between male leaders of various political groups.'¹⁰⁰ As Caitlin Murline puts it, the regimes wanted 'to portray an image of the Tunisian state and civil society as being amiable towards women's interests'¹⁰¹ in a modernisation project that many consider to have been a 'democratic façade'¹⁰² and a 'political hedge fund against national and, above all, international accusations of the abuse of human rights'.¹⁰³

As the women's rights reforms did not spring from an organic movement at a grass-roots level, it was difficult for citizens to suddenly change their ways of life and ways of thinking to accommodate the feminist reforms that were being imposed from above as a strategic choice by the elites in power.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, many Muslims felt that the CPS went against Sharia law and 'violated the religiously sanctioned existence of gendered complementary spheres for men and women', also depriving men of jobs.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, Ahmed Mestiri, the Minister for Justice in Tunisia in 1956, has recently claimed that the law was in advance of society.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Dora Latiri has argued in an interview that this

¹⁰⁰Amel Grami, 'Gender Equality in Tunisia', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35, 3 (2008), 349-361(p.359).

¹⁰¹ Caitlin Murline, 'Women's Organizations in Tunisia: Transforming Feminist Discourse in a Transitioning State', Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection, Paper 1136 (2011), 1-27 (p.13).

¹⁰² Grami, 'Gender Equality in Tunisia' (p.359).

¹⁰³ Julia Clancy-Smith, *Tunisian Revolutions: Reflections on Seas, Coasts and Interiors* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2014), p.35.

¹⁰⁴ Charrad, *States and Women's Rights*, p.233.

¹⁰⁵ Clancy-Smith, *Tunisian Revolutions*, p.35.

¹⁰⁶ Ahmed Mestiri, Minister of Justice in Tunisia in 1956, interview with Mounira Charrad. Cited in: Charrad, *States and Women's Rights*, p.220.

context of state-directed feminism and the resulting drastic changes to family law created tensions and conflict between men and women at a local level.¹⁰⁷

At the time that Fellous and Latiri's texts were being written and or published, the post-revolutionary Ennahdha government was attempting to curb the rights of Tunisian women by changing the constitution to say that women are 'complementary to men'.¹⁰⁸ Both writers therefore created their narratives at the very moment that Tunisia was entering into a new phase dominated by political Islam, a period in which traditional views on gender roles posed a serious threat to Tunisian women's rights.¹⁰⁹ In order to come to some understanding of how gender informs the syncretic identities at play in both narratives, we must firstly discuss the ways in which the narrators present their girlhoods in Tunisia. How do they explore and represent their memories of life in Tunisia as either Muslim or Jewish girls? Are there any suggestions that patriarchal values persisted in this period and continue to exist in the contemporary post-revolution era? How is the relationship between men and women explored? Do they engage with traditional gender roles in Tunisia and, if so, how are these presented and/or contested? To what extent do the narrators engage with contemporary discourse in political Islam that calls for patriarchy to be formally ingrained in the national constitution?

¹⁰⁷ Dora Latiri, interview with the author, 17/06/2016.

¹⁰⁸ Khedija Arfaoui, 'Womens empowerment: the case of Tunisia in the Arab Spring' in *Multiculturalism in North Africa: Aftermath of the Arab Spring*, ed. by Moha Ennaji (New York: Routledge, 2014), 159-175 (p.167).

¹⁰⁹ Clancy-Smith, *Tunisian Revolutions*, 35.

Finally, I will discuss the degree to which the narrators embrace the identity category of 'woman' as a political position from which to speak.

Feminist/ Feminine identity in *Un amour de tn*

In *Un amour de tn*, the narrative explores Latiri's experience of growing up as a girl in Tunisia. In order to understand the ways in which the author represents the relationship between men and women at this time, I will firstly analyse her representation of her relationship with her late father which is a recurring theme in the narrative. Latiri arguably depicts her family life as having been heavily influenced by her father's authority and, as such, I will explore how the author engages with memories of her father and how this relationship may have impacted her identity.

She remembers that her father had once saved her eldest sister's life and states: 'C'est un père qui donne la vie, qui la suspend parfois' (p.50). This quotation suggests that the narrator views her father as someone who has power over life and death. The notion of a powerful paternal figure is further reinforced by the mother's use of the verb 'obliger' when describing how he forced Latiri's sister to breathe: 'la mère dit il lui aurait cassé les dents pour l'obliger à respirer. (50)' The idea that a father can 'suspend' a life is very much tied up with the narrator's personal experience of exile that we discussed in the first chapter. Latiri had a lover who was not Tunisian and, after her father had intercepted their love letters, she was forbidden from seeing the man again (51). The author describes in graphic detail the memory of her father whipping her

as a punishment¹¹⁰ and, as such, we get a sense of the powerlessness that she felt as a young woman forced to submit to the violence of her father's authority. By revisiting these memories in such detail, Latiri suggests a degree of anger about what she was forced to experience at the hands of her father.

At this time, many judges still continued to rely on Islamic law when interpreting the CPS, and women who married outside of their culture, specifically to non-Muslims, were often denied the right to inheritance.¹¹¹ I think this specific historical context is important for understanding Latiri's representation of her father's reaction to her decision to take a foreign lover who was Lebanese and Christian. The historical context points to a society in which it was difficult for women to make their own choices about who to form relationships with and highlights the influence that Islamic law and traditional thinking about gender roles had on women's lives. Whereas women might have appeared on the surface to have more freedoms and equality, Latiri's personal narrative draws us into the domestic sphere to reveal the everyday realities for Tunisian women who were still subject to a patriarchal cultural, if not legal, system that was heavily influenced by Islamic laws. By detailing the way in which her father whipped her for having a foreign lover, Latiri shows how her body was inscribed with the violence of these

¹¹⁰ See chapter one of this dissertation for more detail on the whipping.

¹¹¹ Salsabil Klibi, 'Tunisia: A New Constitution and More Women Judges' in *Gender and the Judiciary in Africa: From Obscurity to Parity?* ed. by Gretchen Bauer and Josephine Dawuni (London: Routledge, 2015), 20-35 (p.33).

patriarchal values which continued to persist within the family home. Through engaging with these negative memories, and suggesting her own opposition to her family's patriarchal values, the author foregrounds her own identity as a liberated and modern woman.

In her narrative of her return to Tunisia in the wake of the revolution, it is significant that Latiri describes her encounters with the objectifying male gaze. Fran Lloyd has argued that the male gaze has 'dominated cultural discourse until recently, particularly on writing on the Orient.'¹¹² Latiri's narrative arguable challenges the power of the male gaze which has traditionally objectified women, placing them in an inferior position. For example, when she gets locked out of her flat she goes downstairs to see the caretaker for a spare key and she describes the way he looks at her: 'j'ai mon appareil-photo autour du cou, le poids de l'appareil fait coller le tee-shirt géant sur ma poitrine, le gardien me regarde. Je reconnais ce regard. (p.73)' This incident makes the narrator think of a time when she was in a plane on the way back to Tunisia and she saw a Tunisian political party leader and his men on the same return journey as her. She says: 'Dans l'avion un homme barbu et boudiné dans une chemise blanche me regarde, il attend que j'engage au moins un échange de regard, il sait que je les ai pris en photo... J'ai fermé mon visage, il me regarde de très haut, je suis assise, il est debout contre mon siège dans le passage étroit, de charmeur son visage est devenu très dur,

¹¹² Fran Lloyd, 'Embodiment and Performing the 'Self' in Contemporary Algerian Art: Houria Niati and Zineb Sedira', *The Journal of Algerian Studies*, 4 & 5 (1999), 59-78 (p.70).

reconnais ton maître, j'ai vu le regard, je n'ai pas rendu le mien, j'ai regardé au travers de lui, il est devenu transparent.' Returning to her encounter with the caretaker, she describes how he looks at the way in which her t-shirt sticks to her chest (p.74). While the author suggests she feels a degree of vulnerability because she is locked outside of her flat in her pajamas, she is able to defiantly return his objectifying gaze: 'Je le regarde, je crée un mur qu'il ne franchira pas. (p.74)' This anecdote demonstrates Latiri's own self-assurance in her position as a woman returning to Tunisia and the feminist tone of the passage indicates that the adult Latiri refuses to succumb to the chauvinistic values that persist in Tunisian society.

We could go so far as to say that her position as a female photographer also allows her to reverse the direction of the male objectifying gaze on her return trip home; the camera effects an important transfer of power that enables Latiri to claim her agency and equality as a woman. This is particularly evident in the photograph on the front cover of the book in which Latiri is pictured with her camera directed towards the viewer. Nicholas Mirzoeff claims that 'the right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity... It means requiring the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim a right and to determine what is right' and we might argue that Latiri is exercising her own 'right to look *back*' in her narrative.¹¹³ Mirzoeff's theory is especially pertinent when

¹¹³ Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look', *Critical Inquiry*, 37, 3 (2011), 473-496 (p.1).

considering the context in which *Un amour de tn* was written and published. In light of the contemporary political context, I would argue that Latiri's representation of the mutuality of the gaze implies an unequivocal feminist political engagement. By foregrounding the specificity of her female gaze in this image, she subtly underlines the importance of the female perspective in post-revolution Tunisia. Furthermore, as Lloyd argues, 'the act of self-representation also pushes at the boundaries of acceptable practice within an Islamic visual tradition which has been wary of figurative representation and where the artists associated with its revered forms have usually been male.'¹¹⁴

Latiri claims that she was able to sense the rising political Islamist sentiment through her artistic sensibility.¹¹⁵ By way of explanation, she draws our attention to the image of the mermaid whose breasts have been effaced by thick brushstrokes of white paint (p.39). The erasure of the breasts suggests that the perpetrator felt offended by the visibility of the female body displayed in a public space. As conservative Muslims believe that women's bodies should not be visible in public spaces, the covering of the breasts is a visual suggestion that conservative Islamic and patriarchal values are gaining favour in Tunisian society. In addition to this, Latiri's photographs of the women wearing the full-body veils on pages 62-63 could gesture to the author's own fears about the rising Islamist sentiment in Tunisian politics and the threat that this posed to women's rights. Prior

¹¹⁴ Lloyd, 'Embodiment and Performing the 'Self' in Contemporary Algerian Art' (p.70).

¹¹⁵ Dora Latiri, interview with the author, 17/06/2016.

to the revolution, the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali had attempted to limit the influence of Islam in political life by enforcing a separation between the religious authorities and the state.¹¹⁶ Women were prohibited from wearing the veil in public spaces, including state-owned schools and universities. The 2011 revolution and the resulting lift of the ban on veiling allowed women a new freedom to wear what they wanted.¹¹⁷ Mona Eltahawy has pointed to a link between the 2011 revolution and an increase in veiling in Tunisian society, claiming that some women have been forced by Salafist groups to wear the hijab.¹¹⁸ She argues that, in Tunisia, 'wearing the hijab does not remain a real choice for women' as long as the Salafist violence and discrimination flourishes.¹¹⁹

The images of the veiled women in Latiri's text contrast greatly with the unveiled self-portrait on the front cover of the book. Indeed, as Lloyd states, 'the act of self-representation... pushes at the boundaries of acceptable practice within an Islamic visual tradition which has been wary of figurative representation and where the artists associated with its revered forms have usually been male.'¹²⁰ As such, it is possible to read the juxtaposition of the unveiled self-portrait and the images of the veiled women as an indication of the author's own position as a liberal, modern and independent woman in contrast to the supposedly traditional gender

¹¹⁶ Hussey, 'Tunisia: order and disorder' (p.133).

¹¹⁷ 'Tunisia: Can niqabs and bikinis live side-by-side?', BBC News (27/03/13), accessible here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21925753> [accessed 03/05/16].

¹¹⁸ Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East needs a sexual revolution* (London: Hachette UK, 2015), p.70.

¹¹⁹ Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens*, p.72.

¹²⁰ Lloyd, 'Embodiment and Performing the 'Self' in Contemporary Algerian Art' (p.70).

roles indicated by the Islamic veils. Nevertheless, such a reading fails to take into account the complex and often contradictory ways in which the narrative engages with the theme of veiling. Although the images of the veiled women have been described by Nina Wardleworth as 'ghostly'¹²¹, implying they lack a real presence or personality, I would argue that they are to be read in relation to, and not separate from, the text which evokes the personalities and daily rituals of veiled Tunisian women on the beach:

...parfois c'est en sefsari qu'elles rentrent dans l'eau, le tissu blanc colle aussi, dessine une silhouette plus abstraite, les gestes pour rassembler le tissu qui gonfle et s'échappe sont une danse. Parfois elles se lavent aussi, le *tfal l'argile* est plus gris que la couleur du sable, c'est un hammam en plein air, joyeux et solaire. Assises dans l'eau profonde, elles plongent la tête pour bien rincer les cheveux.
(p.59)

The women look as though they are in conversation with one another, with the woman on the left hand side visibly turned towards the woman on the right. In this way, the narrative gives personality and movement to the veiled women on the beach. Latiri furthermore evokes the significant presence of veiling in the society as she describes all the different coloured veils she can see in La Goulette: '...il y a des voiles noirs, des voiles blancs, des voiles de couleur, des niqabs' (p.61). She also mentions the sefsari (p.59), a full body veil made of white silk that is specific to Tunisia. In this

¹²¹ Wardleworth, 'The Roman Maghrébin in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring' (p.145).

way, the narrative creates an impression of the plurality within the tradition of Muslim veiling. By highlighting different types of veils, she reminds us that there are some Islamic veils which are also *national* symbols and that women, when not being coerced into wearing a specific type of veil, have a wide ranging choice of what to wear. The narrator furthermore juxtaposes the descriptions of the veiled Muslim women with unveiled women by describing the 'belles baigneuses' who 'sortent de l'eau en combinaison de nylon rose, le nylon colle à la peau, elles sont rondes, glissantes et lisses...' (p.59). She also describes how her cousin, also from a Muslim family, used to sunbathe 'sur la plage en soutien-gorge de satin rose' and how the Western tourists at the hotel sunbathe with 'des peaux nues' (p.60). It is possible to read the juxtaposition between female nudity and veiling as enhancing the 'otherness' of the veiled Muslim women. However, I would argue that these references to female nudity, and the attention to the female form, serve to further reinforce the idea that Tunisia is a diverse society with many women, including Muslims, who do not wear the veil. This helps to challenge popular Western stereotypes which view Muslim women as 'victims, oppressed, [and] having little agency.'¹²² In particular, it subverts Eltahawy's claim that veiled Muslim women in Tunisia transform their bodies into canvases upon which they 'signal their acquiescence to conservatism and patriarchy.'¹²³

¹²² Suad Joseph, 'Thinking intentionality: Arab women's subjectivity and its discontents', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 8, 2 (2012), 1–25 (p.10).

¹²³ Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens*, 72.

When viewing these photographs, readers with knowledge of the contemporary artist Zineb Sedira may be reminded of the artwork 'Self-Portraits or the Virgin Mary series' (2000) in which Sedira attempts to destabilise Western stereotypes that view veiled Muslim women as 'other' by drawing our attention to the visual parallels between veiled women in the Muslim tradition and veiled women in the Christian tradition. Latiri also reminds her readers of the Christian tradition of veiling by including an image of a statue of the Virgin Mary at the end of the narrative (111). Her treatment of veiling could thus be read in relation to Reina Lewis and Sara Mills' statement that the veil has different meanings for its wearers and 'is differently legible to different observers.'¹²⁴



Image 7: Zineb Sedira, 'Self-Portrait or the Virgin Mary' (2000)¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, *Feminist postcolonial theory: a reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2003), p.16.

¹²⁵ From the Series Self-Portraits, Self-Portrait or the Virgin Mary. 2000. Photography by Zineb Sedira.

Indeed, to project a singular interpretation of the veil onto a woman would be to strip her of her agency in the same way that Orientalist artists sought to project their own Western interpretations onto Arab women that they represented in their artworks as sexualised, voiceless and 'other'.

Furthermore, I propose that we can draw on the pioneering anthropologist, Saba Mahmood, when considering Latiri's work. Mahmood interrogates the idea that Muslim women's agency should be seen as 'as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination.'¹²⁶ She offers a way of thinking about Islamic women's agency which is not reducible to the binary opposition of liberal freedom versus religious oppression. The veil can be worn by Muslim women 'not to express an identity but as a necessary, if insufficient, condition for attaining the goal internal to that practice . . . The veil in this sense is the means both of being and becoming a certain kind of person . . . [not] an expression of a performed self.'¹²⁷ In simpler terms, the veil is not necessarily opposed to Muslim woman's agency because many women choose to wear it for their own spiritual or personal reasons. By drawing our attention to both the visibility and invisibility of women's bodies in Tunisia, Latiri invites us to consider the ways in which they constitute important visible symbols which are 'subject to cultural coding'¹²⁸ and which are caught between liberalism and conservatism, secularism and Islam, democracy and

¹²⁶ Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival', *Cultural Anthropology*, 16, 2 (May, 2001), 202-236 (p.203).

¹²⁷ Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent' (p.210).

¹²⁸ Lloyd, 'Embodiment and Performing the 'Self' in Contemporary Algerian Art' (p.71).

theocracy. Indeed, the absence of any judgment on veiling is significant as it suggests that Latiri is aware of the plural and arbitrary nature of this symbol, the meaning of which varies according to the wearer, the context and the observer.

In addition, the narrative also engages with the concept of gender through the character of Khemayiss. Latiri tells us that this former family friend was '*efféminé*' (p.57) and that he used to spend evenings in La Goulette where he would dance with '*un foulard sur les hanches*' and hold hands with sailors (p.57). Homosexuality is illegal in Tunisia, and the fact that Khemayiss wears the veil around his hips suggests a playful subversion of traditional gender roles that is reminiscent of Butler's theory of gender as performance. Latiri's anecdote about transgender identity engages with a taboo topic that previously would have been censored by the Ben Ali regime before the revolution. Her decision to engage with this theme suggests a desire to bring it out of the silence imposed on it by the former regime. At a time when the Ennahdha party was attempting to solidify traditional gender roles in the constitution, this aspect of her narrative can be read as a bold political statement that invites her readers to challenge binary thinking about gender.

Furthermore, quoting Mahmoud Darwich, the narrator says '*Un autre jour viendra, féminin...*' (p.92). The use of the adjective '*féminin*' suggests the narrator's belief that women will be central to politics in the new Tunisia, echoing the important role they already played in the 2011 revolution. As discussed in our earlier chapter on 'National Identities', Latiri also includes an ambiguous passage which links the revolution to

the metaphor of pregnancy and childbirth (p.92). She also refers to her homeland as a pregnant womb in the first chapter: 'le ventre gravide' (p.10). By personifying the new nation as a pregnant woman and imagining a 'feminine' future for Tunisia, the author suggests that the nation can be rethought of as a space for women, rather than as a traditionally masculine, patriarchal power structure. Drawing on the theory of *Écriture féminine*, Victoria Best furthermore argues that part of the multiplicity assigned to feminine identity is understood as being linked to women's capacity to give birth: 'Maternity is seen as endowing her with an acceptance, totally alien to traditional philosophy, of otherness within identity. The embrace of otherness or doubleness by female bodies, can be seen to result in a form of writing that subverts the organising conventions of narrative.' Latiri's description of the nation as a pregnant woman can therefore be read as a way of exploring the otherness and diversity *within* national identity and the multiplicity of her own subjectivity. In this way, she challenges the notion that national identity can be reduced to a singular and fixed essence.

Feminist/feminine identity in *La préparation de la vie*

In *La Préparation de la Vie*, Fellous is returning to Tunisia at a time when the Ennahdha party has already come to power, therefore slightly later than Latiri who returns in the month before the country's first democratic elections. Like Latiri, Fellous uses her return trip home to reflect on her childhood as a Jewish girl in Tunisia.

Both writers show that they had complex relationships with their fathers. While Fellous does not say that her father was physically abusive to her, she does suggest that he occupied a patriarchal role within the family. Although polygamy had been banned by the Bourguiba regime in 1959, Fellous states that her father had led a double life with two different families for twenty years: 'Lui qui nous avait caché pendant vingt ans sa double vie, il avait pourtant jusqu'au bout réussi à garder sur son visage tant de clarté, de naïveté, de bonté et de gaieté, c'est étrange. (p.15)' The author's surprise at the clarity and naivety on her father's face suggests that she is unable to understand, or possibly forgive, his deceitful conduct. Rather than commenting further on her father's affair, the author pushes it to one side in a blunt and matter-of-fact statement: 'La voilà maintenant mon histoire. (p.17)' This line suggests that, rather than dwelling on her father's infidelity, the author is privileging her own female narrative voice and life-story.

On a trip to the beach with her friend Souad, the narrator is reminded of the physical abuse that she experienced as a prepubescent girl at the hands of her swimming teacher. Souad had invited her to have lunch at the *Oiseau bleu* café on the beach but Fellous realises that it is located in the same spot where she used to have her swimming lessons. The return to this place triggers involuntary memories for the narrator:

Un vif dégoût soudain...Je n'ai pas supporté de revenir à cet endroit : excusez-moi, Souad, mais tu vois bien qu'il n'y a plus de sable, je ne peux pas rester ici, c'est trop moche trop sale, j'ai laissé mon corps de petite fille ici, je ne peux plus être là maintenant, c'est

à la fois trop proche et trop loin, je sais que c'est idiot mais je ne peux pas t'expliquer, c'est fini tout ça, je ne veux plus y penser, ça ne sert à rien. On a posé d'immenses blocs de pierre pour fixer le rivage, on ne reconnaît presque plus rien, la vue est bouchée, regarde comme la mer est glauque, il y a des poubelles juste à côté... Soudain, j'ai retrouvé les grosses mains velues du vieux maître nageur qui me faisait faire la planche sur le ventre pour mieux toucher mes seins et mes hanches... Son maillot short de nylon bleu roi, ses cheveux blancs coupés en brosse, ses poils gris argent sur la poitrine, ses lunettes rondes toujours tachées de sel, son zézaïement, tout est là, intact... Je faisais mine de ne pas comprendre, je gardais la peur dans mon corps, elle est toujours là. Mais malgré mes coups de pied, le vieux maître nageur recommençait à palper mon ventre et mes seins... (pp. 111-12)

In this passage the narrator describes the traumatic nature of the experience that still continues to affect her emotionally as an adult. Fellous does not only present the memories of masculine abuse as limited to her encounters with the swimming teacher. She says:

J'avais l'habitude en ville aussi : les hommes touchaient les petites filles, ils se collaient, faisaient des gestes obscènes, dans le bus, au cinéma, dans une ruelle, ils mettaient très vite leur main entre nos jambes, sur nos fesses ou sur nos seins et ils s'en allaient, l'air de rien. J'avais appris à m'esquiver toujours, sans rien dire. (p.112)

This quote can be compared to Latiri's representation of the objectifying male gaze. Just as Latiri explored the power relationship between men and

women in Tunisia, describing how she felt objectified as a woman, Fellous also here shows how women were frequently treated by men as sexualised objects in the streets.

Like Fellous, Latiri also engages briefly with the theme of rape in her narrative; she remembers taking her friend to the police station to report 'une tentative de viol' (pp.30-31). Fellous' engagement with male-authored violence towards women can also be read in relation to Latiri's representation of her father whipping her. The fact that both narrators have stories to tell about physical abuse towards women can be read as indicative of the particular social context of violence towards women in Tunisia. A special report by Amnesty International in 2015 stated that 'All too often, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Tunisia are blamed and punished for the crime they have suffered. A woman who is raped is held responsible for her assault and rejected by her family and community. A wife who is beaten by her husband is told to remain in the abusive relationship rather than bring "shame" on the family... Such social attitudes and failings by the state are particularly harmful in a country where sexual and gender-based violence remains prevalent.'¹²⁹ The report also highlights the fact that nearly one in two women (47%) has experienced violence and, of these, around one in six has suffered sexual violence. These figures emerged from the first national survey of such

¹²⁹ 'Assaulted and Accused: Sexual and Gender-based violence in Tunisia', *Amnesty International Ltd.* (November, 2015), 1-84 (p.4), accessible here: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/tunisia.assaulted_and_accused.full_report.final.pdf> [accessed 28/08/2016]

issues, conducted in 2010 by the Office Nationale de la Famille et de la Population (ONFP). However, as the report acknowledges, the true scale of sexual violence is unknown as it is under-reported and ‘ Many survivors do not come forward out of fear of being accused of complicity in the crime and publicly shamed.’¹³⁰

In *La Préparation de la Vie*, the narrator describes how, at the time of the abuse, she was unable to tell her parents what had happened. This inability to speak about the events still plagues her as she cannot bring herself to tell Souad why she does not want to have lunch in this particular café. This silence echoes the silence that the Amnesty International report refers to; it is symptomatic of a society in which ‘Rape and sexual assault of women and girls are seen as acts that undermine the family’s reputation rather than a violation of the victims’ bodily integrity’.¹³¹ While she is unable to tell the story aloud to her friends and family, it is interesting that the author chooses to put the story into writing. Indeed, we could in this sense see writing for Fellous as a form of healing or ‘scriptotherapy’ that enables her to come to terms with her difficult memories of physical abuse that she experienced as a minor in Tunisia.

Having discussed the ways in which Fellous represents her childhood as a girl in Tunisia, I will now consider the ways in which she engages with contemporary political debates on the position of women in Tunisian society. Much of the information that we get about the Ennahdha

¹³⁰ ‘Assaulted and Accused: Sexual and Gender-based violence in Tunisia’ (p.4).

¹³¹ ‘Assaulted and Accused: Sexual and Gender-based violence in Tunisia’ (p.5).

government comes through the voice of the character Souad, a modern and liberal Tunisian woman who is very vocal about her opposition to the government and its proposals to limit the rights of Tunisian women. Souad announces that 'notre révolution était si belle mais je crois qu'elle n'a pas vraiment existé, elle était juste notre rêve' (p.122). The character goes on to say that 'les visages vont se refermer comme avant, la peur et l'incertitude vont revenir, on commence à voiler les petites filles dans certaines écoles...' (pp.122-123) Indeed, Souad's concerns are justified by the fact that in December 2012 more than 200 nursery schools were reported to be run by mysterious Islamic associations that had been inculcating children with a rigorous form of Islam and imposing the wearing of the hijab on small children.¹³² When Souad asks 'pourquoi cette haine des femmes?' she is clearly referring to the government's proposals to change the constitution so that women would no longer be equal to men.¹³³

Just as Latiri's narrative is a way for the author to 'participate in the revolution', we can read Fellous' text as posing a challenge to contemporary political discourse that proposed to strip women of their rights. There are, moreover, occasions when the narrator does use her

¹³² Layla Reguiat, 'Des petites filles voilées à l'âge de trois ans', *Le Maghreb Magazine*, 15 (December 2012), 62- 65 (pp.61- 3).

¹³³ Souad's question can be read in relation to Zmerli's argument that the term 'complementarity' was chosen to make the notion of equality of the sexes forgotten, to replace it by the existence of two beings, man and a truncated being, of second category, deprived of personality, freedom, not a woman but a complementary being. In: Saadeddine Zmerli, 'Complémentarité, dites-vous?' (2012), <<http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/9049-complementarite-dites-vous>> [accessed 30/06/2016].

first-person narrative voice to condemn the government's attitudes towards women. She claims that '...on s'y perd, on ne croit plus en la justice...' (p.119) and laments the fact that 'une femme qui clame sa liberté' is sent to prison (p.119). Later in the text, Fellous tells us that a woman named Amina 'vient d'être libérée de prison' (p.176) and we can infer that Amina is the same woman who was sent to prison for claiming her freedom. Amina Tyler was a young Tunisian woman and FEMEN activist who was imprisoned in Tunisia in 2013 for posting a photograph of her naked torso on the internet.¹³⁴ On her torso she had written 'my body is mine and not the source of anyone's honour' in Arabic. As a result, the extremist Tunisian Salafist leader Adel Almi issued a fatwa for her to be lashed and stoned to death. Tyler claimed that she posted the photograph in order to call for the liberation of women in a patriarchal society. Although the narrator of *La Préparation de la vie* does not go into great detail about Tyler's story, the quote on page 119 suggests that she disagrees with her prison sentence as she believes the young girl was only claiming her right to 'liberté'. This narrative reference can be compared to Latiri's depiction of the image of the mermaid's naked torso that was effaced by white paint. Through their shared engagement with the visibility and invisibility of women's bodies, we can see that both narratives suggest how the female body has been at the forefront of debate about the place of women in Tunisian society in the wake of the

¹³⁴ The photograph was first posted on 11 March 2013 on Tyler's Facebook profile.

revolution. Both acknowledge the ways in which the female body is caught between Islamic laws and secular values.

In the text that follows, the reader is unsure if it is the narrator or the character of Souad who is speaking: 'Comme avant, mais à l'envers... on condamne à trois mois de prison une jeune fille qui a brandi une pancarte avec des mots jugés hostiles et insultants par la ministre de la Femme... Il faut que tout change' (p.119). The girl in question was Marwa Maalaoui, a twenty-year old student who had referred to the Ennahdha minister, Sihem Badi, as a 'prostituée' on a placard that she carried during a protest. The message read: 'Sous le règne des islamistes terroristes, les femmes d'honneur sont violées parce que leur ministre est une prostituée.' The student's lawyers claimed that her use of this word should not have been taken literally; she used it because it had 'une signification politique.'¹³⁵ The protest was about Badi's supposed inaction when it came to dealing with the rape of a little girl. This links back to my earlier discussion of attitudes towards sexual violence in Tunisia and echoes Fellous' own experience of sexual abuse. By referencing this case in her narrative, Fellous reminds the reader that, although the Ennahdha government may have had women in key political roles, these women did not necessarily defend women's rights in Tunisia. With the repetition of anti-Ennahdha rhetoric throughout the narrative, we can see that Fellous

¹³⁵ AFP, 'Tunisie: 3 mois de prison pour une étudiante ayant insulté une ministre', *Al Huffington Post Maghreb* (10 October 2013), accessible here : http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2013/10/10/tunisie-etudiante-insulte-ministre_n_4075475.html [accessed 02/04/2016].

is expressing her rejection of the Ennahdha party's attitude towards women's rights.

In the first part of this chapter I discussed the fact that although Tunisia is often regarded as the most progressive and liberal country in the Arab world when it comes to women's rights, Latiri uses her first-person narrative to reveal the complexities of this supposedly liberal period in Tunisian history. Latiri used her autobiographical writing and photography as a way of 'taking part in the revolution' and claiming her right to have a voice *as a woman* in the new Tunisia. Fellous' narrative also does this by addressing topics of contemporary political significance and by overtly challenging the Ennahdha government's patriarchal values. Fellous' narrative also comments on the importance of writing to her identity.

Indeed, it is the task that both writers have set themselves and, we might add, have succeeded in doing as they offer *petits récits* that allow the reader to understand, on a more personal level, the threats to gender equality being leveled at women in the post-revolutionary period. The term *petit récit* derives from Jean-Francois Lyotard's critique of the grand narratives of modernity.¹³⁶ It refers to a narrative which is modest, locally-based and often fragmentary in nature. Indeed, as Elleke Boehmer has argued, it provides a counterpoint to 'the so-called grand narrative of the official, male-authored and authorised nation.'¹³⁷ As we have seen, the

¹³⁶ See: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

¹³⁷ Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, p.220.

narratives of Fellous and Latiri are both fragmentary and non-authoritative, offering an alternative engagement with national Tunisian identity to that offered by the first article of the constitution. They also pose a challenge to the essentialised gender roles and patriarchal values that the Ennahdha government was attempting to enshrine in the constitution. For Latiri and Fellous, they claim a platform for their female voices through writing and photography. Indeed, with a backdrop of rising Islamist patriarchal values, the use of the first-person narrative is all the more significant as it sends a message to readers that Tunisian women have voices that will not be silenced.

As previously discussed, the term syncretism is useful for articulating the ways in which identity is formed of many different cultural elements, yet rather than evoking a harmonious blending of these different parts, it allows for them to be dynamic, shifting and possibly in conflict with one another. In this chapter I have discussed how Latiri and Fellous explore the ways in which gender identities are sometimes in conflict with, or deeply ingrained in, national and religious identities. Through an analysis of both narrators' childhoods in Tunisia, we have seen that both experienced different forms of male-authored physical abuse that was typical of the patriarchal society in which they lived. Their narratives suggest that below the surface of the political reforms and progressive rhetoric of the Bourguiba era, equality for women was not necessarily translated into the domestic and everyday sphere; traditional Islamic and patriarchal values continued to dominate national views on gender. The use of the first-person autobiographical genre allows both

Latiri and Fellous to reveal the complexities and ambiguities surrounding women's rights in the post-independence era and to challenge the argument that women were emancipated at this time.

Both narrators also engage with the ways in which debates on the invisibility and visibility of the female body is a hot topic in Tunisia. For some, the visibility of the female body in the public sphere is seen as a religious offence, whereas for others it signifies female agency. Conversely, the veil is presented either as a symbol of backwardness and tradition or, for some, is seen as an expression of post-revolutionary female freedom as veiling was banned under the previous dictatorships. Whereas Fellous' narrative is more inclined to link veiling in Tunisia to the rise in Islamist values, Latiri's treatment of veiling is much more ambiguous and addresses the complexity of the symbol in ways that Fellous does not. We might infer that this is because the former has a greater understanding of Muslim and Arab culture, whereas the latter grew up in a Jewish community and has spent the entirety of her adult life living in France. Finally, Susan Stanford Friedman has written that 'the passion for difference evident in some forms of nationalist, chauvinist theory...renders invisible the symbiotic, syncretist, interactive formations in the borderlands in between difference. The future of feminism and other progressive movements lies... in a turning outward, an embrace of contradiction, dislocation, and change.'¹³⁸ I would argue that both Fellous

¹³⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.4.

and Latiri's narratives are emblematic of this kind of feminism that challenges essentialist notions of identity based on fixed national, religious and gender categories. Their narratives travel not only between different geographical and national contexts, they also interrogate the border between traditional gender categories in Tunisia and propose that this border, rather than being fixed and rigid, can be dissolved and transgressed.

Conclusion

In her paper delivered at the University of Manchester in June 2016, Latiri stated:

One of the challenges of the revolution is the birth of the individual. As you don't have the template of monolithic identity being imposed on everybody, if people can withdraw within themselves and find their own voice, they become diverse, they become themselves. The discourse is about diversity, which is a very strong political issue in the Arab world. So the emphasis is on the individual with an autobiographical narrative. The stream of consciousness highlights the potential for all of us to be unique and different.¹³⁹

Through applying syncretic theory to these narratives I have shown how both authors articulate the fluidity and multivalent nature of their identities which have been shaped by their experiences of different cultures. Their literature is dense, complex and sometimes conflicted, highlighting the extent to which their identities are caught between many different categories ranging from the national and the transnational to religion and gender. Both articulate syncretic identities which privilege heterogeneity and diversity, exemplifying what Hall describes as 'a

¹³⁹ Dora Latiri, 'A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating'.

conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference'.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, Latiri and Fellous left Tunisia at a time when the Tunisian nation was defining itself after independence in 1956. They also both return when the country is re-defining itself after the 2011 revolution. As both had been marginalised from the nationalist culture outlined in the constitution, their narratives of return can be read as an alternative way of thinking about Tunisian national identity. They privilege a more inclusive and plural concept of nationhood which resists homogenising forces within Tunisian society. Bhabha has written that the writing of exiles, like that of wandering people, 'will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation.'¹⁴¹ In line with this argument, Fellous and Latiri both suggest that the concept of Tunisian national identity should be expanded to include those on the margins and those who do not live within the territorial borders of Tunisia.

These personal narratives of exile can be read as important reminder of a turbulent moment in postcolonial Tunisian history which demonstrate the impact of complex social and ideological forces on real women's lives. Through the analysis of these two texts we can begin to understand what life was like for Tunisian women who were exiled from postcolonial Tunisia. Significantly, we have seen that both writers'

¹⁴⁰ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' (p.235).

¹⁴¹ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p.164.

experiences of exile were related to religion and national identity. In chapter one we explored how Latiri was banished from her family and community because of her decision to marry someone who did not share her religion or nationality. Fellous, on the other hand, explores how being a Jewish girl in postcolonial Tunisia meant that she found herself at the centre of many complex global issues that were beyond her control. She was ostracised because of her family's Jewish religion and cultural ties to the former coloniser and because of tensions between Muslims and Jews which were further exacerbated by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In this chapter we also saw how both writers use their narratives as a way of coming to terms with the past and also as a way of renegotiating their identities in the wake of the revolution. Although they suggest that the condition of exile is marked by loss and pain, the act of narrating their experiences allows them to work through their difficult memories and explore the complexity of their relationships to Tunisia.

In chapter two we saw that, in spite of their exiled identities, both writers show an engagement with a sense of Tunisian national identity. Indeed, their narratives suggest that their identities are not void of any connection to history, geography and the pain of alienation from the homeland. As such, they show that postcolonial writing is not primarily concerned with 'transnational' identity. Indeed, in chapter three we saw that Latiri and Fellous do not choose to represent identity as either local or global, celebratory or nostalgic. Instead, they show how the condition of exile holds these different things in tension, revealing their identities to be syncretic, constantly in flux and unstable.

Furthermore, it is significant that both writers are critical of rising Islamist and patriarchal discourse on gender identity in contemporary Tunisian society. In the final chapter we saw that both authors dispute traditional gender roles, advocating feminist identities which pose a specific challenge to Ennahdha's discourse on women. Through the mouthpiece of her friend Souad, Fellous is highly critical of Islam-inspired discourse on gender identity and suggests her fears about the rise in veiling in Tunisia. Alternatively, Latiri's engagement with veiling is much more subtle, suggesting the author's understanding of the veil as a complex and ambiguous symbol. Her focus is more on the diversity of women's voices in Tunisia and the ways in which women's bodies are caught between debates on religion, national identity and politics. In many ways, Latiri shows a closer engagement with and understanding of the plurality and cosmopolite nature of Tunisian society in her narrative, whereas Fellous's text is marked by a greater sense of loss and separation from Tunisia. Perhaps the reason for this is that Fellous's exile was more definitive and permanent. As she was educated in a French school in Tunisia and only taught to speak French, she was already marginalised from the Arab-Muslim population way in advance of her physical exile in 1967. Latiri, on the other hand, suggests that her exile was on a more private and individual scale. Nevertheless, in spite of their different experiences of exile, both writers use their autobiographical narratives as a means through which they can affirm their female/feminine voices and participation in the new post-revolution Tunisia. Fellous' foregrounding of women's political voices, such as that of Souad, gestures to the

importance of the new Tunisian nation as a space for women. As such, these writers, occupying marginal roles on the edge of the nation, are more able to question and subvert in subtle ways some of its long-held beliefs about gender.

The freedom of the narrative voices suggests a privileging of the uniqueness and individuality of each writer's voice that contrast with the silence and control of the former authoritarian regimes. In this sense, their narratives can be read in relation to the revolutionary moment. In terms of future lines of inquiry, more study is needed on Francophone Tunisian women writers who are engaging with important events in their country's history, especially the 2011 revolution and its aftermath. The corpus could be expanded to include other forms of autobiographical expression, particularly digital life-narratives on social media as these were especially important in Tunisia during the revolution. How are Tunisian women engaging with this key moment in their history and does self-expression change across different media and technologies? Another fruitful line of inquiry could be a comparison of Tunisian women writers engaging with the 2011 revolution with female writers originating from other 'Arab Spring' countries (eg. Egypt/Syria/Yemen/Libya) as this could help to map the similarities and differences of women's experiences across the Arab world during these important uprisings.

In his essay, 'Reflections on Exile', Said points to a captivating aspect of the concept of exile and its ambivalence when he asks: 'But if true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so

easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture?’¹⁴² As such, he highlights how exile can be a productive state for literary and artistic production. He furthermore argues that it can be a positive experience as it furnishes the exiled individual with a ‘plurality of vision’ engendering an ‘awareness of simultaneous dimensions’.¹⁴³ The distance from the homeland, combined with the awareness of what is beyond it, gives the exiled writer a unique perspective. Through their travel, education and language, both Fellous and Latiri show that ultimately exile can be a celebratory and productive experience as it gives a writer a unique outlook on their homeland’s culture. Indeed, both writers demonstrate that their exiled identities have enabled them to develop a privileged perspective of Tunisia. Ultimately, their narratives illustrate the complex ways that literature of exiles can provide an alternative discourse of cultural identity by challenging the official versions of national, religious and gender identity imposed by dominant power structures.

¹⁴² Said, ‘Reflections on Exile’ (p.137).

¹⁴³ Said, ‘Reflections on Exile’ (p.148).

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