Homosexuality Explained To My Mother

Abdellah Taïa

*Illustration by Hong-An Tran*

My dear family,  
  
This is the first time I've ever written you. A letter for all of you. For you, M'Barka, my mother. For you, my sisters, my six sisters. And for you, my two brothers. Today, from deep within my soul, these lines well up with urgency. I can't not say them, not write them, not send them to you. I can't keep from explaining my rationale, what I am, what I write, and why I do what I do. Explain? Yes, I must, because necessity compels me, and because you, my family, haven't gone to the trouble of reading, really reading, what I've published—books, articles, interviews... I must because for a long time explanations have been missing in Morocco. I do so that others may finally consider us human beings worthy of receiving explanations, that we may be truly involved in what happens in this country, and that we may stop being humiliated day after day.  
  
I know I am scandalous. To you. And to those around you: neighbors, colleagues, friends, mothers-in-law... I know to what degree I'm involuntarily causing you harm, giving you worry. I expose myself by signing my real first name and my real last name. And I expose you along with me. I drag you along on this adventure, which is just the beginning for me and for people like me: To exist, finally! To come out of the shadows, head held high! To tell the truth, my truth! To be: Abdellah. To be: Taïa. To be both. Alone. Yet not alone at the same time.  
  
Beyond my homosexuality, which I proudly claim, I know that what surprises and scares you is that I elude you: I am the same, thin as I've always been, with the same eternal baby face; yet I am no longer the same. You no longer recognize me, and you tell yourselves: "Where does he get those bizarre ideas? Where does he get the nerve? We didn't raise him like that... And not only does he talk about sexuality publicly—no, no, that's not enough for him—he also talks of homosexuality, politics, freedom... Who does he take himself for?"  
  
I come from Morocco. I know Morocco. To succeed, even to exist, is about having money and crushing others with money. Since I was born, in 1973, in Rabat, this has always been the Moroccan ideal, the model to follow. Like you, I was born poor, and I grew up poor in Salé. Even today I remain, in certain ways, poor. I refuse this sterile Moroccan ideal. This platitude. It does not suit me. I step around it. The Moroccan model, in my own small way, I've reinvented it. I've filled it with new content, with meaning, with courage, and with doubt... That's what truly shocks you: I've turned out different, something you didn't see coming. A monster. When before, by your side, I had always been so agreeable, studious, and well-behaved.  
  
You must ask yourselves the same questions every day: What did we do to him? What did we do to him to deserve this scandal? You must certainly hate me now, curse me. To you I am without doubt no longer a good Muslim. You must also be worried about me: I take risks in exposing myself like this in books and newspapers.  
  
Mother: I know that though you do not agree with my choices you continue to pray for me. And that touches me. I believe, however, because I must, that you have reinvented the world—and Muslim prayer. Mother, you surely do not know it, but this desire to rebel, it's you who gave it to me. In our family, you've always been the guide, the schemer, the rebel. The one who makes things happen. Mother, despite your illiteracy, in the 25 years that I spent near you, you were a school of feminism. And what a school! I admire you. I don't just love you, I repeat: I admire you! You imposed your choices on my father, and on us, your children. You have accomplished your work: the house of Hay Salam. You were the one who set aside money, who bought cement, sand, and bricks, who hired masons and negotiated with the Muqaddam. You understood quickly that you had no other choice but to be a man in a place of men. To be better and braver than all the men around us.  
  
Yes, your determination to get to the bottom of things would at times turn you into a dictator. Yes, your way of talking was a scream, always and always a scream. Yes, it was impossible to argue with you. But, at the same time, how much I have learnt by your side.  
  
Mother, your name is beautiful. M'Barka. Its origin lies in the countryside of Oulad Brahim. Your story and your journey, from Tadla to Salé, through Rabat and El Jadida, delight me whenever I remember them. An epic journey. Without tears. You never gave up. You weren't always fair, especially to my sisters, but to this day, every morning, I take my hat off to you. And I acknowledge my debts to you.  
  
Your language, Mother, is my language. I write inspired by your poetic view of the world and by the rituals you invent, so strange yet beautiful, mesmerizing. I write with your screams in mind. I scream today to honor your screams. To pin them down. To give them a stage. To let them into books, into literature. That is also one of my ambitions: To make your screams an image of Morocco, your name a symbol of Moroccan women. Mother, I can do all that for you. It is my only wealth. My gift. My duty.  
  
Mother, Morocco is not the others, the government, the clergy, the eternal scoffers, the 'hooligans,' the obstacles, the jealous, the petty... The whole of Morocco, the one that I carry in me and the one that I address in this letter, is you. It's a Morocco that is not perfect. A Morocco tense and feverish. A surging Morocco. Possessed.  
  
Mother, I don't care about the negative comments people make about me. But to what you say, even if I do not agree with your dictatorship, I listen. I analyze. And I want to respond.  
  
You are Morocco. My truth, my "I," which, whether I like it or not, contains my homosexuality, my writing, both published and forthcoming, it is for you. It is important for me that you listen in turn. I need you to know that I am like you. Not in the same revolt as you but, like you all the same.  
  
It's you I want to convince.  
  
We often call each other, but I cannot tell you everything on the phone. I become shy like a child and a little stupid. So, I've decided to write. Trust me, Mother, I have no intention of dragging you through the mud, of "drowning you in shame." But I need to reveal the truth, my truth. I need to tell you what's changing in me. In Morocco. Change begins with you. You imposed your ideas on my father and on the neighborhood. On the world. That's why I have no other choice but to impose mine on you. In response, you will scream. You have screamed, "We are going to tear each other apart again." I'm fine with that. I don't like peace and quiet. My favorite poet is the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa. The Anglo-Irish painter Francis Bacon, my favorite painter. The French-Algerian actress and singer Isabelle Adjani, my star. None of these extraordinary people lived (or lives) in peace. You don't know who they are? I will repeat their names; they are important artists for me and for my engagement with life: Fernando Pessoa, Francis Bacon, Isabelle Adjani. You are illiterate and know nothing of culture? Allow me to doubt it. You know mystery, the invisible world. You know transgression. Culture, all of culture, is nothing but just that. To say what we see. What comes along. To impose one's difference and one's language. To surpass oneself. To transform oneself. Literature, cinema, painting, etc. that's all it is. Revelation. And then, revolution. Tell this to my brothers and my sisters. My ambition, my modesty, my intransigence.  
  
I am not the only one in Morocco, Mother. Something has started in this country. A real break with previous generations who abdicated, who co-opted. We are the twenty-first century.  
  
They try to intimidate us. To bring us back to a so-called moral order, to our so-called fundamental values. But which ones are those? And who decides which of these values Moroccan people need today?  
  
The world is going through an unprecedented crisis right now. The world is looking inward for answers. Change is happening. All around the world, people have welcomed Barack Obama as an immense hope. But what's going on in Morocco? People like us are being frightened again. It's the same old formula. We are being dragged down. How long is this blindness going to last? This arrogance? How long are we going to continue to ignore and kill the youth of this country? How long this politics of make believe? Doesn't Morocco deserve any better? A true modernity? A real revolution of mores?  
  
Take a closer look, the revolution has already begun. The only problem is that we don't always want to see it. Some in Morocco would obviously like it better if our identity didn't change one iota, but it's been changing for quite a few years already. Young Moroccans have already grasped this complex issue. They are sophisticated in their reflections on the topic. One might even say that they have already embraced the postmodern condition. But who understands this in Morocco? And who will help them in this change? Who will connect them in a different way to Morocco and restore their confidence in this country?  
  
Forgive me, Mother, if I sound overly bookish. But you, my brothers and my sisters, you know what I'm saying. You are educated, just like me. Like me, you have read the books that Father would bring us from the library, the Bibliothèque Générale in Rabat, where he used to work. You have the intellectual capacity to grasp what I'm saying. Do not tell me that I'm speaking in vain, and that I'm getting carried away, or that my fight is already lost. Do not tell me to fall into line like everyone else. To conform. To say: ["Wana mali?"](https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/abdellah-taia-homosexuality-explained-to-my-mother/)  
  
I can't. I exist in writing. That's to say I have a certain responsibility towards myself and towards the society I come from. I am permanently questioning. A book, it goes without saying, interrogates the world, society. I cannot do things halfway. I finish what I start. I don't want to bow my head any longer. I'm no hero. It's just that I can no longer stand the hypocrisy and all the damage it's doing to Morocco. I can no longer stand us being portrayed in clichéd images, "folklorised" to attract tourists. I can no longer stand the fact that people cannot see the real wealth of this country: the imaginary, the stories, and the mystery. THE YOUTH. I hate the fact that we don't do enough to help Morocco stand up and grow. I can no longer stand the system, which breaks Moroccan people day and night and silences the new voices that are struggling to talk about this country differently. I can no longer stand the mediocrity and the smallness they impose. For me, Morocco is bigger than all that. We have the duty to bring this to light. Even if that means fighting or waging war, which to some seems like treason.  
  
My dear family, I offer you my hand. It is sincere. It is innocent. It is me: it's the way I am. I do not ask you to understand my neuroses or to help me out. No. I just ask you to not make me feel like a pariah. A miscreant. In my own way, I am the continuation of your history, our history. Of our origins. I cannot offer anything to make you proud of me, socially speaking. Today, that is. This is not my goal. I hate pride, a feeling that gets in the way. I dream of dialogue. A dialogue that has been impossible until today. I am not in a minority. I am you, with you, always with you, even when I break taboos. Even when I steal your lives to transform them into literary fragments.  
  
In my books and in my conferences, I defend you. I tell you. I make you exist. I dream that one day if someone insults me in front of you, saying, "Your son, your brother is zamel..." that you might answer "No, he is not [zamel](https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/abdellah-taia-homosexuality-explained-to-my-mother/). He is [mathali](https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/abdellah-taia-homosexuality-explained-to-my-mother/)." It's a word, a simple little word that changes everything. A word revolution. Decide for yourselves. I do not demand anything. I proceed. I fly as I am able. I pray, like Mother does, in my own way: I write.  
  
There is something terrible in each of us here: hatred of the Moroccan! Where does it come from? Why does it remain? Why not dare to be ourselves: to break free. To break free through provocation and scandal. In any case, there is no other way. Only to forget fear and face the world naked. Voila. Again, in tenderness, my truth. For you.  
  
I don't like unnecessary confrontations. I am for necessary battles. The war I wage with and against Morocco is useful. I believe that sincerely. I must not be the only one. I can speak, write. For me and for others. I do it. It is my duty.  
  
A warm Salaam to you all. 

*translated from the French by Riccardo Moratto*