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INTERVIEW



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Alberto Fernández Carbajal

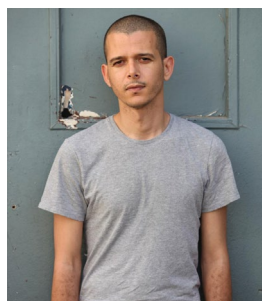
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ABSTRACT

Abdellah Taïa is the first Moroccan writer to assume his homosexuality publicly. Born in Rabat in 1973, he spent his childhood and early youth in the small coastal Moroccan town of Salé, which features in many of his works. He has lived in France since around the turn of the 21st century, where he has written two books of short fiction and six novels in French. His autofictional novels *Salvation Army* and *An Arab Melancholia* were published by American publisher Semiotext(e) in 2009 and 2012; the same publishing house has recently combined *Mon Maroc* (My Morocco) and *Le rouge du tarbouche* (The red of the fez) into a single volume, entitled *Another Morocco: Selected Stories*, in 2017. His fictional novel *Le jour du roi* (The day of the king) was awarded the Prix de Flore in 2010, and his novel *Infidels* was published by New York publisher Seven Stories in 2016. His latest novels are *Un pays pour mourir* (A country to die in; 2016) and *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé* (He who is worthy to be loved; 2017). Taïa has also written and directed a film, *Salvation Army* (2013), inspired by his early life in Morocco and his migration to Switzerland. Taïa explores issues of non-normative sexuality, gender, class and postcolonialism, and his is one of the most important current voices in the francophone Arab world.

KEYWORDS

Abdellah Taïa; gay; queer; Morocco; diaspora; France



In February 2016, I travelled to France to interview Taïa in his apartment in north-east Paris. He welcomed me to his home and gave me mint tea, in preparation for a four-hour interview which was recorded. Although I had a set of questions that I had wanted to ask him for my current Leverhulme-funded research project, “Queer Diasporas: Islam, Homosexuality and a Micropolitics of Dissent”, I often let the direction of Taïa’s thoughts inform the structure of our conversation. The interview was carried out in English, with a few snippets of idiomatic French and some Arabic terms thrown in. It was a real pleasure to re-enter Taïa’s world, so familiar to any reader of his fiction, through a candid and direct conversation. I must thank Abdellah for his generosity and for his friendship.

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Alberto Fernández Carbajal (AFC): **The country of your childhood and early youth features prominently in your autobiographical novels, but also in your fictional ones. Can you tell us about how your family and their experience of Morocco in the 20th century have influenced your own perspective?**

Abdellah Taïa (AT): My family was living in Rabat when I was born, and one year later moved to the city next to Rabat, Salé. I feel I belong to the city of Salé. However, I am not the typical man from Salé because we lived in the suburbs, not in the heart of the city. All my *imaginaire* [imaginary] comes from there. My father and my mother were from the same place in the countryside, called Ouled Brahim. They met and got married there. They must have had some Berber blood in them, like a lot of Moroccan people, but they didn't speak any Berber, so we were raised only in Moroccan Arabic: the dialect, not the *Fusha* [literary Arabic]. They moved from the countryside to the city: firstly, to a town called El Jadida. My father was a school warden and all my brothers and sisters were born there, except me and my little brother [Mustapha]. My father was loved by the director of the secondary school in El Jadida. [The director] was a specialist in Islam, an *alem*, and he loved my family so much that when he was transferred from El Jadida to Rabat, to la Bibliothèque General à Rabat [General Library of Rabat], he asked my father to join him. This man is very important to my Moroccan *imaginaire*, because he was very kind to my family, and he is the person who gave me my name. He named his three sons with names starting with "A": Abderrahmane, Aissam and Abdellah. My father was so grateful to him he named me after one of his sons.

My mother lost her own mother when she was a child and her father married a woman who never loved her. My mother was mistreated by this woman, and her father didn't really protect her. They married my mother off to a man who was sent by the French colonizers in Morocco to be a soldier in Indochina, where he died. That is something that inspired *Un pays pour mourir* [A country to die in (Taïa 2015)]. When the man's family learnt that they were going to get money from the French, my mother already had a daughter from him. They took their daughter and they banished my mother. These events explain many things in my mother's character: her stubbornness, her warlike attitude and her urgency to make her own decisions in life. She was not a nice woman, but she was very determined. My father was the opposite. All these things, both good and evil, are somehow mixed in me. I cannot see that I am only a nice guy. Life is not only about being sweet and tender; it puts you in situations where, if you react sweetly, you are not going to survive. I don't believe in morality, either. When it comes to writing, I totally forget about it. I'd rather always go back to the roots of what is human, and, at the roots of humanity, there is always this idea of doing bad things: stealing, betraying, killing, leaving, hurting – darkness. It's always there.

AFC: **What has your relationship been like with your siblings since moving to Europe and "coming out"? Has it been affected by your status as a famous writer?**

AT: Of course, it made an impact on their lives. At first, they were shocked when I spoke in the Arabic newspapers in Morocco and gave interviews in Arabic. I guess they felt ashamed, and people around them must have been repeating to them what they read in newspapers. In 2006, I stopped talking to them. However, my mother kept in touch, and she never disowned me. She always told my sisters I was the child that gave her the least trouble, except perhaps for being gay. It's impossible for me to call my brothers and sisters and tell them I'm gay. I never did it, but after four or five years, they all came back to me. What changed everything was the death of our mother: it made them grow up and realize I was also a grown-up, and

that if they didn't make a kind move towards me, something would be lost forever. I don't know whether they accept my homosexuality or not, but I do realize they are trying to tell me sincerely that I am dear to them. I got an important prize in France, le Prix de Flore [for *Le jour du roi* (The day of the king; Taïa 2010)]. Maybe they finally felt proud of me. I also realized, sadly, that I had to welcome their tenderness towards me while accepting that there was no space for me to speak freely about who I am. I created this place in my books, but conjuring it in real life is very hard. I find it difficult to accept that I had to come to terms with my past by myself. There is no release from these traumas, except perhaps in love, if one is lucky. What is interesting about my six sisters, who are much older than me, are married and have children, is that, when they feel they need protection, this does not come from their husbands; it comes from me. For instance, my eldest sister, whom I haven't seen for ages, sometimes just calls me and talks for an hour about her children and her husband, and she will ask me for advice. It is strange and sweet. I feel that these are their gestures to let me know that they accept me as gay. They cannot speak about it directly, but they can behave in new ways. This is how things are done in Morocco.

AFC: You said you use your literature as a means of dealing with your sexual difference and your own conundrums. I understand that you wrote your PhD thesis on 18th-century French literature. Could you tell us more about your studies and how they have shaped the way you write, but also the way you think about the world?

AT: I can safely say that my world view did not change because I studied French literature. My views come from my early life in Morocco: my childhood, mostly, and my adolescence. Those are the most important years, when I learnt to play, seduce, escape, to feel danger before it manifested itself, to escape life's tragedies . . . I studied French at university because I wanted to be a film-maker. I knew there was this famous film school in Paris, La Fémis, and I wanted to go there. This may sound naive, but I just had this vision of myself in Paris. By contrast, French is a language that separates people in Morocco: it is the language of the rich and powerful; of governments, kings, ministers. French-speaking Moroccans made you look like rubbish when they spoke French. Although I now speak and write in French, I simply cannot forget these first impressions in life. If I did, I would be betraying myself and that early feeling of humiliation, the memory of that rejection. At the time, I didn't think of it in a colonial or postcolonial manner because I was just a child. Even when I went to university [in Rabat], some of my fellow students came from French schools, and I remember distinctly that I decided I'd be better than them. This is where the writing process began, because my level of French was not good. I decided to take a notebook and I just wrote in French for many years. They were not journals like Marcel Proust's: just my own space where I could master every day a little bit more of this thing called *la langue française* [the French language], to make it my own, but not in the way French people or rich Moroccan people were using French. Now I am happy to have this "poor relationship" with the French language, because writing creatively in a language has nothing to do with mimicry. Although I speak French and I live in France, I simply come from a very different part of the world. Luckily for me, I have all these memories, experiences, tastes, hauntings and possessions that hail from poor Morocco, where I first met life, and it's that which I put into French, although not in the same way as previous generations of Arab and Maghrebian writers. They were much too politically conscious. I just came as me, feeling poor and yet somewhat clever: not intellectually clever, but "street-boy" clever, and using these skills with

my French. There is nothing more intellectual, more theoretical or more pretentious than the French language. It seems to me that Moroccans forget about poor people when they become intellectuals. For them, being an intellectual is using the same references as the big French intellectuals. It is totally false. It means you are forgetting and slaying yourself yet again, submitting yourself willingly to a new form of colonialism.

AFC: Mohamed Choukri¹ is called your “second father”, your “literary father”, in *Mon Maroc*, and is also mentioned in *Salvation Army*. Western authors are also referred to in your prose: Paul Bowles,² Jean Genet,³ and thinkers such as Jean Starobinski⁴ and Michel Foucault. How do you position yourself in relation to such prominent figures?

AT: These names are merely placed in the middle of a Moroccan story. For instance, a character is just reading a book by Foucault [in *Salvation Army* (Taïa 2009)]. I have been fascinated by Paul Bowles since I saw a picture of him in his house in Tangier. I fell in love with him as a man, not as an intellectual. My influence from these writers does not come from their books, but from their presence in my life. You will never find any references in my work which are placed there in order to show off. Even what I wrote about Jean Genet is very subjective, very humanized, and not at all intellectual. As regards Jean Starobinski, I met him in the first instance as a human being. I was a student [in Geneva] and I asked him if I could have a meeting with him, and he was so unbelievably kind, like no other person had been with me up to that point in the west. I attempted to do something Moroccan with him [in “La baraka de Starobinski”, in *Mon Maroc* [My Morocco (Taïa 2000)]: I wanted to touch his clothes. On the other hand, Mohammed Choukri is the first writer that makes you feel you have read his book, *Le pain nu* [For *Bread Alone* (Choukri 2006)], before you have even read it. It is all in the collective Moroccan imagination. That book spoke so much to its society, held within itself so many of Morocco’s essential contradictions, and people found so much of themselves in it, that they were obliged to ban it. But before it was banned, people shared it around themselves and learnt it by heart. That’s how I found the book. Of course, there is also the connection between him and Paul Bowles. I think Bowles understood what Moroccans were like and he had real relationships with them. Of course, he had sex and hashish, but why not? [Laughs.] Everyone needs at least one of those in their lives. He knew about the djinn in Morocco, and he loved the sorcery in a sincere way. He was also not just “nice” to Moroccans. He was obsessed with Moroccan sorcery, and he treated it seriously. He also recorded Moroccan music. Although these things might seem somewhat linked to colonial *imaginaries*, he always said that Morocco, especially Tangier, was the soil of life. For him, the west is for the dead. That’s why he left New York. He said Tangier was still living, and he didn’t romanticize it. He saw what Moroccans’ reality was like there: harsh and hard, and he was harder than them. He also treated them in a hard way. [Laughs.] He was not a very sweet person, but why would you expect someone to be just sweet? He had a real relationship with the country. I just love him, even physically. I would love to work in his house, to put a spell on him, to enchant his mind and make him my own, or something like that. That’s what he liked.

AFC: You are also a lover of cinema and a film-maker. Your writing is suffused with references to Egyptian cinema, martial arts and Bollywood films, and even “westerns”. What do you think about the role of these films in your literary work, and how do they compare with your own film-making in *Salvation Army* (Taïa 2013)?

AT: What obsesses me the most in daily life and I can never get tired of is films. Do you remember the 1980s? Those were the times when we only had one small screen, with one

channel, that started at 6 p.m. and ended at midnight. We watched many programmes that impressed me a lot, especially Egyptian films. I waited for a long time to create something resembling the images I saw on TV. That's my first creative impulse. For many years I never thought about writing books, but dreamt of making films. I felt an important connection with Egyptian cinema because it was in Arabic. The obsession with cinema and its images sparked some thinking in me, allowed me to build techniques and structures that I still use in my own writing. I never thought about other books in order to write my own books. For me, the sense of life is very cinematic, but I am not influenced by French film-making, such as [Jean-Luc] Godard. Cinema needs to feel real to me: concrete, sincere, complex and also melodramatic – like family life, when your parents fight, or when you hear them having sex; this intensity in the house, how you deal with the drama: there is some structure in that. Why should I go to E.M. Forster or Harold Pinter? I just had to take the dramatic structures – narrative and aesthetic – that were already in my life and put them in my books and films. That's how I made my first film [*Salvation Army*]. It comes from my own position in life, not from any influence. Although I say Egyptian cinema has influenced me a lot, my first film is not anything like Egyptian cinema aesthetically. There are explicit excerpts at the beginning and at the end, but, aesthetically, it's rather different. It's from my own place in the world. However, Egyptian cinema influences much of my writing, even my life. The west doesn't know about these films, but they are masterpieces that deal with great subjects: love, sex, transgression, religion, and they are not the cliché the west thinks they are.

AFC: Let us focus on your writing for a while. So far, there are two distinct strands in your literary work: your “autofictions”, which are more realist, almost confessional, literary exercises; and your other literary fictions, which came later, which are more thematically ambitious, more visionary, and which rely more on symbolism and allegory.

AT: To me, these modes of writing are one and the same. For instance, you could find a character like Zahira, the heroine in my latest novel, *Un pays pour mourir*, in my first book [*Mon Maroc*]. I'm sure there are many links. Although since *Le jour du roi* my books are technically not about me, they are *all* me. The love story in *Le jour du roi* I experienced in real life. The other boy [Khalid is based on] was named Yousef. The more you write, the more dissatisfied you become with what you have published in the past, and the more you want to go further, deeper, darker, and become more formally complex. In the first books, until *Une mélancholie arabe* [*An Arab Melancholia* (Taïa 2012)], the writing was simple and yet not so: fragmented, but easily understood. With *Le jour du roi*, the structure started to be more ambitious, although not just for ambition's sake. I knew if I wanted to continue writing, I had to keep challenging myself, because I know that I repeat myself too much. Even my way of writing French is evolving. There are no long phrases any more. I just love making my writing look less French.

AFC: To distil your prose to such powerful simplicity must require a lot of thinking.

AT: I never write a book in a spree of inspiration. The last one, *Un pays pour mourir*, I started thinking about in 1999. I remember when I arrived in Paris I saw an Arab woman in Barbès, and I thought “One day I have to do something with this”. Learning from life and from what you experience takes years; for me, that's reading, too. You have to juggle your observations to make meaning out of them. I don't think we understand everything completely when we first see it. And I like writing events in unexpected ways. I also dislike

reading a text and noticing the writer is thinking about his phrasing. For me, writing needs to be about rhythm, *la fièvre* [the fever], intensity, spirituality: no purity, but a mixture of things, and I need to impress this upon the book and its reader. I guess the simplicity of my writing also comes from the fact I didn't learn French as a little boy. Maybe in the beginning I was ashamed of that, but not any longer. Now I don't care if someone says "This is just too simple". Some people think that, even in Morocco.

AFC: I don't think your writing is too simple, and it also examines difficult topics. However, you treat such themes with a respectful distance and delicacy.

AT: I don't think I am motivated to write about these topics [i.e. incestuous desire, pederasty, homosexuality or violence]: I just have a character and the story in my mind, and these themes come with them. I never think: I have to write a book about this particular topic. I just have many stories in me which are so powerful I just know I need to write them. The stories may appeal to me because there is some transgression in them, but also because they are happening in my own environment. When you are a young, gay boy, people want to rip your skin. Somehow, this inescapable first violence also works in literature: you need to leave your skin in it. It's not about finding meaning in your life: you have to sacrifice yourself in literature the way you were sacrificed in real life. That's what makes writing scary, because you put something there that you may not have recovered from. Our life's experiences are not all nice, they can deal with trauma . . . What is surprising to me is that, although I am dealing with violent and problematic topics, all these themes come also with tenderness. In *Une mélancolie Arabe*, you find this in the boys who want to rape me; at some point, I find a way to make them look not just like rapists. The character based on me says that he knows he's in love with [Chouaïb]; he says "You can have sex with me boy-to-boy". You could not say that the boys who want to rape the hero are just evil. The point is: what is sex about, within the context of our whole lives? It's not about being sweet and tender with the other; it is something else that is being reproduced in the bed.

AFC: It's as though these boys live in a society in which in order to sleep with another man, they need to be dominant; they have to rape the other man in order to feel they are being "proper men".

AT: *Voilà* [There it is.] So, although the novel deals with a topic that I am expected to condemn, I ended up making them look somehow human, and not just like monsters.

AFC: There is also melancholia at the centre of your work that connects with the world of politics without being very explicit.

AT: I think my melancholy and my sadness come chiefly from my experience as a gay man. In Morocco, you get to understand very quickly that, in order to survive, you have to stop trusting everyone around you, and that is traumatizing. I think my whole perspective on life comes from knowing I had no choice but to be cleverer than them, to be stronger, to be bad, as well, and it's a great, big loneliness. This loneliness creates a desire to look for a place where you might feel a little bit better. This place doesn't exist anywhere – in my own experience – maybe in love, when you are in love with someone: love is the place, but it is not a geographical place. However, there is also a nostalgia for places where you have lived and been traumatized. You feel nostalgic because your life happened there. In order to find the place where you can be yourself, you just have to keep wandering: *l'errance*. This wandering started when I was a little boy. At some point, there was just so much pain and

sadness. I felt so alone, I just wanted to cry, but I felt I could not cry next to [my family], so I had to find a place where I could do it. It didn't exist, either. At times, I'd just go out on the streets and cry endlessly, and then I'd return home. Later, I found Arab poetry predating Islam, *Al-Mu'allaqat (Seven Golden Odes, 2014)*.⁵ It begins with the poet wandering in the desert and looking for the traces of his beloved. Because those traces are in the sand of the desert, they are floating in the wind. The poet is following the wind in order to find his love. When I discovered this poetry, I felt such an emotional connection with it. For me, this is the true cosmopolitanism: the fact that being gay could be lived through an Arabic literary poetic tradition, like these poems that were written 14 centuries before I was born, and were already doing the same thing I am striving to do. This is explored in *An Arab Melancholia*: how an Arab literary tradition before Islam is still living through me in my experience as a gay, Moroccan, Muslim, Arab boy at the beginning of the 1980s in Morocco. At that time, it wasn't even a diasporic experience. It was more about how geographical borders sometimes don't mean much: you keep being influenced and defined by things that are important to your culture, despite not being widely accepted by that culture. Someone could say: "These Arabs, they are just silly people, they invented nothing, they don't understand gay people, they are just with ignorant". I never thought that. I was in love with Egyptian cinema and with Arab poetry.

AFC: Besides, there is a lot of homoeroticism in Arab poetry after Islam.

AT: Exactly. When you discover that, it helps you to stay a little bit strong, but it doesn't help that much.

AFC: There was a moment that made me smile, that was lost on me the first time I read *Mon Maroc*, and which clicked when I read it again: the girl that you liked at school gave you a volume of poetry by Abu Nuwas.⁶ This is quite subtle, but that homoerotic tradition is present there, and it was mainstream when it was written.

AT: Even now, people study Abu Nuwas at school. This is the contradiction in the Arab world about homosexuality: there are so many references, historical and literary, and yet they remain opposed to homosexuality.

AFC: The most celebratory moment of homoerotic love I have found in your work is the sexual threesome your autofictional character has with Rafaël and Matthias, the Polish and German characters in *Salvation Army*, which appears to celebrate an ideal of queer diasporic connection across both geographical and personal borders. Is this a conscious antidote, perhaps, to the power struggles and inequalities of intercultural love illustrated elsewhere in your work?

AT: It's like the film *Carol (2015)*, [directed] by Todd Haynes, featuring a lesbian community in New York. They help each other; there is no hostility. In some western gay communities, there is a lot of hostility between gay people: you are not accepted from the beginning and you have to fight for acceptance. In *Carol*, the opposite takes place. There is something of that in the episode of the train [in *Salvation Army*], which is totally autobiographical. It's a miracle of love: caught in the middle of a love triangle – sex in Spain, on a train, in the night – so free, and so innocent. I think there was still something in me that wanted to experience, to see, to love, and to stop doing just thinking. I felt I had so many things in my head that I couldn't share in Morocco, and since I arrived in Europe, I felt as if Europe had to listen to me. I also wanted Europe to see that I was interesting, cultivated, that I was free and that I could enjoy life.

AFC: It's so fascinating, thematically and imaginatively, that this homoerotic encounter takes place on the move: it doesn't happen in any particular place; it happens on a train in transit, in the night, and between three people of different nationalities. At the same time, although keen to establish connections between people of different classes and cultures, your fiction also demonstrates that becoming someone else is impossible. There is this magical-realist moment in *Le jour du roi* when the poor kid, Omar, thinks he has managed to perform sorcery, and that he has become his rich friend Khalid. They swap bodies. They think they have become each other, but they have not succeeded.

AT: I am obsessed with this idea of fusing with the other. For me, the idea of love is that: *entrer dans la peau de l'autre* [entering the skin of the other]. In their case, it didn't work because this is a book about social classes, so it's about the poor always trying to make the rich understand what they live through, but the rich clearly can never really understand what the poor are trying to tell them.

AFC: In the same novel, *Le jour du roi*, which is, arguably, your most structurally and symbolically accomplished novel, you interrogate the figure of the King of Morocco, Hassan II. There is almost a fetishization of the royal figure. This particular novel is highly conscious of issues of class and financial inequality between characters. It seems as though nationalism has failed, as though the postcolonial state had betrayed its citizens.

AT: It means that we, Moroccans, are totally lost, that the people who fought for independence just took away the dreams of their own population to have a decent life and freedom and replaced them with dictatorial dreams, by which I mean that even the dreams of the poor people were filled with indoctrination about Hassan II. You were raised to love the king when you were a child, even when you were not aware of it. I remember, when I was little, I dreamt of kissing the king's hand. This is the dream of the whole country, what its poor dream. In this book, this struggle is not just about gay people: it's about the whole of the Moroccan people. However, I didn't want to write it in too obvious a political way. There is the sorcery, too, and that is important.

AFC: I find your portrayals of Arab and African women very compelling. These are female characters who seldom manage to break away from society's patriarchal strictures. I am thinking, particularly, of the very interesting black character, Hadda, in *Le jour du roi*, whose depiction tackles racism and the sexual objectification of black women by Arab men, but also of the prostitutes Slima and Zahira in *Infidèles* [Infidels] and *Un pays pour mourir*, respectively, both of whom are victims of gender violence. The only character who seems to be "successful" is Naïma in *Un pays pour mourir*, although this seems to be almost a fairy tale in the way the narrative is framed and told. How are the women in your work representative of the situation of women in Muslim societies?

AT: I cannot speak for all Muslim countries because I don't know all of them, but as regards Morocco and most other Arab countries, I can assert that women are stronger than men. Men are only playing the role expected by society: they have power, they have a strong voice, but the real power is in the hands of women. Unfortunately, the laws are not with women. In my literature, I don't speak with the official voice of the government, or perpetuate legal discourse: I speak about the reality that I have witnessed, and in this reality, women are far more courageous, more transgressive, funnier and more immoral than men. This is what fascinates me about Morocco: they say that homosexuality doesn't exist; they say they will never accept that their girls become prostitutes; they say they are good Muslims. However,

in their daily life, all these things are not respected. I am here to tell this reality, because when I write, I do not want to confirm official laws against women, or to corroborate what Moroccan society says about women, or even what western societies say about Arabs. I just write about what is happening at the heart of these societies: in their houses, between the lines and underground, which is daily life but doesn't exist officially. Unfortunately, the only voices heard are those of kings, rich people and westerners. I am interested in the voices of prostitutes, of immigrants here in Paris, even of terrorists, because it says something important about the way people are treated. Equally, I'm not only interested in gay people. All these people don't live in separate worlds; they inhabit the same world, so I choose not to separate them. When I discovered I was gay, I was in the midst of my family, so my feelings and my loneliness as a gay person were also linked to my family. Obviously, I understand that a gay person may be interested in learning what other gay people are living through, but literature is about a vision of the world, and in that world there is not only gay people. In addition, transgression does not necessarily come only from gay people. There are some very conservative gays.

AFC: Indeed, some very homonationalist gays. Your work is also fascinated with female stars. There are references to Juliette Binoche in *Le rouge du tarbouche* [The red of the fez (Taïa 2004)], Souad Hosni in *An Arab Melancholia*, Marilyn Monroe in *Infidèles*, Isabelle Adjani in many of your novels, and finally, in *Un pays pour mourir*, to Nargis, whose real name, as the novel indicates, was Fatima Rashid.

AT: Nargis was a big star in India in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of the film stars in India are Muslim: Nargis, Shah Rukh Khan, Amitabh Bachchan. I'm also fascinated by Robert Mitchum, Gary Cooper (not Cary Grant . . .). I also love the voice of James Mason. Yes, but mostly actresses . . . [Looks pensive.] Well, I guess there must be something very gay here. [Both laugh.] I suppose I identify with some of them because they were outrageously talented and brave, and beautiful, and they seemed free. I don't think actresses are free, or as free as we imagine them to be. With actors I generally get a sense that they give us more than we pay for when we buy cinema tickets. They give something of their lives to us, and I find that very courageous. Even when they use techniques, actors give something of themselves: something that is helpful, that moves you, that stays with you, that inspires you. I am more impressed by that than by writers or film-makers. A good example of this, of course, is Marilyn Monroe. She was totally destroyed by others. All these great film-makers were having sex with her, her mother was mentally ill . . . Marilyn was placed in homes when she was a child and kept going from home to home. And yet, when you see her on screen, she is so innocent and spiritual. Despite being a girl used and destroyed by other human beings, there is an innocence about her.

AFC: In her performance of the song "River of No Return" [in the eponymous film, quoted in *Infidels* (Taïa 2016)], there is an emotional undercurrent that seems to be about trauma and loss. Could you tell us more about the ending of *Infidels*, in which the suicide bombers and lovers, Mahmoud and Jallal, meet Marilyn Monroe in Paradise?

AT: I wanted to reward them. In my own experience, life is just madness, tears, toil. You have to fight all your life, so I hope there is something else after death for all of us. *Ce n'est pas juste* [it is not fair] that you have only this one life to suffer through and that's it. It's impossible. So I tried to dispel this idea in my writing, by performing this transgressive gesture. Some people didn't like it. Marilyn Monroe is for me so spiritual: her eyes, her childlike demeanour. How did you interpret it when you read the book?

AFC: I thought there was something maternal about her. However, I also read it as the acknowledgement that the people who go to Paradise are not those who observe an official version of religion. In the end, Paradise welcomes people all of different kinds, despite people's understanding of Islam and religiosity. It's an anti-normative understanding of the next life. In fact, your work is peopled by saints' mausoleums, djinn and sorcery, but it is not a strict version of the Islamic faith, and it is most often connected with women.

AT: For me, women are at the heart of religion. My mother continually reinvented spirituality: going to the mausoleum, then going to the sorcerer to put a spell on someone. This is more than a simple duality: it's confusion. And this I love, too: you do not just read from the same book. I don't think consciously about gender in religion. I simply write about what I lived with my mother and my family, and a lot of Moroccan people have similar experiences. The only difference is, perhaps, that I am the only writer who is happy writing about these practices. I don't believe these rituals are just for poor people who can't read books. These religious cultures are rich and inspiring. There is something poetic about them, an aesthetic that deserves to be put in books and films. I also find life more interesting when we discuss sorcery and putting spells on each other than when we talk about Molière and Kant. It's not even that I have to think consciously about reinventing Islam: I'm just taking what is part of me and putting it in books.

AFC: Your characters, the autobiographical ones but other ones as well, attempt to maintain a cultural and familial connection with Islam while reclaiming their non-normative sexualities and their sexual freedom, while learning to live with homophobia. You write very movingly about your autofictional character's suicide attempt in *An Arab Melancholia*, when the character almost dies electrocuted after his attempted rape by another man. Lately, you have also explored officially enforced homophobia through the character of Motjaba, the homosexual Iranian rebel in *Un pays pour mourir*. So, you have explored two different incarnations of Muslim homophobia: one that is more systemic and lives in society at an everyday level, and the official castigation of homosexuality by the state. Against this, your characters often have to undertake a journey of re-examination of Islam, for instance in the ending of *Salvation Army*, where your autofictional self inhabits a contradictory position regarding his faith. In the closing of *An Arab Melancholia*, your literary self explains in his emotional letter to his former lover, Slimane, that he is trying to live with this contradiction and needs, indeed wants, to believe. Do you think there is any potential resolution to this debate about homosexuality in Islam in your fiction, or indeed elsewhere?

AT: Firstly, it's important to highlight that Islam, like anything else in this world, is just an idea, and that there is an *imaginaire* constructed around that idea. Morocco is an idea. The UK is an idea. The west is an idea. France is an idea. Indonesia is just an idea. When you realize this, it helps you to free yourself. However, this doesn't mean that I am not nourished by the culture of this thing called "Islam", or that I don't appreciate the stories, the architecture, the poetry, that was created during this thing called *la civilisation musulmane* [Muslim civilization]. It is because I was born in Morocco that I am stuck in the midst of all the contradictions of this culture. At some point in history, Arab culture allowed for some freedom: there were Abu Nuwas, Ibn Rushd,⁷ Ibn Khaldun,⁸ Al-Farabi,⁹ Jalal ad-Din Rumi¹⁰ – all these people were free. Nowadays, it's the opposite. I don't try to change people's

minds. Outside literature, I just tell them that, despite what they think Islam says, gay people don't come from Mars or from the moon: they are just their children. If you asked me what Islam thinks about homosexuality, I would tell you that there is ambiguity there; there is condemnation, but this is only about Sodom. There are boys promised in Paradise. It is written. You are all going to be rewarded with "boys". The Qur'an is the mirror of what was taking place in Arab culture at that time, so, although I am not totally sure, perhaps homosexuality was not as vilified as they would like us to think now. That said, it was not homosexuality as we experience it today. Nonetheless, I need to stress that having the right to live doesn't mean that one will be totally free. Heterosexual people are not totally free. Each society constructs its own values of freedom, while constructing, simultaneously, the enemies it needs. Nowadays, for instance, Europe's enemies are Muslims. For Arabs, for Moroccans, perhaps they are gay people, because they are deemed to be western. I understand there is no total freedom, and I don't think I write books because I want to be free. I write books because all the contradictions within me, including contradictions about homosexuality, are still unresolved. When you experience multiculturalism and different geographical borders – Morocco, France, Europe – the problem becomes bigger. You don't only live your original contradictions as a Muslim person living in a Muslim country; now you are living another set of contradictions, because people in the country you live in want you to be something you cannot be. The contradictions become so much more complex. I would argue that freedom, as an artist, is not in what you express, but in the fact that you can write. However, all I can express is something that is not, and never will be, resolved, at least not in my books. In the last one [*Un pays pour mourir*], there is some hope, but, then again, it is in another life. The debate is not restricted to Islam's position regarding homosexuality. It's still a problem for many gay people in Morocco, and it is very important that someone like me speaks. I do it, and I will keep doing it, but the problem doesn't merely stop here. There are other things to be discussed: postcolonialism, secularism, the rights of women, inheritance law, individual freedom, all at the same time.

Notes

1. Mohamed Choukri was one of the most celebrated Moroccan writers of the 20th century. He is the author, most notably, of *For Bread Alone*, translated by Paul Bowles from French and Arabic into English in 1973.
2. Paul Bowles was an American musicologist, composer and writer who lived in Morocco for half a century. He is the author of numerous short stories and four novels: *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), *Let It Come Down* (1952), *The Spider's House* (1955) and *Up Above the World* (1966).
3. Jean Genet was a French writer and dramatist who spent part of his life in Morocco. He is best known for his autobiographical novel *The Thief's Journal* (1949) and for his novels *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943) and *The Miracle of the Rose* (1951).
4. Jean Starobinski is a Swiss scholar of French literature and author of *La Relation critique* (The critical relation; 1970), *Trois fureurs* (Three furores; 1974) and *L'Encre de la mélancolie* (The ink of melancholy; 2012).
5. A celebrated collection of Arab poetry known as "The Suspended Odes" because they were so beloved by Muslims that they were allegedly hung over the Kabbah in Mecca.
6. Classical Arabic poet born in the 8th century whose legend made it into the *Thousand and One Nights*.
7. Popularly known in the west as Averroes, Ibn Rushd was a 12th-century scholar from Andalusia, in contemporary Spain.
8. Influential 14th-century Tunisian philosopher.

9. 9th- and 10th-century philosopher, scholar and jurist from Afghanistan who worked in the Arab world and who kept alive the knowledge of Greek philosophy.
10. A celebrated Persian poet from the 13th century.

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