

An interview with Cécile Oumhani:
The Arab Spring

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Resumen

Las revoluciones en el mundo árabe de 2010 y 2011, denominadas por distintos medios como la *Primavera árabe* componen una serie de alzamientos populares en los países del norte de África. Son unas revueltas sin precedentes ya que si bien ha habido con anterioridad numerosos movimientos de protesta éstos se habían caracterizado por nacer de golpes de Estado militares que daban paso a gobiernos autoritarios con o sin apoyo popular. Sin embargo las sublevaciones populares de ahora han salido a la calle a pedir una instauración de la democracia así como una mejora de las condiciones de vida. La escritora Cécile Oumhani, desde la retaguardia, lucha y da voz a aquellos que no pueden expresarse. En estos momentos se halla en pleno *combate* por la liberación del pueblo árabe y hemos de agradecerle enormemente que nos haya dedicado su tiempo y estas palabras.

Palabras Clave: Revolución, árabe, *Jazmin*, jóvenes, migración, literatura.

Abstract

The revolutions in the Arab world from 2010 and 2011 known by varying media as the “Arab Spring” was made up of a series of popular uprisings in countries in North Africa. They are unprecedented revolts. Before, there had been numerous protests, these were characterized because they arose from military coups which were followed by the establishment of authoritarian governments, with or without popular support. However the popular uprisings happening now have come out onto the street to demand the establishment of democracy as well as a improvement in living conditions. The writer Cécile Oumhani, has always fought and spoken for those who could not express themselves. She has been there, at those moments, right in the middle of combat, for the liberation of the Arab people and we are very grateful to her for dedicating her time and thoughts.

Keywords: Revolution, arab, *Jazmin*, young people, migration, literature.

Introduction

Tuesday 8th March 2011

“The same moment that I was preparing for my meeting with you, the Arab world was right in the middle of a revolution. 17th December 2010, Mohamad Bouaizi, a 26 year old travelling salesman, burnt himself alive, in protest to the right which had been denied to him to sell vegetables which had allowed him to make a living and survive. He lived in Sidi Bouzid, a very deprived city in the centre of Tunisia. He was desperate, like so many young people, young men and young women from Tunisia, often with University qualifications, who were unable to find work, despite the sacrifices which they and their families had made to make it possible to study, thinking that this way they would have a better life. To die by burning oneself is to choose one of the most atrocious ways to die. Burning ones body is directed at oneself, a punishment, the silent violence bred from years and years of frustration in a country where contempt towards the people had been institutionalized by the power of the mafia, mafia which had robbed the country’s wealth. I wish to emphasize the repercussions which Mohamad Bouaizi’s self-immolation had on the Arab world. This case was followed by other similar cases of suicides in Tunisia, and has brought about an unprecedented revolt against the regime in power, which as a consequence, on 14th January led the president Ben Ali to flee the country. Some days later, numerous similar cases took place in Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Yemen and in Sudan. On 11th February, almost a month after the fall of the dictatorship of Tunisia, the Egyptian president stepped down from power under pressure from the protesters gathered for more than 18 days in Tahrir Square, well named as its Arabic name means “Liberation Square”.

This is how Cécile Oumhani began her conference “Women’s writing in the Maghreb: Texts and Contexts” which I attended as a guest professor from the University of Almeria. Given the revolution in the Arab world, this conference planned for the end of January, had to be postponed. Cécile, a dedicated writer, had to have been following the protests closely, expectant, awaiting the progress of events and using the written word to fight, along with other colleagues, to let Europe know through their articles what was happening in the Arab world. Oumhani finally arrived in March, almost

three months after the first uprisings. We all waited anxiously, all aware that she came loaded down with a lot of information.

Firstly we will give a brief introduction to her life and work, followed by the interview where she speaks about all the uprisings which took place in the Arab world from the middle of December last year up until today¹.

Cécile Oumhani was born December 12th 1952 in Namur (Belgium). In writing circles she is considered a French-British-Tunisian writer. She grew up with the French and English of her mother, in a multi-cultural environment. Marked by her time spent during her childhood with her maternal family in the English speaking part of Canada, she developed a familiarity with varying and distinct universes: Belgium, Scotland and Canada. Later on she went to Tunisia as an adult and this new country enriched her multicultural experience even further. Cécile Oumhani began writing because she saw it as a remedy and refuge from being so far away from her loved ones. If we had to define her we could say that she is passionate about writing, and her words are full of extreme sensitivity which always shine from the text, (sensitivity, which she inherited from her mother, the Scottish painter Madeleine Vigné Philip). She is the author of various books, books of poetry, short stories, novels and essays. Among her collection of poems, we find ; *A l'abside des hêtres* (1995), *Loin de l'envol de la palombe* (1996), *Vers Lisbonne, promenade déclive* (1997), *Des sentiers pour l'absence* (1998), *Chant d'herbe vive* (2003), *Demeures de mots et de nuit* (2005), *Au miroir de nos pas* (2008), *Jeune femme à la terrasse* (2009) y *Temps solaire* (2009). Amongst her novels we find : *Une odeur de henné* (1999), *Les racines du mandarinier* (2001), *Un jardin à La Marsa* (2001), *Le café d'Ylka* (2008) and *Plus loin que la nuit* (2007)². She is also the author of essays and short stories such as *Fibules sur fond de pourpre* (1995), *À fleur de mots*, (2004) and *La transe* (2008).

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² In 2011 the editorial Chèvre Fueille Etoilée reedited *Plus loin que la nuit*.

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In this interview we ask Oumhani about the repercussions the Arab Spring had in North Africa, and its consequences. The roles which literature, women, new technologies..etc have played, as well as the events which continue to happen in these countries.

Interview

Esther González: *The Jazmin Revolution surprised us all. Did you already have warning signs or did it take you by surprise as well?*

Cécile Oumhani: I must say I was taken by surprise. When I heard protests were erupting in Sidi Bouzid and other areas in Tunisia following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, I never thought or rather I did not dare hope they would spread all over the country as they did, in a matter of days. As demonstrations broke out all over the country, I was filled with admiration for the courage and determination of these young people. Retrospectively, I found a lot that could explain what happened. For years I had met young people in Tunisia, either in universities or in everyday life. They were thirsty for knowledge. Cyber-café's were full of young people surfing as much as they could possibly do living in a country where censorship was omnipresent. I could see them taking notes, passionately discussing. When I came to attend conferences, these were held in large lecture-halls crowded with students eagerly listening, asking questions, whereas in such occasions in Paris, we usually see only about half-a-dozen post-graduate students coming. The generations that grew up at the time of independence in 1956 and after received an education, boys or girls. And in the years that preceded the revolution, the number of unemployed graduates had been swelling with the despair of all those left with no prospect but to live under a corrupt government that was ruthlessly laying hands on the country's riches. Exactly a year before the recent events, in January 2010, I remember seeing violent anti-police graffiti in a country area north of Tunis. This struck me enough to want to take a furtive picture, as this seemed so incredible.

Esther González: *Do you believe that present day literature from Magreb, in a certain way, was announcing the arrival of this revolution?*

Cécile Oumhani: It is the young who took to the streets, in particularly from underprivileged areas in Tunisia. They were followed by other people in other cities in the next few days. Established writers and artists enthusiastically supported the movement but they did not initiate it. I can think of a hip-hop artist, El General, whose songs openly denounced the regime and led him to be jailed promptly. Lina Ben Mhenni, a young blogger, had also been active. In August 2010, she had posted a photograph of her naked back with the inscription “404 not found”. Looking back on the literary production in Tunisia in the preceding years, Emna Belhaj Yahya’s novel *Tasharej* published in 2001 comes to my mind. It depicts a society with no perspectives but despair for the younger characters. Whatever criticism had been made of society, which censorship made very difficult in any case, I do not think people had imagined events of such importance would come. They were aware of deep-seated social problems. They were aware of the corruption of the family in power but writers and artists had not predicted what happened a year ago.

Esther González: *Does the Revolution in Tunisia owe a lot to new technologies?*

Cécile Oumhani: You probably saw photographs of the slogan painted on a wall of Tunis: “Merci Facebook!” For several years, young Tunisians had been using new technologies as much as they could, defying “Ammar”, the nickname they had found for cyber-censorship. The Internet had been a major source of information for them and they soon found how social networks like Facebook could enable them to form groups where they could share information, when organising protests, for example. They quickly posted videos filmed with their mobile phones. I remember one entitled “An angry Tunisian”, showing a young woman bravely addressing the crowds in the streets of Tunis several days before the fall of the regime on January 8th. People saw it on their Facebook pages in Tunisia and in France. With the new technologies, communication is almost instant throughout the world. The protesters soon realised that with their mobile phones and the Internet they could become the journalists of their own revolution, and thus dismantle a communication system based on hushing up the vio-

lence of the crackdown on protesters. Protesters in Egypt then followed suit and so did the Yemenis and the Libyans before the Internet was shut down in their country. Since last March, Syrian protesters have been posting videos of their uprising every day, making it possible to follow their daily marches almost as they are taking place, despite hacking attempts from the Syrian government. The new technologies are certainly a very powerful tool. They make global access to scenes of ongoing events possible and thus give the citizens of the world new responsibilities. For how can we *know* what is happening, turn a blind eye and fail to express our support for non-violent protesters daily exposing themselves to death just to express their desire for freedom and dignity?

Esther González: *What role have women taken in these uprisings?*

Cécile Oumhani: They participated actively as the numerous videos of the Tunisian revolution testify. Nessma TV had a moving “Tribute to Tunisian women” which can still be found on the Internet if you google “Nessma, hommage à la femme tunisienne”. It is made of photos showing women in action during the protests. Lina Ben Mhenni was an iconic figure of the Tunisian revolution with her blog “A Tunisian girl”. She was shortlisted for the Nobel Peace Prize with other young Egyptian bloggers. Gigi Ibrahim was also an iconic figure of the Egyptian revolution. In both countries, women fell under the bullets of repression, just like men. In Libya, women took to the streets as early as February 15th 2011. The mothers of prisoners who had died in the prisons of the regime demonstrated in front of the Benghazi court holding photographs of their sons. Women went on participating, even after the men took arms, although some said they bitterly regretted not being able to fight with arms too. But their role was significant, although less visible at that time. There have been numerous articles telling about them as doctors, nurses, or smuggling arms, writing pamphlets, imprisoned and tortured. They have created “The Free Libyan Women”, with a Facebook page. Libyan women are determined not to give up on their revolution. Whatever the obstacles ahead, as indicate their conspicuous absence from the political scene of new Libya, they say life can never be the same after what happened. I personally met Najat, a woman from Misrata in a Tunis hospital where she had taken her sick husband by car from Libya. She told me how all businesses had closed overnight when men had taken arms, explaining how the solidarity of everyone made it possible for life to go on for all those months, without salaries being paid. I could hear her voice break only once. This is

when she explained how her fifteen-year old son, a bright student, had taken arms too, using a kalashnikov for the first time in his short life. Najat also evoked the four members of her family who died as *chababs*, fighting for freedom.

Esther González: *What position do the women writers take? What do they say today?*

Cécile Oumhani: I was asked to speak about writers and the revolution at the Zagreb Literary Talks last October, which has led me to think quite a lot about this question: how do we write and what do we write in such circumstances? Writers, men and women, from various countries of the region have been following events very closely for the past few months, with passion and emotion. Famous Egyptian writer and feminist Nawal El Saadawi was in Tahrir square during the revolution. So was Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif only a few days ago when protests started again in Cairo. Syrian poet, Aïcha Arnaout has been dedicating herself totally to the Syrian revolution, ever since it began last March, from Paris. She has been sending countless news updates, organising meetings and rallies weekly. I interviewed her for the American online magazine *Words Without Borders* and she shared her experience of writing as events are still tragically unfolding. One of her sentences became the title of the interview: “A scream has no alphabet”. It very powerfully speaks for itself, I think.

I have also been amazed by the vibrant creativity of women in various artistic fields. One of the most striking recent and controversial examples was Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, posing naked on her blog. Her photograph is not just audaciously breaking a taboo. It is meant as artistic photography as the nude portrait and its use of colour indicates together with others where her naked image appears in front of Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading the People”. In Tunisia, the impertinent tomcat “Willis from Tunis” was born with the revolution and young cartoonist Nadia Khiari has had great success, commenting on ongoing events with provocative humour.

Of course Tunisian women writers did not want to see the Ennahdha party win the election. But they are vigilant and ready to stand up and defend their rights when necessary.

Esther González: *Algerian and Moroccan women have a lot to be envious of their Tunisian neighbours from a legal point of view?*

Cécile Oumhani: Tunisian women undeniably have the best status in the Arab world, not just North Africa. Soon after Tunisia's independence in 1956, Habib Bourguiba was at the origin of a code of personal status that revolutionized the condition of women, abolishing polygamy, and replacing unilateral repudiation by divorce. In the wake of this unprecedented reform of the law, other measures gave women access to contraception without the need for their husbands' consent. Indeed Algerian women are still living under the very restrictive 1984 family code. King Mohammed VI initiated reforms that brought in positive change but cannot be compared with Tunisian law.

Esther González: *Therefore how do you explain the result of the elections in Tunisia (90 seats in the Constituent Assembly) for the Islamic Party Ennahda?*

Cécile Oumhani: In the weeks that followed the revolution, over 100 new political parties were founded, reflecting the interest of Tunisians for the new political life in their country. Ennahdha had existed for over twenty years. It had been outlawed by the Ben Ali regime and its militants had been jailed or forced into exile. How could all these new political parties rival with Ennahdha that had this long experience and was so well-organised? Besides the years some of them had spent in jail after being tortured helped them win sympathy with the population, as victims of the previous regime's brutality. Ben Ali and his family were corrupt. They had taken hold of the country's riches for their personal use. Ennahdha is seen by those who voted for them as defending moral values the previous government flaunted. Add to this the huge number of parties and you will understand how they won. Let's not forget they got 40 % of the votes, which means over half of the Tunisian voters did not vote for Ennahdha.

Esther González: *The Moroccan PJD (The Party for Justice and Development) has obtained 107 seats in the New Assembly. Don't you think that the situation is similar to that of Tunisia?*

Cécile Oumhani: The name of this islamist party is the party for justice and development. To my mind, it reflects people's rejection of corruption, their aspirations for a better life. All this is about economic problems in an extremely difficult economic global context for which other parties do not seem to have effective remedies. Voters

are more in search of social justice and solutions to their economic problems than religion.

Esther González: *The Egyptians are going to vote for the members of the People's Assembly. If the Muslim Brothers, who appear to be in the position of power, obtain a similar result to the Ennahda and to the PJD, what conclusions can we take from all that?*

Cécile Oumhani: Even last February, observers noted the significant role the Muslim Brothers were likely to play in the new Egypt. They were founded in 1928 and are also extremely well-organised and present in Egyptian society. They are concerned about the everyday problems of their fellow-citizens, which can account for their popularity. We still have to wait a few more weeks for the final results of the Egyptian election. The results announced last week, although not complete yet, are an overwhelming victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and a conspicuous presence of the salafists, which is indeed a great source of concern for the future of the new Egypt.

Esther González: *Is it possible, that we, as Westerners, have not understood anything about these uprisings nor their result?*

Cécile Oumhani: It is clear that in the West, people are not familiar with the Middle-East and North Africa. We should learn to differentiate between the forms of islamism present in those regions. In the West, people have a tendency to oversimplify and assimilate extreme forms of islamism and moderate ones. As long as the elections take place democratically, as long as the status of women is respected, as Ennahdha promised they would, we have to accept the rules of democracy and prepare for the next elections which will take place in a year from now in Tunisia to elect the members of parliament and a president. The present Tunisian assembly was elected to write the new constitution.

Esther González: *How do you see the future of the Magreb democracy?*

Cécile Oumhani: When Souad Abderrahim, a member of Ennahdha, declared that single women were not entitled to a legal status of any kind and that they were a

shame for Tunisia, reactions were immediate. People wrote dozens of open letters, opened Facebook pages to voice their protest, showing their determination to defend the values of democracy. A group of salafists violently aggressed a dean at the University of La Manouba in Tunis last week, because they wanted students wearing the niqab to be allowed inside the university. The dean and his colleagues refused to give in or even call in the police to enforce the regulations, preferring dialogue to repression. There was a widespread and immediate reaction of civil society against the pressures and intimidations of the salafists. As the new government is being formed, sit-ins have been taking place in front of the Bardo where the constituent assembly is sitting. People are loudly demonstrating that they do not want their revolution to be confiscated, that they are demanding freedom, democracy, jobs, and guarantees for women's rights. I think we must remember that such revolutionary processes take a long time, despite the magic instantaneousness of the Internet and mobile phones. Historical time is much slower. It will take years for the process to be completed. As long as all citizens, women and men, remain involved and active, I have hope for the future; I still believe the Arab Spring is a major turning point in History, even if there are obviously signs of counter-revolutions that are a source of concern, especially in Egypt.

Esther González: *What are the consequences of the Arab Spring on migration?*

Cécile Oumhani: In the first few weeks after the Tunisian revolution, there was a sudden increase in the number of immigrants arriving in perilous conditions on the Italian island of Lampedusa. The rates of unemployment were dramatically high in Tunisia especially in the particularly underprivileged regions where the protests started a year ago. All these people were in such dire conditions that they could not wait for democracy to be implemented. They seized the nearest opportunity to leave the country and try their luck in Europe, at the peril of their lives. In the case of Libya, a war broke out very soon after the first protests were quelled in a bloodbath, when freedom-fighters turned arms against the Gaddafi regime. Hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers from Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa had to leave Libya in a matter of days, even if this meant walking across the desert. They flooded east across the Egyptian border and west across the Tunisian border. I was in Tunisia in March at a time when all this was happening. Tunisia was going through its own revolution and at the same time they also had to deal with the mass-arrivals of refugees. For several weeks, volunteers helped the army in the camps

that were opened at the border. Tunisian people made a point of donating whatever they could afford to, be it a pack of spaghetti or a blanket. Some welcomed refugees in their own homes out of solidarity. When I returned to Tunisia in September, the foreign workers of Libya had almost all been repatriated but Libyans were coming in great numbers, at some point at the rate of 8000 a day. They were not pro-Gaddafis fleeing new Libya but people morally and physically exhausted by a six-month war. They came to Tunisia to recover, which was somehow good news for the Tunisian economy, although individuals might sometimes complain that the prices of the essentials of everyday life were soaring because of the arrival of the Libyans, who are better-off on average than the Tunisians. This Libyan presence was also quite visible in Tunisian hospitals, as a lot of war-casualties came to Tunisia for treatment. They received free treatment out of solidarity. When I was there, they were calling for people to donate blood as Tunisia's reserves were running very low after all the fighting.

I also hear in France around me of people considering migrating back to Tunisia. These generally are either educated people or people who succeeded in their business and feel eager to become involved in the democratic process under way, helping and contributing as best as they can. In early December, these Tunisians complained about an article of the new constitution that might restrict their rights to run in a presidential election, which shows how closely they are following events, even if they live in France.

Esther González: *Do you believe that the Arab Spring will have a historic repercussion on the regulation policy of migration in Europe?*

Cécile Oumhani: Perhaps it is too early to answer such a question as so much is still under way in the region. A few days ago, the Muslim Brotherhood won the Egyptian elections and the Salafists obtained a very high number of votes. And the most notable event since is not Egyptians fleeing the country *en masse*. It is Egyptian women taking to the streets, wearing a niqab or bare-headed to protest against the brutal and shameful molesting of a woman protester by the army last week. And such an impressive reaction on their part does not mean that they are necessarily going to be heard and that the reality of the fundamentalist victory has miraculously vanished in any way. In my opinion, this just shows that the transitional process is still under way and that many of us are holding their breaths wondering what is going to happen.

Esther González: *Do you believe that there will be a change in literature arising from all these events?*

Cécile Oumhani: It is bound to change although it is too early to speak of novels that were written and published after the revolution. A number of essays have been published about the ongoing revolutions. Poems have been written in relation to the intense emotions this period aroused like Libyan poet Khaled Mattawa's poem "After 42 years", written after Gaddafi's death. It can be accessed on the Internet site of the "Los Angeles Times" or on the BBC, where a video shows Mattawa reading his poem. As the Syrian poet Aïcha Arnaout said, "a scream has no alphabet" and some more time will be needed for novels to appear. Syrian writer Samar Yazbek has come to Paris in exile and she has been writing a diary that is soon to be published in France. Like poems, the diary form enables the writer to remain in close touch with events that are still unfinished, raise a lot of questions and have a powerful emotional impact. I believe novels require the ability to take a retrospective look, which is difficult to do right now.

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