



**TUNISIAN
WOMEN
SPEAK**

CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

- Women in Contemporary Tunisia
(Evelyne Accad). 2

TUNISIA

- Facts and Figures. 4

PIONEER

- Fathia Mzali, Minister of the Family and the
Promotion of Women. 5

ARTICLES

- What Feminism for Tunisia?
(Hafidha Chekir) 6
- Women at the Tahar Haddad Club
(Wafa' Stephan). 7
- Nissa, a New Women's Journal 8
- The National Union of Tunisian Women... 9

LITERATURE

- Is there a Renewal in Tunisian Feminine
Literature?
(Jean Fontaine). 10
- Tunisian Women Writing in French
(Hedia Khaddar). 11
- For Azza, the Song of Tunisia
(Anne Marie Skye). 12

POETRY

- Chroniques. 13

INTERVIEW

- Nabiha Ben Milad and Early Tunisian
Feminism. 14-15

REPORTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

- Egyptian Parliament Approves Divorce
Law. 16
- Jordanian Women to be Drafted In Army. 16

Women in Contemporary Tunisia

Tunisia, at the crossroads of civilizations: Carthage, Rome, the Ottomans..., is often considered the land of dialogue, and the land where women enjoy a more privileged position than their sisters in other North African and Arab countries. Are these assumptions about modern-day Tunisia supported by the reality?

It would take too long to fully answer this question within few editorial notes. However, in tracing the history of the emancipation of Tunisian women and in showing some of their present-day accomplishments, some elements addressing this issue will surface.

*The origins of women's emancipation in Tunisia go back to 1930, with **Tahar Haddad's** publication of «Our Woman in Law and Society». In it he denounces polygamy, the veil, sex segregation, and the right of repudiation by the husband. He advocates the right of women to education on all levels and states that Islam has given the same freedom to believers of both sexes. Ahead of his time, Haddad was banned from the Koranic school of Zitouna as a heretic; but his ideas still played an important role in the evolution of Tunisian society. **President Bourguiba's** reforms thirty years later were the realization of Haddad's revolutionary vision in terms of women's emancipation.*

*The first woman's organization in Tunisia was the **Union of Tunisiana Women**, started by Mrs. **Behira M'rad**. It was not a «feminist» movement per se, in that it did not aim at changing the status-quo. It lasted until 1958. Then came the **Union for Tunisian Women** started by French Communist women living in Tunisia whose husbands often belonged to the Socialist Union of Tunisian Workers. The first two organizations stopped their activities after independence. A new organization saw the light in 1956 and is till active today. It was founded by the Neo-Destourians and was called the **National Union of Tunisian Women**. With **Bourguiba's** rise to power, the beginning of women's*

liberation in Tunisia was attributed to the following factors:

1. *A wide campaign of literacy for both men and women started by the Neo-Destourians in 1955.*
2. *The National Union of Tunisian Women founded in January 1956 had many reform projects for the liberation of women.*
3. *Above all, the «Code of Personal Status», promulgated on the 13th of August 1956, was to make Tunisia one of the most advanced Arab countries in terms of its legislation for women.*

Among the reforms brought about by the Code were: the minimum marriage age was raised to 17 for girls and 20 for boys; the forbiddance of polygamy; the abolishment of forced marriage; the association of religious marriage with civil marriage; unilateral repudiation replaced by a legal one; the custody of children given to both parents; a law for adoption (Tunisia is the only Arab country to have one); adultery punished equally for husband and wife.

*According to **Souad Chater** «the promulgation of Personal Status Code was not the result of a conscious feminist movement, but the work of one single man»⁽¹⁾.*

In spite of the improvements, the glaring drawbacks still existing in this Code are: 1) no marriage can take place between a Moslem woman and a non-Moslem man; 2) women continue to receive only half of the inheritance of men.

As in many other Arab countries, there is a wide gap between the law and its implementation in Tunisia. Often people stick to their traditions (which include unfavorable aspects vis-a-vis women's liberation). Women are often not aware of their rights, and those who are, are subjected to social pressure and interpretations which are opposed to the ultimate rights of women.

Modern-day Tunisia, however, has some very active



Evelyne
Accad

women, movements, organizations, researchers, writers and thinkers working towards improving their actual status and that of other Tunisian women. Among the noteworthy women working in the official sphere are: **Mrs. Fathiya Mzali**, in charge of the Ministry of the Family and the Promotion of Women, and **Souad Chater**, who used to be the President of Family Planning.

An independent woman who stands out because of her long history with the women's movement in Tunisia is **Nabiha Ben Abdallah Ben Milad**. There is also **Dorra Bouzid**, a pharmacist, journalist and writer who established the first Tunisian women's journal, «Faiza» in 1958-59. Another outstanding woman is **Maitre Naziha Lakehal-Ayyat** who wrote an important book on Tunisian women and the law⁽²⁾ and **Hedia Khaddar**, professor of literature who wrote a book about Tunisian poets writing in French and contributed an article on Tunisian women writers for this issue. **Jelila Hafsia**, director of the various cultural groups of the **Club Tahar Haddad**, a journalist and a novelist who published «Ashes at Dawn», «Faces and Meetings» and «The Pen in Liberty» (all in French) is also an outstanding woman of present-day Tunisia.

Among the women to have done important research on women I note: **Lilia Chabbi Labidi** who has published extensively in psychology and ethnology and is the author of «Women in the Maghreb», «L'Histoire d'une Parole Feminine» and others;⁽³⁾ **Samia Attia**, who wrote on the contradictions in women's lives, the schism between two sets of values; **Soukaina Bouraoui** who studied the family and concept of the child in Tunisian law; **Badra Bechir** who wrote on youth-culture; **Naima Karoui** on the work of women; **Hasna Hamzaoui** on the socialization of little girls; **Raoudha Chegrouch** on the ideology of Tahar Haddad and Cheikh Ben M'rad and **Lilia Ben Salem** on the social origin of political women. **Safia Ferchion** is a well-known ethnologist;

Malika Zamiti, a writer on migrant women; **Souad Khadraoui**, a researcher on contraception and women's relation to their bodies and **Nebiha Grueddana** is responsible for national research on child mortality. **Alia Baffoun** has studied women and work in Tunisia and **Zaned Traki** has recently published a book on the human body in relation to the Islamic concept of space.

Since an article in this issue is devoted to Tunisian women writers, we will not mention them in this editorial. However, what I would like to mention is the women's group of the **Club Tahar Haddad** who I consider to be the most exciting and leading force of the Feminist movement in Tunisia. These women meet regularly to discuss vital issues concerning their struggle towards liberation and they have a yearly colloquium on the subject. They have recently founded a feminist bilingual journal called «Nissa», which is the only one of its kind in present-day Tunisia.⁽⁴⁾

Having lived and worked, read and met most of these women during the six months I spent in Tunisia as a researcher, I can only conclude that Tunisia is indeed a vital and dynamic place for women. Despite political upheavals in the Arab world the achievements of Tunisian women are a leading force not only for Tunisia; but for their sisters in other parts of the world.

Evelyne Accad

-
- (1) "La Femme Tunisienne: Citoyenne ou Sujet", Tunis: MTE, 1979. p. 93
 - (2) "La Femme Tunisienne, et sa Place dans le Droit Positif".
 - (3) "Maternity/Femininity", a Bibliography of Tunisian Multi-plinary Titles in French: "The Language of Children": "The Family and Environment": "The Thirties": "Live Stories from History".
 - (4) See article on "Nissa", p. 8 of this issue.

Facts and Figures

Population:	6.700.000 (1982 est.)
Age Distribution:	0 - 14: 43.3% 15 - 59: 50.9% 60 - : 5.8%
Ethnic Groups:	98% Arab.
Languages:	Arabic (Official), French.
Religions:	Mainly Moslem. (Christian and Jewish minorities)
Area:	154, 530 sq. kms. (63, 378 sq. mi).
Location:	On North coast of Africa.
Neighbors:	Algeria on West. Libya on East..
Topography:	The North is wooded and fertile The Central Plains are for grazing and orchards. The South is arid; near the Sahara desert.
Capital:	Tunis, with 1.385.000 inhabitants (1984 est.)
Government:	Republic.
Head of State:	Pres. Habib Bourguiba - Born August 3, 1903 - Took office: July 25, 1957.
Prime Minister:	Mohammed Mzali - Born Dec. 23, 1925 - Took office: April 23, 1980.
Local Divisions:	21 governorates.
Industries:	Food processing - Textiles Oil products - Construction materials - Tourism.
Chief Crops:	Grains - Dates - Olives - Citrus - Fruits - Figs - Vegetables - Grapes.



Minerals:	Phosphates - Iron - Oil - Lead - Zinc.
Currency:	Dinar.
Health:	
Life Expectancy at Birth	59 years (1980 est). 50.0 Males / 56.0 Females. (1975 est.)
Births (per 1,000 pop.):	34,9 (1980 est.).
Deaths (per 1,000 pop.):	7,7 (1980 est.).
Natural Increase (1980):	2,72%
Education:	
Literacy:	2% (1980 est.).
Compulsory years:	Attendance 85%

(☆) This information is based on **1984 World Almanac**, NEA New York, and on pamphlet «**Population and Development en Tunisie**», Ministère de al Famille et de la Promotion de al femme, Aug. 1984.

Fathia Mzali, Minister of the Family and the Promotion of Women

Fathia Mzali
Minister of
the Family
and the
Promotion
of Women



Fathia Mokhtar Mzali is the **Minister for the Family and the Promotion of Women** in the Tunisian government since November 1983. She is married to Mohammed Mzali, Tunisia's prime minister, who is groomed to be President Bourghiba's successor one day. Mrs. Mzali has also been the president of the National Union of Tunisian Women since August 1973.

Born on April 6, 1927 in Tunis, she studied French, Arabic and English in school and graduated in philosophy from the Sorbonne University in Paris. Mother of 6 children, she worked as a secondary school teacher, headmistress of the Teacher's College in Tunis and as inspector of secondary schools in the country. Before Tunisia's independence, Fathia enrolled in the **Destourian party** in Tunis and then in the Socialist Destourian party in Paris where she was studying. She participated in all the demonstrations (1950-55) that led to the independence of the country.

After independence, in 1956, Fathia became one of the founding members of the **Union of Tunisian Women** and later, its president in 1973-1976 and 1981. Before that she was vice-president, and secretary-general.

Mrs. Mzali also worked as a councillor in the **Municipality of Tunis** from 1957-1960. She was vice-president and then president of the **National Women's Club** in 1963-1966 and was a founding member of the **Secondary Teacher's Destourian Cell** and one of the founding members of the **Family Planning Association** and its vice-president from 1968 to 1978. She was the first woman in Tunisia to give a conference on birth control in 1959, with special permission from President Bourguiba. She then became President of the **International Family Planning Association (IPPF)** for the Middle East and North Africa (1974-1978).

In 1979 and 1981, Mrs. Mzali became a member of the **Political Bureau of the Destourian Socialist Party**

and was elected deputy at the General Assembly in 1974 and 1981 for the regions of Kairouan, Tunis and Bizerte.

For four consecutive years (1980-1984) Mrs. Mzali was elected **Vice-President of the National Assembly** and she now presides over the ad hoc **Commission on Population and Development** in parliament. She is also a member of the National committee for Culture set up by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and is also a member of the Committee for the **Control of Theatre Plays in Tunis**.

On the Arab scene, Mrs. Mzali is **President** of the follow-up committee of the conference, **Women, Family and Development** for Arab and Moslem countries held in October 1983 and was a member of the official delegation accompanying President Bourguiba on his tour of the Middle East in 1965. Mrs. Mzali has been the head of the Tunisian delegation for the **UN Mexico Conference for Women** in 1975, the **Mid-Decade UN Conference for Women** in Copenhagen (1980) and this year's **UN Nairobi Conference for Women**.

She has also been a member of the Tunisian delegation to the **Bucharest Conference on Population** in 1974 and the **Mexico Conference on Population** in 1984.

Mrs. Mzali has participated in a number of United Nations conferences on Human Rights, Anti-Apartheid and has been invited officially to the U.S., Great Britain, Sweden, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. She has also been a member of the **International Committee of Parliamentarians on Population and Development** since its inception.

The Tunisian Minister of the Family received the UN Human Rights Prize, in 1978, in the name of the National Union of Tunisian Women. She has also received a number of national and international decorations from France, Finland and Senegal.

What Feminism for Tunisia

by
Hafidha Chekir

Hafidha Chekir, who teaches law at the University of Tunis and is very active in feminist and syndicate movements, raises some important questions concerning feminism in Tunisia: **What is the nature of feminism in relation to political engagement? Are the two closely linked or is woman's liberation a social project able to attain its aim through legislative, political, economic and educational reforms within women's struggles?**

In a situation dominated by cultural, political and socio-economic identity crises, what should the priorities be? Can women's oppression disappear through their own struggle, independent from others?

Hafidha Chekir sees three kinds of feminist movements:

- 1) The reformist which seeks to improve women's condition,
- 2) The radical which goes beyond mere reforms and attacks the foundation of patriarchal society, and
- 3) The ideological which mixes class with sex struggle.

She believes that Tunisia ought to combine all three movements for a more «militant» triple action: a feminist struggle for the acquisition of full citizenship in a democracy and for a change of the socio-economic structures.

She remarks that the Tunisian contribution is not fully applied today due to the strong dominant patriarchal ideology. She sees the misogynous attitudes and, above all, the Islamic revival movement, as the most serious threats to women wanting to achieve equality and obtain their rights.

Finally, she notices that feminist movements in Tunisia appear to have the necessary components for the transformation of the entire society, because their



Hafidha Chekir centre, with Hayet Gribba left and Evelyn Accad, right.

struggle combines the fight against social exploitation, political imperialism and the specific oppression of women.

Women at the Tahar Haddad Club

The Tahar Haddad Club is one of the many cultural clubs that exist in Tunisia. Situated right in the middle of the old city of Tunis—the Medina — it carries the name of a famous Tunisian reformist of the early 20th century, who advocated the emancipation and equality of women.

Established by a group of Tunisian intellectuals ten years ago and directed by the remarkable journalist and writer, **Jelila Hafsia**, it comprises a dozen clubs, each with a specific area of interest (law, music, poetry, literature... etc).

Among the most active is the **Women's Club** which was founded in 1978. The first issue of its bulletin, **Par Nous Mêmes** (By Ourselves), states: «Our situation as women as well as our reflection on women's condition in Tunisia have made us create, within the context of the Club Tahar Haddad, a study group where women could regain control of themselves, reflect, express themselves freely and come out with answers. This is why it was decided to have a club strictly for women».

The most important aims of the **Women's Club** are:

- To pinpoint the specific problems facing Tunisian women.
- To articulate them through research, interviews and discussions.
- To organize cultural events that would sensitize the maximum number of people (males and females) to women's problems.

Since its inception, the club has organized many events such as debates with visiting feminists, Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt and Fatma Mernissi of Morocco. Some of the debates were open to men such as the ones on «Freedom of the Press», the «Rights of Women», «The Image of Women in the Media», «Women and Violence», «Women and Sexuality» and a conference on «Women and Mental Illness».

The Women's Club has encouraged women's artistic expression in theatre, poetry, short story writing, painting and film screening.

What is unique about this club, however, according



Jelila Hafsia
Director of the Tahar Haddad Club

to members Zeineb Guchiss, Rachida Enneifer and Hayet Gribaa, is the method that has been used to analyze women's conditions. The key question asked was: to what extent do women perpetuate their own alienation?

It is after asking this question that the women of the club saw it necessary to tackle their problems as active «subjects» and not as «passive victims»; and also to view research on women in a different perspective. ►

Nissa, A New Women's Journal

Nissa is a feminist, bilingual journal issued by a group of women who decided they would like to contribute to the shaping of women's image different from that portrayed by the traditional media or by sexist discourse.

Nissa aims to give all women the opportunity to express themselves within its pages and testify freely about their everyday lives. It also welcomes contributions by men interested in women's questions.

Nissa informs women about their rights and gives them information that would enable them to help themselves. It also tries to analyze the reasons behind women's oppression and to pinpoint the beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes that contribute to it.

Nissa will fight against all forms of discrimination experienced by women in Tunisia and around the world. It also wishes to develop an opinion movement which will promote a more equitable relationship

between the two sexes.

Among the remarkable women behind the production of **Nissa** is **Amel Ben Aba**, journalist, teacher, militant feminist, and syndicalist; **Rashida Enneifer**, President of the Arab Journalist Association and journalist for the Tunisian daily **La Presse**; **Hayet Gribaa**, poet, writer, journalist, and teacher; **Siham Ben Sidrin**, journalist and militant; **Souad Rjeb**, researcher at the CERES on women-the family and sexuality; **Noura Borsali**, teacher, student of literature, journalist, and militant; **Hafidha Chakir**, professor of law at the University of Tunis and militant in syndicate and feminist movements; **Dora Mahfoudh**, researcher at the CERES; and other women who prefer to remain anonymous.

The first issue of **Nissa** came out in April 1985. It dealt with rape, the death sentence, International

Women at the Tahar Haddad Club, cont'd.

That means to look at women's work, for instance, not as a «case study» but as a «lived experience», an action that changes women's lives. Also, to analyze women's conditions through «collective reflection», to bring down the barriers separating the «cultural» from the «political» and the «personal» from the «public», and to encourage women to talk about themselves not as «objects of debate» but as «autonomous subjects».

Women, say club members, should reevaluate their own image and their own words by examining the various discourses held on women and by observing the way women are portrayed in different sectors of the media.

Women, they add, should «learn to speak, to listen to each other and encourage one another to speak up in any language they want (Arabic or French)».

Commenting on the women's club, three women who did not wish to be named said:

- I think this club is like a big family; I can be away and come back whenever I want. There is always a spirit of communion that prevails.
- The women's club discusses the dominant ideas in

our society. This means it is not self-centered. It has been a subject of debate in wider circles because of the special way it raises women's questions. It is a place for exchange... When I first arrived to the club in 1979 and I was identified by outsiders as a member, I understood that each of us expressed herself differently, but that all had common goals. What I consider positive in this club is the will for establishing a dialogue and to be open to one another... to minimize the reflection on the cultural is wrong because culture is the starting point of all change.

How do the women of the club reach decisions? Not through voting, they answer, but through consensus. This implies a more active participation of each member in decisions taken.

In conclusion, the club's effort to push for «rehabilitating the cultural» has not been fruitless, despite some women's criticism of the «limitation of cultural activities».

Wafa' Stephan

☆ See article by **Lilia Chabbi**, P.



Siham Ben Sidrin,
another active
journalist in the
review *Nissa*



Amel Ben Aba
one
of the leading
women behind
the journal *Nissa*

Women's Day, women and suicide, everyday sexism, and health, economic, and cultural concerns.

The second issue (May 85) included articles on syndicalist women in the South, women's rights, the 7th International Festival of Women's Films, the right

of children to life, the first Tunisian Women's Organization and an epitaph for Sana Mhaydli, the 17-year-old Lebanese resistance fighter who blew herself up with a car bomb near an Israeli checkpoint in the Israeli-occupied zone of Lebanon.

The National Union of Tunisian Women*

The National Union of Tunisian Women or U.N.F.T., as it is called, is a women's organization which aims at «improving the cultural, educational, social, economic, and political levels of Tunisian women to enable them to acquire their full rights and to accomplish their national, social and familial duties in an atmosphere of authenticity and respect».

The U.N.F.T. coordinates women's activities in different parts of the country and works towards a harmonious division of labor between men and women in the workplace and at home. It includes different working groups or «commissions», each specializing in a subject related to woman as a wife, mother, wage earner, and citizen.

The Union encourages institutions responsible for the protection and education of children, social ser-

vices and all legislation pertaining to women and children.

It encourages and instigates dialogue on women's questions and problems and publishes a monthly journal on its various activities, projects and policy. It organizes special leader-training sessions and orientation programs for members and cooperates with state institutions in promoting the ideals and aims of the Tunisian Socialist Destourian Party.

The U.N.F.T. aims at developing friendly relations with women's unions in other countries and with international women's organizations, in addition to exchanging experiences and working towards achieving international cooperation and world peace.

☆ This is a translated excerpt of the U.N.F.T.'s Constitution, written originally in French.

Is there a Renewal in Tunisian Feminine Literature?

Jean Fontaine, one of the founders of IBLA, the Institute of Arab Literature (Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes), has often written about Tunisian literature. In his latest critique, he questions whether there has been a renewal of literary efforts by Tunisian women between the years 1971 and 1981.

First of all, Fontaine mentions a number of authors and categorizes their work into various trends: 1) the «reformists» with Najia Thameur and Hind Azouz, presenting the world as it should be; 2) the «realists» with Khadija Chitouï and Beya Nouri on the one hand and Fatma Slim and Jalila Mehri on the other, describing the world as it is; 3) the «feminists» with Zoubeida Bechir and Leila Mami looking at the world as it should be and; 4) the «explorers» with Fadhlila Chabbi and Zohra Jlassi, going into a world of fantasy.

Fontaine then reviews the works published by

women during this period which amount to 14 books and 100 texts representing only 10% of the male production during the same lapse of time. He concludes that the literature written by Tunisian women during those ten years is disappointing, not only as to the quantity but also qualitatively. His analysis leads him to define two additional categories of literary trends: a) the «marginalist» with Nefla Dahab and Noutayla Tbianiyya where women, unable to have an impact on the outside world, prefer to take refuge in their private sphere and, b) the «transformist» trend exemplified by Aroussia Nalouti and her book «The Fifth Dimension».

Comparing this decade with previous ones, Fontaine decides that any renewal that has happened has been a negative one and that feminine literature in Tunisia is the reflection of a tragic destiny.

Jean Fontaine

Tunisian Women Writing in French

by
Hedia Khaddar*

Tunisian women, like their sisters all over the world, have always expressed themselves in gestures and symbols of everyday life. Since the middle of this century, their expression has started taking written and public form. Their early writings, published in Arabic, call for justice: «the justice of heaven», «the right to live and to build a future» and to «achieve individual liberation». As the author L. Cherni said; «The central theme of feminine literature in Arabic has been love: a key to individual liberation». A different road has been followed in Tunisian feminine literature in the French language.

«Cendres a l'Aube» (Ashes at Dawn), the first novel

written in French by Jelila Hafsia, adopts the biographical form, initiated by Alba de Cepedes in her novel, «Elle». It is a revolt against the traditional fate of woman and an effort toward self-expression through work. Aisha Chaïbi evokes in a sincere tone the life of Rached, a young provincial who treads with difficulty the steps of social mobility. In her two novels, «La Vie Simple» (Simple Life) and «Jardins du Nord» (Gardens of the North), Souad Guellouz tries to examine the memories of an outmoded period. The story of a family from Northern Tunisia forms a background for identifying and elucidating the problems of a Tunisian family on the eve of independence.

Hedia
Kheddar



Whatever the importance and the literary value of novels and short stories in French, they cling to the autobiographical form, using detailed descriptions of daily life and brief analysis of the strains and stresses endured by women in a society regulated by and for men. Generally, the feminine novel in French in Tunisia is the mouthpiece of an older generation.

In the poetic field, women's literature seems to have more intensity and richness. If the works of **Melika Ben Redjeb** and **Behija Gaaloui Hedr**, in spite of their sincere tones, sink into outdated imitation, it is through such women as **Sophie El Goulle** and **Amina Said** that poetry finds new horizons and original expression.

Sophie El Goulle considers poetry as a story of words:

**Words say nothing
Words can say everything**
 Nothing
 All

**I like enjoying words
In a play of words
That say nothing
In a play of words
That can say everything**

In her pursuit, Sophie El Goulle allows herself to be carried through «Petrified Africa» and the «Vast World». She is the invisible traveller, «The Errant

Traveller» who daily «asks others and asks herself».

In contrast, Amina Said diligently scrutinizes life, trying to know and to be known. Beyond a search for personal identity, she is searching the world, a world where communication between human beings would be finally possible.

**Man measures distance
Between himself and the world
In the mirror that he raises
To give himself a face
The world fails to look at him.**

In another poem the poet, in an upward flight of feminine solidarity, has «for mirror the whole sea» with which she moves in perfect union:

**My woman's transparency
Has for mirror the whole sea
My foams are born
Out of the salt of these summits,
My voice echoes
Its murmurs,
We were one rising wave
When we walked toward the earth
Hand in hand.**

Elsewhere, in a highly suggestive poem, she suddenly becomes conscious of her silence and of her woman's strangeness and, though she is at the heart of creation, she finds she has no authority over things: ►

CHRONIQUES

Dans un cour vide et sur un souvenir, de temps en temps se posent une aile, un souffle, une image sans nom. J'hésite face à la contrainte de l'espoir et je vois s'éloigner, avec les dernières vagues du couchant, ce rayon de brume relatant l'amour d'un hiver.

Je fais partie de celles qui, levées tôt avant l'aube, épuisées par l'attente, meurent au petit matin.

Trop plein de sève.

Jetées dans une foule sans nom, nous attendons que se consomment ces murées de voix.

Dans la nuit, ce craquement des os quand on voit

rire ces lumières et éclater ces noms. Comment expliquer aux autres quand on ne comprend pas? Blessure magnifique faisant couler l'oubli.

D'avoir failli comprendre et d'avoir perdu. Les sillons crevés s'égarer, découvrant une plage de rochers. L'horizon de l'attente et d'avoir pleuré si longtemps ajoute à la présence lumineuse de cet instant.

Khedija

**I strike at the most beautiful spot
Of a world so created
A partition stretches along its curves
It answers me with a hollow voice
I close my eyes without fear,
Readily rises the song
And it is my strangeness which astonishes me
And my silence
My hand still open
To the periphery of things.**

Though feminine literature in the French language is still in the elementary stage, it is not for that reason less significant. By itself, it reflects:

1. The problems of language which have become more and more acute since independence. Though the French language has been maintained in the curricula of primary and secondary schools, French is little used and badly spoken. There is a deterioration in vocabulary and

structure. The poet, whose tool of communication consists of words alone, suffers from this decline and tends to wander in the literary sphere.

2. Problems of identity, expressed in a renewed effort to describe daily life in «apprenticeship» novels, trying to delineate the place and the roles of women in a society undergoing full change. This statement applies equally to women poets who realize that they are «hanging at nothingness» and confronted by «archives of silence.»

Translated from French
by Rose Ghurayib.

☆ Hedja Khaddar is a literary critic and lecturer at Tunis University. Her most recent book on literature in Tunisia is: «Anthologie de la Poesie Tunisienne de langue Française». Edition l'Haramattan, Paris, 1984.

For Azza, the Song of Tunisia

The poem burst from her mind like a song, like a bird full-fledged, like a small, free, perfect bird that hovered, flittered, tested its wings, threw its head back and thrilled before soaring to its freedom; soaring high over the ocean. The song took form, formed the moment, came like a gift, flowed away freely given, climbed and floated above the heads of her sisters as they walked slowly away from her on the ragged beach; as they walked ungainly, bound round with the flowing, creamy, gauzey bonds of tradition and history and timelessness. The air was still except for that one clear note; a note of freedom that floated, dipped, darted, soared above the heads of her sisters.

Could they hear it, she wondered, watching them? Could they hear it now through all those soft, thin, cottony layers of hidden meaning-layers of cloth that wrapped the past in the body of each woman to keep it safe and soft, vulnerable and pale, to hobble its strength? And if they could not hear it now, would it be lost forever over those misty, milky, mossy, watery depths, over the ocean and the high, tearing peaks beyond? Would it soar high enough, her song, to cross those mountains, that sea, and leave her forever behind, holding the perfect round globe of an orange in each hand?

The song mingled with the pulsing waves, the drifting breezes; the voice of the child, her little daughter, her hope for the future, the only song that might endure. Her daughter who asked her now for the secret juice of those glowing fruits, those solid spheres which she herself held in her own two strong hands: her hands that had held the child's father like a child himself; the hands that had cradled the head of her own dying mother, traced the lines of the sunken orbits, the feathery brows, the cavernous cheeks; the hands that had fought to protect her own body, her

own being, that had covered herself and been inadequate but all she had; the hands about to squeeze the blood red juice from the fruit, the juice to soothe her child's thirst.

«Why are you waiting?» the child asked, her round dark eyes set like rare jewels in her porcelaine face. «Why are you waiting?» As she stood with an orange in each hand, watching the layers of air shift over the restless sea. «Why are you waiting?» As she listened to the echoes of the song weaving, twining, losing itself among the folds of her sisters' flowing, graceful bonds. «Why are you waiting?»

I am waiting to live in a world where I can walk outside alone; where each one I meet isn't watching every breath I draw, counting every heartbeat and judging it evil or just. Freedom: an elusive, simple thing. It is nothing: the air, the haze on the mountain, the color of the sea, it is nothing at all. From whom would I steal my freedom? There is enough for all the world; not yet enough for you or me.

«Why are you waiting?»

I wait for you, my child, to grow; for my sisters to hear; for my brothers to awaken; for the future, for the movement of the waves, the fullness of the moon, the keeping of promises, the breath that feeds the body, the breath that nourishes the soul, the breath of life. I wait for the juice of the orange to melt the bonds and to flow sweetly and fully in the veins of my daughter; for a world where even the poor have dignity and even women are alive. I wait for my sisters to hear my song, and for brothers to awaken from their long sleep.

The juice flows sticky rich and ruby red, staining my strong hands with promise. And I wait.

Ann Marie Skye

NABIHA BEN MILAD

Nabiha Ben Abdallah Ben Milad, whose husband was a personal friend of Tahar Haddad, is one of the earliest Tunisian feminists. She grew up under French occupation and saw the birth of independent Tunisia. She has been active in the women's movement since its early days, and now at 70, she still follows with much interest women's affairs, welcoming in her home visiting feminists to tell them about her experiences with the women's movement. Guest editor Evelyne Accad and co-editor Wafa' Stephan visited her one afternoon in her home, situated right in the middle of a huge garden, very close to the city centre or Medina. On her walls are paintings of old Tunis and landscapes of Tunisia by French orientalist painters. On her dining room table lay a pile of papers, correspondence and studies, all pertaining to women's affairs. On her face was a warm and vivacious smile, and her green eyes were shining with life and compassion. Here is part of the conversation we had with her.

Q: Mrs. Ben Milad, could you tell us about your childhood in the 1920's in Tunisia?

A: I went to school in 1923. In those days young girls didn't leave home and were rarely sent to school. Boys went to the Lycee and girls had a school on El Pacha Street. We were taught religious teachings, sewing, embroidery, and of course, French language. It was a very strict nun's school and the only secondary school

available for girls. There were few primary schools for girls, either. It was a difficult time for them.

Q: Did women have to wear the veil?

A: My mother wore the veil and she made me wear it when I was 12 years old. I didn't know how to put it on myself, so she had to put it for me before I went to school. But she wasn't an illiterate woman. She read the newspapers everyday. My father was a very cultured man. He used to send us, my sisters and I, to the theatre, to music concerts and to the cinema, but we always had to be accompanied. He sometimes went with us.

Q: Did you have any brothers?

A: Yes.

Q: Was their upbringing different from yours?

A: Oh, yes. The boys went all alone to school, unaccompanied.

Q: How long did you stay at school?

A: I stayed at school until I was married, at the age of 14.

Q: Did you meet your husband before you got married?

A: Yes, I saw him and he saw me but we didn't date like young people do now. He was 17 years older than I.

- Q: Did this create any problems for you?
- A: No not at all. You know marriage is a kind of hazard game. Either it works or not. You have to fall on the right number (laugh)...
- Q: How many were you in the family?
- A: Four daughters and three sons. We were one of the most «emancipated» families of Tunis.
- Q: Were you close to your parents?
- A: I was very close to my father. Yes, I remember my father saying that he loved his daughters very much. As for my mother, she was a woman of rare intelligence, very much ahead of her time. She was a very cheerful woman, open to people. She did not receive a formal education but she knew how to read. Although she didn't learn French, she understood everything when we spoke.
- Q: What about the other members of the family?
- A: It was totally different. For instance, when we went to my uncle we couldn't speak French; we weren't allowed to. We couldn't speak freely with his daughters.
- Q: Did you learn Arabic at school?
- A: They didn't teach us Arabic at school. We had to learn it at home. We had a private teacher who taught us grammar, reading, writing and the Koran.
- Q: Were you aware of the ideas that were promulgated by Tahar Haddad?
- A: Yes. In fact, my husband's first gift to me was Tahar Haddad's book, «Our Woman in Law and Society». They were very good friends. They lived almost in the same street and used to meet everyday to discuss the question of the emancipation of women and other topical matters of the day.
- Q: Did you discuss Tahar Haddad's ideas with your husband?
- A: We were not married then. But when I was at home, I wasn't aware of the problems other women faced because we lived a rather free life. When I got married, my husband gave me all the



The young and old feminists:
Amel Ben Aba with Nabila Ben Milad

freedom I wanted.

- Q: How come your husband was so liberal in his ideas about women?
- A: You know, when I got engaged my father told me, «Nabiha, you are very lucky. You are getting married to one of the most enlightened young men of Tunis.»
- Q: How did you start becoming aware of the problems women faced?
- A: Just after I got married, **Bechira Ben M'rad** formed the **Moslem Union of Tunisian Women**. It was to teach women how to be aware of their duties, how to raise their children. She asked me to join the movement, and as she was the sister of my sister-in-law, she used to come to visit us everyday because I used to live with my in-laws. She was a middle-aged woman who spoke of freedom for women and of their rights. She was very courageous because she did not only think of upper-class women, who were more or less free considering the times, but of ordinary women, «the daughters of the masses». I stayed in this group until the Second World War. At this time the communist women's movement was starting, in 1942. Women used to meet, discuss and join in students' activities. Finally, the Neo-Destourian party took over the movement, and Bechira Ben M'rad followed because she thought it was a very dynamic movement and was moving forward. It consisted mainly of men who were interested in women's problems.

Egyptian Parliament Approves Divorce Law

After a protracted and noisy debate, the Egyptian parliament has unanimously approved a law giving women the right to sue for divorce if their husbands take a second wife.

The law which passed on July 1, 1985 is almost identical to the «Personal Status» one which was decreed in 1979 by the late President Anwar Sadat, and was known as «Jihan's Law» after President Sadat's wife, who lobbied hard for it.

The 1979 law gave a woman whose husband took a second wife an automatic divorce if she requested it. The key difference in the new law is that a woman who suffers «moral or material injury» from her husband's remarriage can file

for divorce, the decision to grant it or deny it left to a judge.

The new law has retained another controversial article from the 1979 one, which is to give the family dwelling to a divorced woman and her children. It has also added a provision that the woman can take either the marital dwelling or enough money to obtain another home.

The reason the first law was scrapped is because President Sadat implemented it by decree, bypassing parliament. Moreover, the 1979 law had elicited criticism from Moslem fundamentalists who said it gave women non-Islamic rights.

The new law, however, according to government legislators, conforms to Islamic Law or Sharia - which allows a man up to four wives - because it did not regulate his right to remarry, only his wife's right to ask for a divorce.

(AP, July 2, 1985)

Jordanian Women to be Drafted In Army

Jordan's Parliament has approved a bill, after heated debate, to raise a «people's army» into which both men and women would be drafted. Under this law, all males between 16 and 55 and female students in secondary schools and higher institutions would have to join the «people's army». Other women between 16 and 45 could volunteer.

This new force would be a paramilitary one to help Jordan's 73,000- strong armed forces and would be under its supervision. Until now women were allowed to serve in the Jordanian armed forces, but only as volunteers.

This law raised controversy because some deputies cited tradition and religion as reasons for opposing female conscription. One deputy

declared, «Many would refuse to see their daughters being trained in school compounds by men, under the gaze of crowds of boys».

But Prime Minister Zeid Rifai, who pushed the bill through an extraordinary session, said, «It is not logical to ignore women, who make up half our society». He cited occasions when women had fought alongside men from the early days of Islam down to modern times and said, «Today in Afghanistan we find Moslem, Afghani women taking part in resistance operations».

The Prime Minister also said training would not be mixed. The women would be trained in the use of light weapons, first aid, traffic control, and civil defense.

(The Daily Star, July 3, 1985)

AL-RAIDA, IWSAW QUARTERLY

LEBANON

P.O.Box 13-5053
Beirut University College
Beirut, Lebanon
Cable Address: BECOGE
Tlx: BUC 23389 LE

U.S.A.

Beirut University College
475 Riverside Drive,
Room 1846
New York, NY 10115

IWSAW STAFF

Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr - Director
Nuha Azar - Executive Secretary
Irene Lorring - Researcher
Rose Ghurayyib - Editor of al -Raida
Wafa' Stephan - Co-editor and writer of unsigned articles.

YEARLY CONTRIBUTION

Lebanon: L.L. 50 per year
Other Countries: \$ 15 per year
plus \$ 3 to cover postage