

# Of Laws Tattooed in Flesh:

## Gendered Self-Expression through “*Tounsi*” in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

Agatha E. Palma

They gathered outside, in the summer of 2013, at a public park in Tunis with yellow flyers attached to their arms that read Sayeb 15. They were demanding freedom for *Wled al-15*, a Tunisian rapper, who had recently been jailed after months of hiding for his song *Bolicia Kleb*, or “The Police are Dogs”. The gathering was among the first for *Kalaam Charaa*, a street poetry movement initiated by young Tunisian poets, which stresses the importance of poetry in Tunisian dialect, known locally as *Tounsi*. One young woman got up to read an original poem, but I had seen her somewhere before – she was Shams Radhouani Abdi, a popular socialist and feminist. Her voice low but powerful, she read her poem, “Prepare the Shroud”, in dialect:

Prepare the shroud  
 And if you still have more cloth, don't forget  
 To sew her a dream  
 And to sew her a light in a dark night  
 And to write her a poem and a love song enveloped by a sigh  
 And to wipe the tears of her idea  
 And to tell her, I'm still with you until the revolution comes  
 You shut your eyes and open them  
 And you find her resisting by your side  
 Laughing and measuring and cutting, she tells you,  
 Prepare the shroud

In the poem, Abdi speaks of preparing a burial shroud for her country. Yet she intentionally refers to Tunisia in the feminine pronoun ‘*hiya*’, to speak not only to the grim future she predicts for the country, but for its women as well.

I first met Shams Abdi in the spring of 2013 at the World Social Forum, held in Tunis. She had led a large seminar on transnational feminism, and later brought several hundred to their feet, chanting “So-so-so! *Solidarite! Avec les femmes!*” She had garnered the attention of many, and was waving off an Al Jazeera journalist when I finally had the opportunity to approach her. Before I knew it, I was crammed into the backseat of her two-door car, amongst four other female poets, laughing each time we hit a bump in the road – Shams was yelling out dirty curse words from her open window, defining them for me in explicit detail, and asking if there were

any equivalents in English. A young man crossed on foot in front of us, and Shams honked and yelled out her window, “*Zabbour!*” which made the entire car erupt in laughter. Finally, it was explained to me: *Zabbour* is the Tunisian word for vagina, used frequently by men to describe sexy women. Shams, then, was appropriating the term and using it to tease a younger man, who looked back at us, bewildered and amused.

Throughout this paper, I will argue that the use of Tunisian dialect, or the *Derja*, can in certain contexts be an act of resistance, especially as used by women; *Tounsi* is often associated with vulgarity and crudeness, and while it is used by Tunisian women all over, it popularly holds lower-class and uneducated connotations. It may especially be cited as inappropriate, for example, in the supposedly refined world of poetry. If modern standard Arabic and French are the languages of education and sophistication, then the *Derja* is the unwritten language, the language of the streets. “The *Derja* is a battered language. And yet it is the mother tongue, that of affect, emotions, human relationships” (Ben Ammar, quoted in Auffray, 2014) – it is thus the language of expressivity, and is therefore a significant focal point with which to examine resistance.

With an emphasis on women’s street poetry, this paper examines various artistic forms of resistance in Tunisia as they illuminate gender relations, masculinity versus femininity, and Islamism versus feminism. Yet Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) warns us not to romanticize resistance, arguing that we have become so fixated on it that we forget to trace it back to the actual power structures that it could not exist without. But I would also argue that through anthropology’s fixation on power, we forget to examine critically what we take to be its given forms. I thus also hope to complicate, by turning towards Islamic hip-hop, the rather simplistic dichotomy that often places Tunisian feminism at odds with Islamism, and the commonly held view that Islamism is necessarily a form of power that must be resisted.

We might expect that rap lyrics would be written in dialect, but the use of the *Derja* in poetry is rather unusual, and I argue that it serves several means: for one, it resists the supposed sophistication of standard Arabic, used historically by Arabic-speaking poets, and the supposed pureness of classical Arabic, associated with the Quran; second, it asserts a Tunisian identity above all others; third, it pushes up against the politics of language education, wherein French becomes the dominant means of pedagogy in Tunisian schools; fourth, it confronts questions of language use and masculinity versus femininity; and finally, street poetry becomes a means for women to reclaim public space.

Tunisia has long been known by the West as a beacon of progressivism in the Arab world. This is nowhere more apparent than with the issue of women’s rights. Following liberation from the French, Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba, in 1956, implemented the personal status code, which consisted of a number of progressive laws regarding women and gender relations. The code guaranteed women the right to divorce, the right to abortion, and outlawed polygamy, among other things. Feminist organizations in Tunisia were thus generally content until the 1990s, when there began a wave of Islamism in Tunisia. Viewing the increased presence of Islamism as a threat, various feminist organizations began to mobilize, the most prominent of which was the Democratic Women’s Association of Tunisia, or the ATFD.

But Tunisian Islamism was also a threat to Ben Ali and Bourguiba; as we know, its opposition to the regime meant that along with Tunisia's underground leftists, Islamists were routinely harassed, jailed, and forced into political exile. It was in fact to the regimes' benefit to pit Islamists and leftists against each other, and likewise, Islamists and feminists. The result is no more visible than ever today; the country is divided by and large between Islamist conservatives on the one hand, and secular leftists on the other.

But identity rifts in Tunisia often go beyond the political, and language intersects with Tunisian identity in crucial ways. In fact, it may have contributed to what some had called a Tunisian identity crisis in the years leading up to the revolution, wherein many Tunisians were unsure of where they fit in culturally: nationally-renowned filmmaker Nouri Bouzid (1996), for example, acknowledged one aspect of this so-called crisis by asking: "Are we Arabs? Are we Tunisians... Berbers... a mixture?" and, "What do these mean? Why have I always been ruled?" Add to this the triad of languages used in particular situations and only when appropriate (Standard Arabic and French in public, for example, and Tounsi in private spaces), and it is easy to understand how popular ideologies of Tounsi and its speakers have been shaped over the years.

But such language ideologies appear to be slowly shifting in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Arguably one of the most important moments of the revolution was the convergence, albeit brief and short-lived, of something like a Tunisian culture, since Tunisians from nearly all backgrounds were by and large opposed to Ben Ali's dictatorship. In fact, the revolution had become a certain kind of antidote to, if indeed there ever were, an identity crisis: the tiny country of Tunisia was suddenly put on the map. It became the country responsible for the Arab Spring, and even the theme song of the Tunisian revolution, *Rais Lebled*, or "Head of State", a rap song sung in *Tounsi* by Tunisian rapper El General, became the theme of Egypt's uprisings as well (Gana, 2013). Perhaps then, in some ways, the revolution was the answer to Bouzid's identity crisis; Mediterranean, Arab, Berber – Tunisia is all of these things, but Tunisia is also distinctly Tunisian, and its language is *Tounsi*. Poetry in Tunisian dialect, then, firmly asserts a Tunisian identity: it rejects the generalizing "Arab" identity implied by the use of standard Arabic, which arguably erases the distinctly Tunisian experience.

Yet as I have claimed, poetry in dialect is especially important for women. Throughout my fieldwork in Tunis, I often noted that the Tunisian dialect appears to hold particularly masculine connotations. While it is equally spoken by Tunisian men and women, the language is considered rough, especially in its most modern form – young Tunisians, for example, have taken to replacing certain verbs with the word *ennik*, or fuck. They will often be heard saying, *ennik sandwich*, which means, "eat a sandwich" but which translates literally to "fuck a sandwich", or *ennik taxi*, for "take [or fuck] a taxi". Common insults in the dialect, such as *barra nik ommik*, or "go fuck your mother", have clear implications of what gender they speak to, and have become such a fixture of the dialect that they have almost lost their original meaning.

Women typically refrain from using such phrases in public. In fact, numerous studies have shown that when it comes to code-switching between dialect and a more prestigious language, women actually tend to choose the prestigious forms more often

than men (Gordon, 1997). In Tunisia, this could mean choosing French in certain formal settings. Linguist Elizabeth Gordon (1997) explains that this is not for purposes of self-promotion, but rather to avoid the associations that often accompany dialect use when intersecting with gender: female users of dialect, for example, tend to be associated more with sexual impropriety. We should then ask what meanings we might draw from women who intentionally use dialect in public spaces. Perhaps it is more than simply to reaffirm their Tunisian identity, but to also directly challenge the stereotypes that might otherwise cause them to refrain from using their own mother tongue in certain contexts.

While the two founders of *Kalaam Charaa* are men, it has become a popular space for many politicized Tunisian women. Poetry has historically been an acceptable place for women perhaps because it is associated with “softness”, but scholars have long shown how poetry has been a central means of women’s resistance. In fact, feminist poet Audre Lorde has said, “poetry is a vital necessity of [women’s] existence. It forms the quality of the light within which [they] predicate [their] hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (1977, p. 37). But still, we must question, how can the use of the Tunisian language translate into tangible action?

The female poets of *Kalaam Charaa* are often powerful speakers. They take up space, moving their arms and bodies for emphasis; raise, deepen, and lower their voices to convey emotion, and pause, sometimes for several tense moments, for effect. This falls in line with one of *Kalaam Charaa*’s stated purposes, which is to “reclaim public space”. This can be found on their Facebook page and has also been repeated at several of its events, where participants have been known to exclaim, “public space belongs to us”. Such a sentiment must be especially important for women, who must negotiate a public space that was largely constructed at their exclusion.

Questions of women in public space and the implications of freedom of speech in post-revolutionary Tunisia are worth exploring, but within the content of this study I would like to briefly trace out the role of *Tounsi* in public space in more recent years, as language has been an immensely strategic tool used by both the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. Prior to 2003, Tunisian radio stations were solely public, and like television stations, were strictly in standard Arabic. Public speeches by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali were likewise always given in standard Arabic; Tunisians often referred to the use of standard Arabic as *Hashabia*, or “wooden language”, referencing its stiffness, or inaccessibility and elitism.

Yet decades into Ben Ali’s leadership, he rightfully sensed a climate of growing dissatisfaction among Tunisians. It has been argued that one of his efforts to mitigate Tunisian discontent was through his authorization of private radio stations, which, while still under his control, became entirely broadcast in dialect. The didactic, stiff programs broadcast in standard Arabic at last gave way to new private stations, wherein Tunisians could call in and air out their frustrations that may have otherwise been directed at the regime (Haugbolle, 2013). Ben Ali similarly allowed for *mizwid*, traditional Tunisian music associated with the lower class, to be publicly broadcast for the first time on national television (Gana, 2013). Like the use of dialect, Nouri Gana

argues that broadcasting *mizwid* was a means to opiate the masses, to suppress their resistance. It should be noted here that the only public speech the regime ever delivered in dialect came from Ben Ali, the day before his ousting, wherein he infamously stated, “*ana fhemtkoum*,” or, “I understood you”.

The poets of *Kalaam Charaa*, then, seem to have hit a nerve at exactly the right moment: as even Ben Ali demonstrated in his final speech, the *Derja* has the power to communicate in ways that standard Arabic cannot. This likely explains why, more often than not, the women’s poetry of *Kalaam Charaa* is extremely political. Another of Abdi’s poems, written after the assassination of leftist leader Chokri Belaid, is an obvious confrontation with *Ennahda*, the Islamist party that some hold responsible for Belaid’s death. In this poem, Abdi speaks of *al-fikra*, or the idea, being stomped out by Islamists. She writes,

The idea is a time bomb, a missile  
 The idea is dynamite  
 It heals the ill  
 Awakens the dead  
 A song, a poem, a book  
 ...  
 The idea is a rap artist  
 And in his blood he injected the hate  
 of *Ennahda* and Al Beji  
 His words came out of the ghettos  
 Written in blood  
 Coming from flesh  
 ...  
 The idea makes you live, despite the killing  
 The idea calls for life, despite the fighting  
 The idea lets you make bullets from words  
 Of laws tattooed in flesh

Through my interviews with Abdi, I learned that “these laws” were actually in reference to the constitution, which was then still under the process of re-drafting. Many feminists, like Abdi, had worried that Islamism was making its way into the constitution.

Yet some scholars assert that feminist opposition to Islamism has in large part been stoked by discourse promoted by the Ben Ali regime, which intentionally framed women’s rights and Islamism as oppositional (Marks, 2013). Such discourse can be traced back to the early years of Bourguiba’s presidency, wherein he presented himself as the protector of women’s rights partly in order to gain popular support against his Islamist opponents. For Ben Ali, calling himself the advocate of women’s rights served similar purposes – he managed to suppress Islamist resistance by continuously portraying it as regressive and anti-modern (Marks, 2013). In fact, Monica Marks (2013) asserts that there had been something of a tense alliance between Ben Ali and several feminist groups, like the ATFD, because of their shared opposition to what both viewed as the threat of Islamism. Because of this arguably constructed dichotomy between feminism and Islamism, when Islamists flooded the Tunisian

political scene following the revolution, some commentators began to paint the revolution as “bad for women”.

While I have yet to find any artistic expressions on the part of religious women, a number of male hip-hop artists emerged during the revolution that can be labeled as pro-Islam, if not Islamist, and many speak of women’s outspokenness in the public sphere in their songs. Among the most famous of these Islamic hip-hop artists has been Psycho M. Several’s songs. Among such songs are: “Manipulation” and “Psychological War”, that express disdain for what he views as a global campaign against Islam (Gana, 2013). Both songs include violent attacks on Tunisian secularists, such as filmmaker Nouri Bouzid, who has spoken out against Tunisia’s Islamist role post-revolution. In “Manipulation”, Psycho M. also harshly criticizes Tunisian actress Sawsen Maalej, who referenced the male organ on a talk show (Gana, 2013). In the 15-minute song, he calls her a “sick actress who needs to be treated,” and then sarcastically remarks,

Thank God we have such an actress  
Leading women and the nation  
With champagne and pastis.

The growing popularity of Islamic hip-hop in Tunisia may give us pause; after all, hip-hop as we know it has deep roots in anti-establishment movements, and rarely embraces religious values. Islamism, however, as we have seen, has been anything but the establishment in Tunisia for many decades. We have thus seen Islamic rap emerge as a particularly important form of resistance pre- and post-revolution, with women and the role of Islam in public Tunisian life as some of its focal points.

Also significant is the use of the *Derja* in Tunisian rap. Similar to Black English in American rap, *Tounsi* has a sense of limitlessness, as there are no written rules; of course, both Black English and the *Derja* are rule-governed systems (Alim & Pennycook, 2007), yet they are more flexible and free-flowing, and become a way to “contest the dominant script” (Scott, 1992, quoted in Alim & Pennycook, 2007). Rap has also opened up the space for the creation of new words and new styles of speaking, and while it is still relatively new in Tunisia, we cannot underestimate the potential impact it will have not only on the Tunisian language, but perhaps even on ways of thinking for Tunisian youth. So while we have thus far seen *Derja* in poetry as a means of feminist resistance, its use in Islamic hip-hop may allow us to recognize more clearly how Islamism has in fact had a long history of suppression in Tunisia.

Acknowledging the struggle of Tunisia’s more religious or conservative population, especially its women, who had long been harassed under Ben Ali’s regime, is not to undermine what leftist feminists face. Instead it becomes clear that both secularist and religious Tunisians, and especially women across these lines, share much to resist. It is both secularist women and their religious sisters who had been victimized, oppressed, and punished under Ben Ali’s decades-long dictatorship, and who continue to be used variously by every party on the political spectrum to gain national support. As we know, women’s bodies have long been the location in which men hold ideological disputes, further their political agendas, and create allegories for their nationalist struggles.

Unfortunately, as we know, shared histories of struggle have not transformed into solidarity or sympathy in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The intense, spiteful divide between Islamists and leftists, or Islamists and feminists, perhaps stoked by the old regime, has become the new standard. Yet public space must be reclaimed by all: Tunisia remains a police state, and as many have noted, the old system is what continues to shape the new. Perhaps then, in order to successfully contest the dominant discourse, be it through artistic forms, the use of the Tunisian language, or otherwise, it will be important to remember first what had once been shared acts of resistance against the oppressive state. Such common histories have by and large been forgotten in a divided post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Agatha Palma is a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology,  
University of California, Los Angeles.  
Email: agathaepalma@gmail.com

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