

Touria Hadraoui

Tradition and I

*I decided to sing Malhoun,
an exclusively male song:
I have become the first woman
in history to sing it as an
expert. I have claimed it
as my own by dusting it.
I have become a link in a chain
where traditional and modern,
woman on one side and
man on the other, no longer
exist, but rather a chain made
of creators and lovers
of beauty.*

When Gruppo Comunicazione Visiva contacted me to take part in a meeting they had organised in Genova¹, I was asked to speak about the status of women within the code of the Moroccan family. Although I am very attentive to all that happens in this domain, I have to admit that it is a long time since I have written on the subject. The militants for women's rights have succeeded in putting forward a discussion for the revision of the text of the *Moudawana*², causing an upheaval in the whole of Moroccan society and dividing the country into two. On one side we have the unrelenting conservatives of all different tendencies mixed together, and on the other those who want to restore at least some dignity to women. If I no longer write about "women and the family code", it is because I try to avoid repeating myself (I don't like repetitions). I don't want to find myself saying once again something which I have already said and written twenty years ago. At this level nothing fundamental has changed. The Moroccan woman is still inferior in the eyes of the law, even when she is a minister, ambassador, business woman, judge...

The theme of the meeting in Genova was "Women - between religion and tradition", and I chose to speak about my experience as a woman with tradition.

When I became interested in my own condition as a woman, I consequently found myself facing a more complex question: that of women in general. While trying to decipher my own personality, I landed on the "problem of women". The cultural associations at the end of the 70s and the journal *Kalima* (a social-cultural journal that favoured the female cause) in the 80s provided me with an ideal framework within which to satisfy my thirst for knowledge while learning by actively taking part in the field. The sociological and journalistic enquiries, the portraits and reports I made, allowed me to meet women and men belonging to

1. Schegge di Nord Africa, the 11th of March 2001

2. The family code of Morocco

different social backgrounds and with distinct horizons, and to confront reality in its complexity, rid of all demagoguery. Thus I was able to understand that the evil does not come only from the lack of women's rights, but also from women themselves. Women are not only passive victims; they are not only objects of repression; they are also instruments of repression. They are the ones who reproduce the dynamic of male domination. Change cannot come from the abolition of injustice towards women, even if this is a necessary stage. Society is not only ordered by legal rights - feminists often forget this...

When *Kalima* stopped publication in 1989, my quest in relation to women's themes came to an end. Circumstances pushed me in other directions in my personal research. Gifted with a voice that I had denied during my militant and journalistic period, after the involuntary halt in my journalistic career, this voice insisted on making itself heard and I returned to my first love: singing. On this new path, I discovered the *Malhoun* (a traditional form of singing, initially based on poetic texts of great value; born in the 14th century in the oases of south Morocco and later developed in the artisan guilds of urban centres like Fès, Marrakech, Mekhnès... It began to disappear at the beginning of the 20th century with the introduction of industrial life).

The encounter with the *Malhoun* disturbed and changed my life. I was fascinated and seduced by this form of singing. The creative flame of its poets, who were also its composers, touched me deeply, so I enrolled in the courses of an old master. He was the only master to be found in Casablanca - the modern city that looks towards the future free of the weight of a burdensome past that transforms a traditional city into a snail curling in on itself content with its old acquisitions. While

learning the rules of this difficult, beautiful and refined chant, I decided to dedicate myself completely to singing. It must be said that singing was not foreign to me; I have sung since I was nine years old and I have always made music. But singing traditionally was far from my interests. In the 70s and 80s I was against anything traditional, struggling tooth and nail for modernity (for me it is still the only guarantee for the emancipation of woman), and now, incredibly, I found myself in the heart of tradition. An avalanche of questions overwhelmed me: what is traditional and what is contemporary? Is tradition in contradiction with modernity? Why do we who proclaim ourselves for modernity ignore tradition? Can we build our future without looking into our tradition?

Exercising the art of *Malhoun* as it is called in Morocco and practising it professionally, the dark heavy shadow invoked by these questions slowly started to disappear. An illuminating and bright aspect of tradition revealed itself to me...

Tradition is not something that can be refused in its totality by defining it as "reactionary", "retrograde" or "anachronistic". Within tradition a pulsating life can be found where love, desire and the body have great space. In reality I have come to understand that we have been deprived of our tradition by a covering mask of atrocious rigidity and reductive uniformity. Tradition has been reduced to a few sacred texts chosen for us for circumstantial reasons and narrow interests, and subjected to a mediocre interpretation. I use the word "mediocre" on purpose, because these "new" interpreters cut out both the dynamism of the Arab-Islamic culture that was one of the most open cultures of the time, and the universal modern culture.

Thanks to music I have reconciled myself with what is alive and beautiful in tradition. The texts of *Malhoun* conceal a

sensuality and express a freedom of tone rarely found in the contemporary Arab poets who call themselves modern. The texts propose a way of loving and of being moved that are substance for thought.

Thanks to the *Malhoun*, I have been able to get closely acquainted with traditional intellectuals and musicians. Unfortunately, in Morocco, they are the only keepers of the traditional cultural and artistic legacy. These people are engrossed in a culture and a vision of the world different to mine. They live in a Morocco of another era and they refuse change. Withered and ancient in their souls, they are products of a decadence that they have made perennial. They pass on tradition as something dead; or they absolutely refuse to transmit it, preferring to bury with them what they have inherited from their ancestors (so many treasures of oral culture have disappeared eternally thanks to this behaviour; I cannot tell if this is caused by a lack of generosity, recklessness or ignorance or by all these factors together). It is these traditional people that are anachronistic, not tradition itself. They don't manage to handle the vitality of tradition. They are unyielding in their point of view and they are not able to see what moves around them or in the texts. They remain attached to empty forms of tradition as shipwrecked people cling to the broken pieces of wood of a boat that a very strong tide appears to want to throw on the opposite shore.

I decided to sing *Malhoun*, an exclusively male song: I have become the first woman in history to sing it as an expert. I have claimed it as my own by dusting it. I have become a link in a chain where traditional and modern, woman on one side and man on the other, no longer exist, but rather a chain

made of creators and lovers of beauty. By appropriating the *Malhoun* myself I have given it a new breath: my own. I have loaded it emotionally with all my experience as a woman in pursuit of herself and in search of the new also within the ancient.

The *Malhoun* has transformed with me. It has become something else without losing anything of itself, thanks to its genius, its vitality and its capacity for adapting - and this is characteristic of a great work of art.

I say all this to assert that the struggle of women is not only juridical, but also cultural in the big sense of the word. If I have finished my work with female associations and my writing on women's social and legal situation, it is not at all because I don't value women's accomplishments. It is because I have opened up a new frontier, or even a new struggle. I don't consider myself a militant even though I am a fighter. I work in serenity and happiness against all kinds of conservatism, rigidity and mediocrity.

Translated from French by Julia Varley

TOURIA HADRAOUI (Morocco) after having taught philosophy and worked as a journalist, she specialised in the traditional singing art of *Malhoun*, creating and participating in numerous performances. Her articles have been published in national and international journals, and she has published the novel *Une enfance marocaine* (A Moroccan Childhood) and is a founder and active member of different cultural associations.