

Lilia Labidi



African Feminist Thinkers: Our Voices [1]

To speak of my trajectory, I should say that, at the outset, I was determined to be independent and financially autonomous. I have been working in a manner that enables me to maintain this status. This situation is what has permitted me to view problems in particular ways and to analyze with more freedom the situation of women and my own situation as a woman. This decision also influenced my trajectory in the fields of gender and feminist studies, articulating these with the levels of the individual, the social, and with history.

My education and training abroad was a source of discovery both about others and about myself. As with all Africans, I was the target of racist remarks but, rather than allowing myself to be wounded by them, they helped to reveal to me a hidden side of Western civilization, which had been presented to me in school as, 'my ancestors the Gauls.'

I also noticed very quickly, during my training in the Department of Psychology at Paris, where the orientation was psychoanalytic in a context heavily influenced by the post-1968 period, that students from the South were rare and the discipline was dominated by authors who were predominantly all from the West and mostly male. This 'provincial' view on the part of the elites and feminists from the North (relayed later in their silence with regard to the condition of Maghrebin and African women living on the outskirts (banlieues) of the French cities), encouraged me to look for multidisciplinary approaches. Therefore, as I was finishing my studies in psychology I was also turning towards anthropology and, in particular, towards an anthropology of one's own society. This enabled me to rediscover the contribution of Arab and African philosophers to world philosophical thought; and my field experience in my own society enabled me to develop, subsequently, a psychological approach that articulated anthropology with subjectivity.

In parallel to this, the discovery that French women did not have the right to contraception and abortion when Tunisian women had access to contraception starting in 1963 and to free abortions in 1973, and were obliged to travel to Holland or in some cases to Tunisia to abort, led me to become a participant in the Movement for the Freedom of Abortion and Contraception (MLAC - Mouvement pour la libération de l'avortement et de la contraception). This was a very important experience for me because, in struggling side-by-side with women who did not enjoy a number of social and political rights in the areas of health, education,

leadership, political participation, etc, I discovered that the situation of European women wasn't all that different from the situation of women from the South, which completely demystified the West in my eyes.

On the bases of these observations and experiences I turned toward the study of women in my region, embarking on a research project, as part of my doctoral studies in psychology, on Tunisian women's relationship to contraception in both rural and urban milieus. While I discovered that the diffusion of contraceptive methods was elaborated in a center/periphery perspective(the program had been set up in Tunisia by Western foundations), I also discovered the various dichotomies of man/woman, central power/peripheral power, urban/rural, dominant/dominated, etc. This reflection led to a second demystification, that women in all societies were the victims of discrimination. Whereas the university itself tended to be somewhat closed unto itself, my own experience in other sites, such as in the Experimental School of Bonneuil and my psychoanalytic training helped to provide other perspectives on social reality as well as to objectify my own experiences.

Returning to Tunisia in 1979, and continuing my work with women in poor areas and my earlier research that I had undertaken in my doctoral program in psychology, I pursued my study of women, of sexuality, maternity, women care-givers in the Arab world(midwives, the first women doctors, women psychiatrists, etc.), the culmination of this being my doctoral research project for the doctorate in anthropology. It is also in this framework that I set up a working group with midwives, a profession that played a major role in many respects in Tunisia where, from the onset of independence when the country lacked trained personnel, they had promoted the national health program among women and children throughout the country. In addition to presenting publicly this group's work, the group also created the first midwives' association, which continues in existence today.

Starting in 1981, when I was the target of some pressure to restrict my activities which I saw in relationship to the colonial experience, I began to feel the urgent need to uncover the work of those women who had struggled against colonialism in Tunisia. This was also the period when I began to think of the relationship between women's absence from the formal political arena and their strong presence in the literary field. It was in this framework that I undertook collecting life histories of the women of that generation. The oral autobiographies of these women, showing a wide variety of political orientations, were published in Tunisian Arabic (different from standard written Arabic) in order to convey their experiences in their own language. During my meetings with them, some of them presented me with documents or objects, others gave me photographs, which led me to reflect on these experiences and also which provided material for a number of gatherings and exhibitions of documentary photographs. In this context and somewhat inspired by the surrealist movement, I utilized these photographs in collages in order to re-examine women's history. Over the last few years I have begun work focusing on these two kinds of material ? life stories (in order to write the history of women's struggle) and photographs (to give visibility to women) ? and bringing them together to create an encyclopedia/dictionary of Tunisian women who distinguished themselves in the cultural, social, or political domains between 1881 and 1956.

Beyond the historico-political domain, I have used photography in other areas, for example, for psychological analysis, as in a study on the couple, basing this on marriage photographs over three generations, and another study using photographs to help in understanding biography.

The third main focus of my work concerns the construction of public morality in the Arab world

and Africa, in part as a reaction to a Western discourse that speaks of the continent only to emphasize famine, drought, leaders' corruption, ethnic wars, coups d'état, Islamic extremism, the veil, etc., without ever seeing this in relation to colonial history and the control of the continent's resources by Western powers, etc. This multidisciplinary program brought together 75 researchers and students between 1996-1997 and 2000-2001 involving, in addition to the translation of a work on the history of globalization as seen through the commodification of sugar, had four main themes. This program consisted of developing a synergetic discourse that took account of the innovative work accomplished by the continent's researchers, the role of women in writing the memories of South Africa and Algeria, scientific research as seen in the active debate in Egypt over organ transplants and removal articulated with the developments in advanced medicine there, the role of Senegalese women writers in discussions over the institution of the family, and finally the solidarity initiatives in Tunisia in the struggle against poverty and in the effort to develop an ethics based on counting on oneself. In addition to national and international meetings organized in the context of this program and works produced from these, I also published *Romanci P res sénégalaises B la recherche de leur temps* (Sahar, 2003), the first book on African writers published in Tunisia.

Main sources of inspiration, opportunities, accomplishments:

If I had to summarize my main sources of inspiration, I would refer to two concepts, recognition and responsibility. But I would also evoke the articulation between social context and personal situation, an identification with events but at the same time a distance that allows both observation and testimony. An ordinary happening or an historical event, a novel or a film, a work of art ? all have played, in one way or another, at one time or another, an important role in my thinking. The opportunities I had were numerous. I would mention first the choice of moving beyond my family environment and the gaining of financial autonomy, for these allowed me to aspire to a freedom of thinking that has been fundamental to my entire itinerary. This freedom is also what guides my research today where everything I have undertaken or written has been free of pressure from whatever direction. I believe that whereas my time in Europe helped to demystify the West for me, and my encounter with historical events and with certain writers and thinkers from the African continent have been essential to my outlook, my research orientations and all that I have learned, I owe it to women.

Among my achievements in this domain I will cite:

introducing psychoanalysis and life histories/life stories for the understanding of historical events;
introducing women's testimony and photography as sources for writing history;
reintroducing subjectivity for the understanding of a subject that had been emptied by group ideologies and clan orientations;
the importance of symbols and rituals for the understanding of culture.

Reflections on my experience:

My thinking is embedded in the contexts of the second post-independence generation and of the first generation of women who were concerned with research on the situation of women. It is with this group of women that women, formerly targets of research, become subjects and authors of their own research. My work has also been marked by the conditions of production in our context, as it is for all social actors, whatever their field of activity. Finally I should add

that, whereas I have sometimes been subject to some pressures (a judicial proceeding in 1995 following the republication of a chapter on virginity taken from my book, *Çabra Hachma*, sexualité et tradition by a magazine, for offenses against morals), I have also received some offers. However, my determination to maintain my status as independent, and keeping to the career of teacher, clinical psychologist, and researcher, from the 1970s up through today, has enabled me to develop my thinking in the directions I have outlined and that I hope to continue to follow well into the future.

List of publications (since 1990).

Books

- 2004 Itinéraire d'un Tunisien, Album Rachid Driss. Tunis: Imprimerie Tunis Carthage.
- 2003 Romanci P res sénégalaises B la recherche de leur temps. Tunis: Sahar.
- 1993a Deuil impossible. Tunis:Sahar. (avec Dr. T. Nacef)
- 1991a L'intelligentsia féminine face B la guerre du Golfe en Tunisie. Tunis:Institut de Recherches Appliquées.
- 1989a Cabra Hachma: sexualité et tradition. Tunis:Dar Ennawras. (Prix Foire du Livre 1989; Prix d'encouragement B la création du Minist P re des Affaires Culturelles.)
- 1987b L'adolescent tunisien, santé et environnement (avec 4 co-auteurs). Tunis:UPPS (Prix international Nathalie Masse pour les recherches sur les enfants défavorisés dans le tiers monde)
- 1987c Qabla (sage-femme), médecin des femmes. Tunis:UPPS.
- 1987d Origines des mouvements féministes en Tunisie. (en arabe, introduction en franç ? ais.) Tunis:Imprimerie Tunis Carthage. (2 P me édition 1990.)
- 1985a Génération des années 30: la mémoire vivante des sujets de l'histoire. Tunis: CERES. (Avec A. Zghal)
- 1982a L'histoire d'une parole féminine. Tunis:El Asria.

(as editor):

- 1992e Sages-femmes et la pensée réformatrice au XX P me siècle en Tunisie. Tunis:Minist P re de la Santé Publique.
- 1990c Participation des femmes B la vie publique. Tunis:Hô Ç pital d'Enfants et Centre de recherche et de formation pédagogique.
- 1988a Médecine, Santé des Femmes. Tunis:UPPS.
- 1985c Adolescents, Adolescentes. Tunis:UPPS.
- 1984a Enfant, famille, environnement. Tunis:UPPS.
- 1978a La femme au Maghreb. Special issue of Soror. Paris:Université de Nanterre

(as compiler)

- 1987a Santé des femmes tunisiennes: une bibliographie. Tunis:UPPS.
- 1984f Enfant, famille, environnement: une bibliographie. Tunis:UPPS.
- Articles:(1990 and later)

(forthcoming)

- a ?? R é am é nagement des sentiments. ?? In Recherches f é ministes dans la francophone plurielle. Dakar: Universit é Cheikh Anta Diop.
- b ?Women, Gender and Mourning and Funerary Practices: Arab States.? In The

Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures. Netherlands: Brill.

- c ?? Women, Gender and Human Rights: North Africa. ?? In The Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures. Netherlands: Brill.
- d ?? Women's Poverty in the Arab City: Between Moral Emotions and the Abject. ?? In Comparative Urban Landscapes and Their Subaltern Citizen-Subjects in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Istanbul Workshop.
- e ?? The nature of transnational alliances in women's associations in the Maghreb. ?? The case of AFTURD and ATFD in Tunisia. ?? In JMEWS 3/1 (Winter 2007).
- f ?? Lorsque la photo aide à voir ce que l'oeil ne voit pas. ?? in Conference on Le Vu et le Lu. Tunis December 2003.

(already published)

- 2006 ?Rita ElKhayat on Moroccan psychiatry and sexuality.? in Family, private life and sexuality (Special issue), editors Mary O'Dowd and Bernadette Whelan. Women's History Review. Vol. 15. N 4. September 2006. p. 638-649.
- 2006 ?Truth claims in the cartoon world of Nagui Kamel.? Cairo Papers in Social Science. 27, 1/2. p. 26-50.
- 2003 ??Dynamics of Change in the Medical Sector in the Islamic World - toward the redefinition of ?hudud.?? In The influence of human mobility in Muslim societies. Edited by Kuroki Hidemitsu. London: Kegan Paul. 289-312.
- 2002a ??From sexual submission to voluntary commitment: the transformation of family ties in contemporary Tunisia.?? In Cairo Papers in Social Science. Cairo Papers in Social Science.24, 1/2. Pp. 117-139.
- 2002b ??Being elsewhere: women and psychoanalysis in the contemporary Arab world.?? In Dimen, M and V. Goldner(eds). Gender in Psychoanalytic Space. New York: Routledge. 263-284.
- 2002c ??Thinking beyond violence.?? In Fernea, Elizabeth(ed.) Remembering childhood of the Middle East. Austin TX: University of Texas Press. 295-301.
- 2001a ??Traditions et pluralisme: participation des femmes dans le monde arabe ? le cas de la Tunisie. In Parizeau, H(ed.). Pluralisme, Modernité, Monde Arabe. Québec: Université de Laval. 287-293.
- 2001b ??Femmes et actions de solidarité dans la Tunisie coloniale.?? In Cahiers de la Méditerranée 63(December): 101-111.
- 1998a ??Discours féministe et fait islamiste en Tunisie.?? Confluences 27(Automne 1998): 69-79. Paris: Harmattan.
- 1998b ?Do I have the right to be here??. In Echo (Quarterly newsletter of the Association of African Women for Research and Development), Number 2, April 1998, pp. 13-17.
- 1997 ??Moralité publique, femmes et principes de justice.?? In Femme et droit, Femme et modernité, pp.133-154. Tunis: Centre d'études juridiques et judiciaires.
- 1996 ?Building public morality? In Ellis, S. (ed) Africa now: people, policies, institutions. London: James Currey and Heinemann. pp. 75-89.
- 1995 ?Circulation des femmes dans l'espace public: cimetière, carrefour du politique et du religieux dans le monde arabo-musulman.? In Ephésia conseil scientifique (eds). La place des femmes: les enjeux de l'identité et de l'égalité au regard des sciences sociales. Paris: Editions la Découverte. pp. 232-236
- 1994 Droits des femmes musulmanes au XX^e siècle: pensée réformatrice et éthique laïque. In Tabak, F. and F. Verucci (eds.), Os Direitos da Mulher - a difícil igualdade. Rio de Janeiro:Relume Dumara Editors. 141-160.

- 1993b La circulation des femmes dans l'espace public et politique formel ? le rôle ?capitale? de Tunis. In Capital Cities, les Capitales. Perspectives internationales. Edited by John Taylor, Jean G. Lengellé and Caroline Andrew. Ottawa: Carleton University Press. Pp. 125-143.
- 1993c Erreur ou Don de Dieu. Propos recueillis par Lilia Labidi. In Histoires de Développement, 23, Oct 1993, p. 4. Marseilles.
- 1993d Du besoin de la maternité au désir d'enfant au Maghreb. Approche psychanalytique et anthropologique de Quattous Ennafas. In Psychologie et probl P mes de la société contemporaine. Actes du Premier colloque international de psychologie au Maroc. Rabat: Maroc. Pp. 9-24.
- 1992a Le savoir des femmes et leur participation au champ de la représentation du pouvoir. In Cahiers du CERES, Séérie Sciences de l'Education 3:125-142. Tunis: CERES.
- 1992b Le droit du foetus tunisien. In Revue tunisienne de sciences sociales 108:57-63. Tunis:CERES. (avec H. Chelli, Y. Drissi, I. Lebbi, F. Zouari, H. Marrakchi)
- 1992c Rupture épistémologique, mécanisme de protection des droits des femmes. In Revue tunisienne de sciences sociales 108:37-45. Tunis:CERES. (avec A. Belkhadi)
- 1992d Les abus sexuels et mécanismes de protection chez la petite fille. In Revue tunisienne de sciences sociales 108:47-55. Tunis:CERES. (avec H. Chelli, Y. Drissi, I. Lebbi)
- 1991b Famille maltraitante: syndrome de Maroua. In Revue tunisienne de sciences sociales 106/107:97-116. Tunis:CERES. (avec S. Barsaoui, S. Bousnina)
- 1991c De la résistance B la confrontation. In R. Bourqia et N. Hopkins (eds.), Le Maghreb: approches des mécanismes d'articulation. pp.93-102. Rabat, Maroc:Editions Kalam.
- 1990a Sexualité et politique dans le discours islamiste fééminin ? le cas de la Tunisie. In Actes du 1er Sommet Mondial sur Femmes et Multidimensionnalité du Pouvoir:321-323. Montréal.

- [AGI on Twitter](#)
- [AGI on YouTube](#)
- [AGI on Facebook](#)
- [Search](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Login](#)

The African Gender Institute is a research grouping within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town University of Cape Town
Except where otherwise noted, content on this site is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 License

Source URL: <http://agi.ac.za/teaching-material/lilia-labidi>

Links:

[1] <http://agi.ac.za/category/gws-africa/african-feminist-resources-our-voices>