

Malika Oufkir: the American Making of a Moroccan Star

If Morocco is rarely a political issue in American popular culture, several newspapers and TV shows took us by surprise recently when they devoted extensive reports to Malika Oufkir and her recent autobiography *Stolen Lives* (2001), originally published in French as *La Prisonnière* (1999). Written in collaboration with the French novelist Michèle Fitoussi, Malika's account of imprisonment was a bestseller in France for many weeks and is now translated in as many as nineteen languages. But it is in America that the book has attained its greatest success, topping bestseller lists of several American newspapers. Over the last few months, Malika, 47, has been touring American cities, speaking at prestigious universities, book forums, private dinners, and popular TV shows. Her early life at the Moroccan palace, her imprisonment, and her escape have made the top story of NBC, Channel Five, Fox TV, "Sixty Minutes," "Rosy O'Donnell Show," and the most popular show of Oprah Winfrey.

Malika cannot help being stunned at the unexpected popularity with which America has received her story, a popularity which helps her revive an old dream she had when she was still living at the Moroccan palace. "What do young women dream of," she remembers asking herself, "Most of them dream of love. I dreamed of stardom" (76). Malika's stardom is now irreversible as her story, it is rumored, will most likely obtain a film contract at Hollywood. As Malika is trying to come to terms with her turbulent past, her rising popularity will enable her to redeem the lost prestige of the Oufkir family and rescue their name from a long period of isolation and obscurity. Asked by an American journalist about the impact of her book, Malika said: "Our success is not the sales, the profit, or money, but the globalization of our story." Commenting on the success of her story in a different interview, Malika affirmed that, "I'm lucky to have been able to revive the name Oufkir." Ironically, Malika's dream of stardom was put to rest by twenty years of imprisonment just as it is now being revived by the written story of that same imprisonment.

Ironic coincidences do not stop here. For while Malika is on an American campaign to "revive" her family name, the European media on the other side of the Atlantic, notably BBC and the French newspaper *Le Monde*, are discovering new evidence regarding her father's responsibility in torturing, kidnapping, and assassinating Moroccan civilians and activists during the 60s and early 70s. To keep her marketable image as innocent as possible, Malika has said nothing about the "revival" of the Oufkir story in the French newspapers, which she must have closely read. Moreover, hiding information about her past can only be conducive to what she sees as reasons for her success in the U.S. Answering a question on why the American public is more receptive to her story than the French, Malika stated on "The Oprah Show": "It seems to me that Americans have...a different sensibility. They are aware of being privileged. On the other hand, the French are more familiar with Moroccan history and the story of the Oufkirs shocks them less." Does this imply that her present popularity is merely based on the Americans' unfamiliarity with Morocco? What makes the story appealing to American readers, and how does it fascinate them? Would the American public continue to give her the same reception if they are properly informed of her father's abominable atrocities?

Let me now attempt to answer these questions by re-examining the very book—*Stolen Lives*—behind Malika's emerging stardom. The story is no doubt captivating.

Oufkir, the former prisoner, and Fitoussi, the writer, put their oral and writing talents together to create a moving narrative which offers readers instant gratification. The book is “an unforgettable story of one woman’s journey to freedom,” says an editorial review published on the web site of the Oprah Book Club. Other reviews read as follows: Malika’s “horrifying descriptions” of her confinement are “mesmerizing, especially when contrasted with her earlier life in the royal court;” her “experience does not fit easily into current perceptions of political prisoners victimized for their beliefs or actions.” So goes the advertising for *Stolen Lives*, the reading selection for the month of June at the Oprah Book Club.

Stolen Lives interests American reviews less as a “prison narrative” based on revolutionary beliefs than as a story of radical contrasts shaped around dramatic turns in Malika’s life. As the daughter of the king’s top aide, Malika had a “dream childhood” and a spoiled adolescence (she introspectively remembers this period as confinement) in the Moroccan Palace, where she became the adoptive daughter of the king at age 5. She went back to her parents’ home when she was 16. Taking advantage of her father’s unlimited power, Malika continued to enjoy her aristocratic lifestyle, flying to European and American cities whenever she desired, riding fancy cars, wearing the most fashionable clothes, and hanging out with film celebrities like Alain Delon and Steve McQueen. The failure of her father, who had control of the Moroccan police and the army, to assassinate the king Hassan II in a 1972 military coup suddenly put an end to her extravagant life. Mohamed Oufkir was executed, leaving his entire family subject to twenty years of imprisonment and house arrest. As they became convinced that the Moroccan authorities left them to die in prison, Malika and her brother escaped in 1987 to inform the outside world about their case. They obtained their full freedom in 1992.

No summary could do justice to the emotional intensity of the book, which was conceived five years after Malika gained her freedom. Thanks to its powerful language, dramatic tone, suspense, and vivid imagery, where Fitoussi’s literary command is quite manifest, *Stolen Lives* is a major contribution to the genre of autobiography. The reader is left with no choice but to identify with a broken woman whose remarkable story of survival recalls captivity-escape themes, once so typical of epics, classical novels, and Hollywood movies.

However, the emotional drive of the story, its moral weight, and its aesthetic quality ought not to deter us from considering a “written text,” intended for public consumption and read by audiences beyond Malika’s control. Harsh as this may sound, *Stolen Lives* requires a critical reading, a patient reading that must leave aside the media’s manipulation and the sensation it generates in America to look into the larger political and historical framework within which this Moroccan story emerges and develops. The event itself (the conditions as Malika and her family actually experienced them) and the written form that springs from it (the text constructed on the basis of memory and flashbacks) are two different things, which may or may not correspond. If it is so natural to sympathize with the former, it is then no less legitimate to question the latter. On one side or the other, it is unwise to view the text, any written texts for that matter, as an impeccable translation of its original story.

Stolen Lives, in particular, invites such a critical approach, regardless of its co-authors’ intention. Malika is not any storyteller, but, as her partner puts it in the preface, “a remarkable storyteller,” “A Schherazade” (3). Endowed with a sharp awareness of the

power of storytelling, Malika is conscious that stories, her own included, can thrill and manipulate the audience, sometimes at the moral cost of twisting and distorting real facts. It is in prison that Malika discovers the empowering effects of storytelling:

I was disturbed to realize the extent of my power over the others. The Story [an imaginary story about nineteenth-century Russia] was so real to them that I could manipulate and influence them at will. When I sensed they were unhappy, I would restore things with a few phrases. The Story was part of our everyday life, to the point that it caused arguments and passions to flare. (156)

We sincerely applaud Malika on the creative skills she employed to save her family from giving in to the fatal inertia of the cell and to keep their human hopes alive. But we also worry that some of her manipulative skills may have spilled over to the text that is now between our hands. We become more concerned when we discover that her life story intersects with historical realities and political facts shared by the Moroccan public at large: Islam, monarchy, French colonialism, liberty of expression, General Oufkir, the assassination of Ben Berka are all delicate issues making the common political stock of Morocco. Given Ms. Oufkir's direct or indirect involvement in these events, is she capable of resisting the temptation to manipulate them for her own ideological purposes?

By calling herself Scheherazade of *the Arabian Nights*, Malika caters to the West, where the market for Oriental exoticism is still thriving. Malika as well as Fitoussi, who supervises the story from a lofty invisible tower, arouse the West's exotic desire in several respects. They both encourage a non-domestic interpretation that externally feeds on racial, cultural, and religious differences. *Stolen Lives* goes beyond its national boundaries to occupy an international medium contested by two mutually exclusive worlds, mapped as "East" and "West". Unlike Abdelatif Laabi, Abaraham Serfaty, and other Moroccan political prisoners who also published accounts of their imprisonment, Malika Oufkir introduces herself as a victim not only of the monarchy which was once its protector, but of a larger enemy implicitly identified as Oriental, Eastern, Arab, or Islamic civilization.

Long before her fall from grace, Malika is irritated by anything Moroccan, from tradition and religion to language and mores. Although she received her education at prestigious Moroccan schools that Moroccans of her generation could not even afford to dream of, Malika has only learnt how to renounce, not to critique, the cultural, linguistic, and psychological foundations of her native country. What Moroccans take as the advantages of their bilingual education, Malika, not yet reaching her twenties, pompously defines as the symptoms of an identity crisis: "I was permanently torn between East and West. At my parents' house and at the Villa Yasmina we spoke French, but at the Palace Arabic was the rule" (57). The Palace and the Oufkir Mansion are constantly brought up into competition, one symbolizing the archaic world of Islam and Arabic, the other representing the Western values of freedom, modernity, and French. Caught up between these two contradictory worlds, Malika portrays herself as a liberal woman who by fate's mistake happens to be living in the wrong country—the medieval Islamic East.

As the story picks up steam, the position of being torn between East and West turns out to be little more than a polite expression, set aside once Malika is ready to make her choice. After admitting that she was "protected" in the Palace, that this "little

community living in the past preserved me from the dangers of the wider world,” she adds the following statement: “But, *deep* down inside, I was a *European*. I was often shocked by what went on within the Palace walls, by the cruelty and severity of the sentences and punishments” (58-59; emphasis mine). Conversely, if Malika happens to be Moroccan at all, then she is only so superficially. Why is it so difficult to speak of one’s suffering as a Moroccan? Must one be European to distinguish between right and wrong, between the normal and the shocking?

Since the West is the primary, if not the exclusive, audience Malika has in mind, it is tempting—and all too easy—to wear the mask of a European Scheherazade victimized by the entire Islamic world. Western readers and spectators, in exchange, can be equally tempted to find in her an authoritative voice for expressing what they, constrained by the rhetoric of political correctness, could not say themselves, at least not openly. They are likely to whisper something like, “here’s a Moroccan liberal woman victimized for her European beliefs;” “her tragedy exemplifies the inhuman treatment of women in Islamic culture;” “Malika’s escape from the East is a neutral confirmation of our civilized and democratic values.” Malika’s posture in her book and on her TV appearances does not make it so difficult to imagine such racist statements, some of which were openly advanced on The Oprah Show on other American TV channels as well.

By identifying herself as someone who comes from “the *Sharifa*, direct descendants of the prophet” (32), Malika lets us assume that she is a Muslim. But she does so only to remind us of the non-negotiable conflict between her cultural and religious heritage on the one hand, and her liberal individual aspirations on the other. “In our family,” she asserts, “Christmas had always been sacred. Even at the Palace, where Islam was dominant, Christmas was still Christmas” (153). Once again, the East and the West—via religion this time—are brought up into a knock-out whose outcome is decided by Malika, the in-between arbiter. To make her readers more convinced about the depth of her Europeaness, Malika defines her embrace of Christian holidays, idols, and rituals as above all a rejection of her former Islamic identity. The prison, which functions as a surrogate family house, is the shrine where Malika and her family, except her mother who “remained a good Muslim,” openly announce their conversion: “we had rejected Islam, which had brought us nothing good, and opted for Catholicism instead.” If the Oufkirs survived their ordeal and gained their freedom it is because they “were convinced the Virgin Mary was protecting us” (188).

Malika is free, naturally enough, to remember her pain and express her resentment in the terms she prefers. But the freedom of speech and the freedom of worship do not entitle her to systematically and openly disrespect the beliefs of her own people, who by principle stand against the unjustified imprisonment of the Oufkir family. Is it so difficult for Malika to speak of her conversion without degrading her heritage? Her story would have been totally different if Malika had chosen to criticize her culture from a local and informed perspective. Instead, she invests into a provocative scheme which vows to frustrate the spiritual, cultural, and psychological sensibilities of an entire people. Malika misses no chance in specifying that her family’s social manners, their nick names (one of Malika’s sisters is nicknamed “Brigitte Bardot”, the famous French racist), the books they order and read, the radio programs they listen to, the soccer teams they cheer, and the performances they stage in prison are good and exciting because they all bear the

blessing stamp of Europe. Malika insists on reminding us that the slightest detail in her life is one way or another an expressed allegiance to the West. For example, the Oufkirs “were all football fans...we often had to stuff rags into our mouths to stop ourselves from screaming, especially when France was playing” (166). As Malika “still remembers” now, France, winning or losing, is the only national team that stirred their “enthusiasm and disappointment” (167). Malika does not spare even this trivial detail, which is nonetheless expressive of one’s patriotism.

To make her story more precious on the global marketplace, Malika sells the self-image of a Moroccan renegade, a European-oriented martyr persecuted by the “barbaric” East now waiting to be reclaimed by the civilized Christian West. But the image is more complex than it looks. Malika does not abdicate her Moroccan background without first exploiting it, albeit instrumentally. She recuperates her Moroccan identity when it is suitable to her position as a native spokeswoman endowed with due expertise in Moroccan politics. Speaking as a well-informed insider, Malika alleges that all Moroccans are “prisoners” of their own culture, their religion, and their political system (she excludes here her father’s military power) without at the same time being conscious of their own fate. Right after her escape from prison, a significant public scene in the streets of Casablanca catches her attention:

This continual procession of people walking with their heads down, not seeing where they were going, reminded me of Chaplain’s *Modern Times*. I felt curiously sorry for them. All in all, they were more to be pitied than I was. Perplexed, I mused: ‘So is this life, is this freedom? They are just as much prisoners as I was...’ (202)

Malika, who has all along turned a blind eye to her father’s horrid crimes and to her own abuse of power, pities Moroccans for being blind, submissive, and lost. Not surprisingly, these are the same qualities that Malika appreciates when it comes to her father; Moroccans then are not submissive but “loyal” to Mohamed Oufkir, the man of justice and compassion. In her turn, Malika poses here as a wise woman who is able to diagnose and assure Moroccans that she knows them more than they know themselves. Yet, the more she pretends to know the deeper she exposes herself as someone with an ambitious task but lacks the most basic intellectual and methodological means to carry it out.

Malika should make it clear that her political analysis, no matter how embroiled in emotion, is restricted to a personal trauma going back to the Oufkirs’ long benefit from and abrupt deprivation of the royal privileges: “If I still respected Hassan II as my adoptive father, I hated the despot he had become the day he began to persecute us” (114). The question that haunts her, therefore, is formulated around the enigmatic relationship between her father Mohamed Oufkir and her adoptive father Hassan II: “The silent hostility between the two men I loved most in the world grieved and worried me” (85). But the Freudian turn against the adoptive father is freed of its psychological bounds to become a vindictive campaign whereby the whole Moroccan nation is accused of being behind the Oufkirs’ suffering and victimization. As Malika’s finger-pointing shows throughout her story, all Moroccans must be blamed for her predicament. Should we fail to get this accusatory idea from the story itself, Fitoussi highlights it in the book’s preface as a verdict dividing the accuser (Malika) and the accused (Moroccan people).

Malika holds Moroccan people in “warmth and passion,” asserts Fitoussi, “even though they deserted her” (6). Guilty as they all are, Moroccan men and woman should silently accept the verdict, nodding their heads in recognition of Malika’s pitiful and forgiving words. Their sympathy may not be even retained since it is counterproductive to her general and global cavalcade against their Islamic or Eastern beliefs. Has she left any reasons for Moroccans, treated here as “deserters,” to sympathize with her story?

Fitoussi’s absurd judgment reflects that she is either a mediocre reader of the story, or is too personally involved in Malika’s scheme to be curious about the history of the Oufkirs. What are the specific crimes committed by Moroccans to deserve Malika’s blame? Or, what good Malika has done to Morocco to feel disappointed by Moroccans? No matter how strong her suffering and imprisonment, they alone do not make Malika a national heroine whose ideas and actions are to be shared by Moroccans. The latter stong reasons to reject her polarized and polemical views, without compromising their belief in free speech and (self)criticism. What was Malika doing when Moroccans of her generation (the late 60s and early 70s) were fighting for an independent country inspired by the modern values of democracy, freedom, and social progress at the price of being massively eliminated by the repressive machine set up by her father?

A short glance at her life prior to imprisonment is enough to make us argue that Malika had nothing in common with Moroccan men and women of her age. The General’s daughter ridiculously describes herself as “a rebel”, “a feminist,” but neither of these terms has a social or political significance. She spent the years she now remembers as her rebellious period in shopping for the right skirts, securing the last fashionable haircuts, and sneaking to the most fashionable nightclubs in Morocco and abroad. Here’s the passage that sums up the productive years of the so-called rebel:

I just had to snap my fingers and anything I wanted was mine without any effort on my part. Travel? I flew first class the way others took the bus. Clothes? I bought up couturiers’ collections in every major European city and, if need be, I borrowed my mother’s Saint Laurent outfits. Fun? My life was an endless round of parties and balls, with guests straight out of the society gossip columns. Holidays? I had a choice, the world was my oyster. I took everything for granted, money, luxury, power, royalty and subservience. (75)

How do we read this passage? Many would read it as a confession that clears, if not absolves, Malika’s political standing. But once we examine the passage carefully and in relation to the insidious message underlying the entire text, we reach a different conclusion. Malika hides from us the story of her luxurious lifestyle to exonerate her family from power and corruption. She never admits that the fortunes she spent on her numerous indulgences were illegally and immorally amassed by her father. Nor does she feel guilty that the bills of her consumerist desires were paid by the Moroccan poor.

The unbridgeable gap between Malika and the rest of the Moroccan people needs no further comment. Yet recalling makes us alert to the book’s narrative strategies. Malika’s omissions are meant to keep the radical contrast, as carried by American reviews, newspapers, web sites, and TV shows, neat and undisturbed. To put the matter differently, Malika would like us to interpret the luxury of her youth as a contrast to her subsequent hardship in prison, not in comparison with the impoverished and modest life

of her fellow Moroccans. Readers with no particular knowledge of Moroccan politics risk to be misled by the storyteller's strategies: they would empathize with Malika as a woman who was once wrapped in opulence and now stripped to the basic means of prison life. As for informed readers, it is doubtful that they would be deceived, especially in Morocco where the name "Oufkir" has always been, and continues to be, synonymous with betrayal, self-serving military coups, kidnappings, assassinations, and massive repression of civilians.

But let us now move on to dig out the roots of Malika's European and Christian identity. Since Malika—a Berber native for whom Berbers are no more than exotic clowns stereotypically identified as "Blue Men" of the desert—acquired her new identity neither by birth nor by naturalization, her "deep" Europeanness may be explained in terms of her family's colonial past. As she herself tells us, both her grandfather and her father owe their political prominence to their careers in the French colonial regime, which ruled Morocco from 1912 to the independence in 1955. In the 1920s, her grandfather, Ahmed Oufkir, was appointed "Provincial governor" of a southern region by "Lyautey, then Resident General under the French Protectorate" (14). Her father would inherit the same, if not stronger, zeal for colonial service. After his education at the school of Azrou, he became "second lieutenant in the French army" and received "his captain's stripes in Indochina" (14).

It is astounding that this history poses no moral or ethical problems to Malika, who instead conveys it to us with simplicity, innocence, and even pride. Nowhere does she imply that by serving the French colonial regime, the Oufkirs were actually betraying Moroccans of their generation who were dying in thousands, in the Rif, the Atlas, the South, and in the cities to free their native country from French occupation. Worse, Mohamed Oufkir, as several historical sources testify, did not hesitate to execute hundreds of Moroccans during the popular uprising following the exile of King Mohamed V—Malika's adoptive father—in the early 1950s. Mohamed Oufkir killed his own countrymen, both Berber and Arab, without the slightest feeling of shame.

Nor does his daughter desire to redeem his criminal past in guilty or confessional terms. What stands clearly as the father's betrayal is for the daughter an achievement to be rewarded. "His career was progressing rapidly," says Malika. "By 1955 he had risen to the rank of major in the French army, when he left to become king Mohammed V's chief aide-de-camp, after playing an instrumental role in bringing the King back from exile" (15). Malika deviously transforms her father's opportunism into natural outlines of a progressing career. Her father would of course not let any opportunity slip by without exploiting it to keep his dominance. He distanced himself from the French and their Moroccan puppets (Laglaoui and Ben Arafat) only when he realized that the end of the French rule was eminent and the power transfer was about to take place. He successfully made his way into the new Morocco, climbing from director of National security to minister of the Interior to head of the army. The telling irony is that his role in rebuilding the free nation consisted in emptying it of its most promising voices in democracy, social progress, and economic development. Just as his military power was increasing so were his crimes.

Among Mr. Oufkir's countless crimes the most notorious is the assassination of the Moroccan and Third World charismatic leader Mehdi Ben Barka. All Moroccans knew that Malika's father kidnapped and executed Ben Barka in 1965. If it is too

embarrassing for Malika to ignore her father's implication in the assassination, she remembers it in her book as a complicated affair beyond the mental scope of a young woman like her:

One student called me a murderer's daughter, because of the Ben Barka affair, about which I still knew nothing. I didn't know what to say back to them. With the naivety of my age, it wasn't my father I condemned during our political arguments, but the Government with a capital G and a capital R. (66)

Malika cannot be more frustrating. It makes absolutely no sense to describe the Moroccan government from the independence to the 1972 coup without mentioning its essential backbone the General Mohamed Oufkir. Nor does it make sense that her classmate is so mature to name the murderer while Malika, the "bright student" (85), is too naïve to even guess the crimes committed by her own father. Her devotion to French values did not help her either in discovering that France sentenced her father to life imprisonment for kidnapping Ben Barka (Fitoussi puts the information in the book's footnote).

Curiously, Malika was too naïve to grasp her father's atrocities yet so smart to take advantage of his servants, police escorts, body guards, and of anything else that was under his control, that is, everything. "I obtained my driving license thanks to my police escort who asked the examiner to give it to me," Malika spontaneously tells us (70). The same thing holds true for her school exams, scholarships, and studies abroad—the list of the laws broken by the Oufkirs can never be closed. All of a sudden, the Oufkir mansion, the bastion of French values according to the daughter, collapses upon its own inhabitants when they are asked to prove their commitment to law, trustworthiness, transparency, and honesty.

Malika's naivete and obsession with luxury, if we wish, might explain her disinterest in political details, but never to the extent of ignoring the fact that her father had absolute power over the Moroccan secret service, security forces, home affairs, the army, and the Royal Air Force. Most importantly, by the time Malika conceived and wrote down her story she was a mature woman and a responsible public figure that could no longer hide the truth under the excuse of naivete. Yet, there is no significant difference between her thoughts now and her thoughts thirty years ago. The message remains the same: Oufkir used to be a powerful man, but all his crimes, including the assassination of Ben Barka, were virtually committed by the monarchy.

The missing details in the Ben Barka affair are now made available by European and Moroccan newspapers and magazines. According to the French daily *Le Monde* of June 26, 2001, Ben Barka was "tortured to death" in a villa outside Paris, "assassinated by the General Oufkir and his assistant Major Dlimi" in the deep night of October 29, 1965. The Moroccan newspaper *Le Journal* added that King Hassan II made it almost clear in one of his speeches at the time that Ben Barka had the choice to come back from his French exile to help form a Moroccan democratic government. The prospect of such a government was an obvious threat to Oufkir's power. He therefore began to coordinate with the French secret services and the CIA agents in preparation for the crime.

Oufkir did not simply execute Ben Barka, but was determined to savagely torture him. To go back to the shocking details provided by *Le Monde*, "Mehdi Ben Barka, with a face dripping with sweat, is gasping for breath. Holding a blade in his hand, Oufkir gets

closer, brushes against his [Ben Barka's] face, and draws sharp cuts on his open chest. But the opponent does not react, nor does he answer the questions Dlimi continues to ask him." Because of Ben Barka's national and international reputation, his execution had to be done in perfect execution. The corpse was smuggled in a plane to Rabat and was then dissolved in a bath of acid by Oufkir's security agents. It is actually one of these agents, Mohamed Boukhari, who uncovered the whole story of Ben Barka's kidnapping and assassination.

In spite of the pieces of information spared by Malika, she is never willing to help us get a glimpse of the ghastly role her father, who figures in her book's dedication, played in modern Morocco. Had Malika told us the whole truth her story would have captivated our hearts and our minds. To the thousand spectators who watched her on American TV channels, where, surprisingly, no one familiar with Moroccan politics was invited, Malika could have bravely told the missing truth about her family's devastating legacy. In addition to blaming the monarchy, she could have dropped a short note about the CIA involvement in Ben Barka's assassination to make her American admirers question their foreign policy. For those of us who are deeply concerned, like the members of the Ben Barka family, Malika's recollection of her parents is even more insulting: "I came from an ordinary family with principles and values that were different from those of the Palace" (58).

If her father is "ordinary" then we should no longer trust the meaning of words. Perhaps such a skeptical attitude will motivate us to seriously think about the making of stories, not only what they say but also how they are written, published, and disseminated. As for the Oufkirs' values and principles, they have yet to find an identity that will adopt them. In the meantime, we will continue to imagine Scheherazade as an exotic plant whose seeds were planted on a spoiled Moroccan soil and whose sour fruits are sweetened and consumed elsewhere.

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