

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 Chaibi** 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 If the works of **Melika Ben Redjeb** and **Behija Gaaloui Hedr**, in spite of their sincere tones, sink into outdated imitation, it is through such women as **Sophie El Goulle** and **Amina Said** that poetry finds new horizons and original expression.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: ►