About the author

Fatima Mernissi, perhaps the most famous feminist scholar of the Middle East, was born in 1940 in Fez, Morocco. She studied political science and sociology at Mohammad V University, where she subsequently taught from 1974 to 1980. She has published prolifically in both French and Arabic. Previous translations of her work into English include *Beyond the Veil* (Indiana University Press/Al Saqi); *Doing Daily Battle* (Women's Press/Rutgers University Press); *The Veil and the Male Elite* (Addison Wesley), published in the UK as *Women and Islam* (Blackwell); *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Polity Press/University of Minnesota Press); *Islam and Democracy* (Addison Wesley/Virago); and *Dreams of Trespass* (Addison Wesley), published in the UK as *The Harem Within* (Doubleday).

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CHAPTER I

Writing is Better than a Face-lift

> Apply *Writing* every day. Your skin will be revitalized by its wonderful properties! From the moment you wake, *Writing* promotes cellular activity. With the very first marks on the blank page, those bags under your eyes fade right away and your skin feels fresh again. By noon, it is in tip-top condition. With its active ingredients, *Writing* reinforces your epidermic structure. At the end of the day, your wrinkles have faded and your features are smooth again.

Just try writing for a few days. In the end, it's every bit as effective as *Résistance*, the skin cream whose advertising copy I've borrowed here. What have you to lose? Nothing. And in fact you save on the cost of the cream. Writing costs you just the price of a biro (1 dirham-DH)[1], an exercise book (1.50DH) and the odd few stolen hours, strung together like pearls on a necklace.

Start tomorrow. Put your moisturizing cream away, get up an hour earlier and sit yourself down with a pen in front of a blank page. And bring some patience to the task. Lots of patience. Suddenly, things will happen. The page will come alive, your brain will click into gear, your body will be energized and your ideas will come together.

Writing, I tell you, is the best remedy for all kinds of crises, all types of wrinkles. The only thing it really can't cure is greying hair. You'll have to use henna for that. But, in spite of my nationalistic attachment to tradition, I have to admit that henna is uncontrollable. At times my hair comes out carrot-coloured, at others it is 'old rose'. *Immédiat* by L'Oréal or Wella's Koleston 2000 are less unpredictable where the precise tint is concerned.

Write for an hour every day. Anything. Even a letter to your local electricity company to tell them the light outside your house isn't working. You've no idea what an effect this daily exercise will have on your skin: that grimace at the corner of your mouth will disappear; the line where you knitted your brows will fade; your eyes will widen; and, with all this, inner peace will come.

I don't know whether you've noticed how incredibly young, energetic and radiant Nawal El Sadaawi, Hannaan al-Shaykh, Assia Djebar and

Liana Badr look, to name but a few. And the sheen of their hair, the sparkle in their eyes! Writing, I tell you, is a miracle the equal of all the revitalizing creams and energizing treatments.

Now, don't tell me my 'Writing = Elixir of Youth' theory fails to convince. I shan't believe you for a moment. And why not? Because I've tried both cream and writing, and writing, I tell you, works better!

It's the deepest, cheapest face-lift you can get in the Arab countries, where everything from the political regimes to the ideological pollution and economic climate conspire to make women old before their time, give them a nervous breakdown once a week, a heart attack once a month, white hair from the age of twenty-five and at least five wrinkles a year after twenty.

Like the women selling detergents, seen so often on our national TV screens, I recommend only what I test. I've been writing regularly for more than twenty years now, the way others do yoga or boxing, and I get compliments all the time: 'You look younger and younger! You're in good shape! How do you manage it?' Writing's my secret! Even to go and do battle with the grocer, who has (again!) slipped me three rotten pears in a kilo of five, I put the whole scene down on paper – what I'm going to say, what he'll reply. I analyse all the possible scenarios and write down my lines, keeping clear the essential point: I want three-fifths of my money back. Because that's what writing is: clarifying the essential point and getting it over, at all costs, to your opponent.

I'm sorry, I mean to your reader. Opponent is a very bad term since writing must not, above all, be confused with a boxing match.

In boxing, you land the blow directly on your enemy's nose. Wham! It's him or you. His nose against yours. (*Ahafid*! *Assatar*!). Writing is something else again. First, all those involved have to keep their noses intact – and that includes you. To write is to make an interlocutor of your opponent.

To write is to make someone who was indifferent into an attentive reader. This is, in fact, the whole secret of writing and what differentiates it from boxing. And it is what makes it work as a super revitalizing cream: the point is to turn the 'monsters' around you into adorable interlocutors who listen to you with delight. You don't even need to shout yourself hoarse to be listened to. Once you have learned to write – i.e. to get through some message close to your heart – the other person, previously indifferent, will now pay money to know what you have to say. Isn't this wonderful? It's an extraordinary discovery which Arab women ought to use at least as heavily as they use moisturizing cream!

But, you will say, how can monsters (and they make take the form of friends, colleagues, good Muslims, pleasant civil servants, etc.) be

turned into attentive interlocutors? Well, that is where writing is much more effective than any elixir of youth or restorative exercises: first you have to transform yourself. Other people's interest is simply a consequence of that transformation. You have to believe, for example, that what you have to say is important and that, however fragile and insecure you might be, you have within you a little inner light (*shu'la*) worth heeding. If you want other people to stop being monsters who attack you as soon as you open your mouth to say something interesting and unique (of course!), you have to begin by giving up the boxer's posture. It took me years to understand that.

I began by writing articles that were vitriolic. That was in the 1970s in the now defunct monthly magazine *Lamalif*, administered and published, come hell or high water, by Zakia Daoud from Casablanca. Well, hell and high water did eventually get the better of the magazine, but that's another story. Let's stick to the cream and the boxing for now. People were shocked. Many of my friends and colleagues (often the same people) recognized themselves in the vile portraits, and acrimonious discussions ensued. Then, one day, I came to the conclusion that I really had to find a different method. What if I accentuated the positive, the things that were right, that gave hope, instead of getting bogged down in all that was wrong? Perhaps I would help myself – and others too – to see how you could wade on through the mire, and perhaps how you could avoid it – possibly even how you could learn to fly. And, anyway, what was there to lose from imagining a better world? This shift opened up to me incredible doors of friendship and comradeship and brought me harsh but constructive criticism and so much emotion, so many dreams and hopes reciprocated by readers of both sexes, giving me the boldness I needed to continue my explorations. Indeed now, if I am away from Rabat for ten days, I sink into a bottomless pit of homesickness. I have lost my anger along the way, or at least it is expressed in a different way.

To write, you have to let out your anger one way or another, or at least get on top of it, since putting it down on paper hardly solves the problem. I do not read a writer because she infuses me with anger; I read her because she spreads before me paths which explore a myriad inextricable ramifications of those little pent-up emotions and knotted affects which constitute anger, humiliation or frustration. All these familiar feelings which are the daily bread of all the people of the Maghreb, whatever their sex – but which are, particularly, the daily bread of women, for the simple reason that society is based, from the outset, on our silence. Accept and shut up. Not that men express themselves more, but they at least do not have to deal with their inferiority being

regarded as sacred and trumpeted to the world as constitutive of their identity and specificity, as ours is in the codes of law which enjoin us to obey authority.

Authority is the key word where writing is concerned. Writing is one of the means human beings discovered thousands of years ago for challenging authority. You can shut yourself away quietly for an hour and write a long page to the Director of the Postal Services, who have just sent you something looking like the White House's phone bill for the Gulf War. That director is one of the most invisible personalities in the kingdom and getting through to him is as complicated as planning a pilgrimage to Mecca before the invention of the steam engine. Your letter may never arrive; but then again, it may, even if there is only one chance in a thousand. To write is to grasp this tiny, mini-mini-microscopic chance to express yourself. It is to take the risk of communicating with someone who doesn't give a damn for what you think and doesn't want to listen to you.

In this sense, it is an extraordinary opportunity for someone isolated, looked down on and excluded from decision-making to hold a dialogue with herself, first of all, then with her environment and, possibly, with the authorities. Of course, I can't guarantee you'll be read by anyone in authority, but what is certain is that, by making your daily attempt to express yourself, you will not so much change the world as change yourself. And I know that it is, in fact, by changing yourself that you change the world.

On this point, I shall be attacked by the politicos, most of whom feed us a diet of speeches intended to change us while they continue to peddle ossified programmes that have hardly changed for decades – indeed, not since the great independence years. Not that I deny the importance of political activism. There is, certainly, no substitute for it when it comes to communicating messages and transforming mentalities, but writing is of a different order and fulfils other functions.

There is, first of all, humility. The politician has a message to get through to you, a programme for changing your life. Like the *Résistance* cream the managing director of the cosmetics company wants to sell you. What you are being sold is something sure and certain. But writing (good writing, the sort that grabs you) is the act of a lost soul; the approach is that of someone fragile, who has no message, someone in search of herself, someone sure of nothing, except that something isn't right and it hurts.

Writing is an admission of impotence, but one reinforced and buttressed by an incredible generosity and marvellous faith in humanity and in its grandeur which derives from its being perfectible. Yes we, the

people of the Maghreb, lost and anxious as we are, and ill at ease as we have so far been in this electronic century, can remake and reshape ourselves, transform and metamorphose ourselves, men and women, and take the place that is ours in a planet hurtling towards the galaxies of the future.

Writing is one of the most ancient forms of prayer. To write is to believe communication is possible, that other people are good, that you can make contact with their kindness, awaken their generosity and their desire to be better.

With that in mind, a group of women set up a writing workshop in May 1991 in Tunis. The idea of the workshop was a simple one: the Maghreb of the galaxies needs to know women's point of view. We have to learn to clarify our opinions, to refine our vision of ourselves and of the world around us. Not in order to dominate or show off, but simply to say quite plainly what we think. We can express ourselves in thousands of ways. Some people weave away in the shade at marvellous carpets; others embroider; others labour day and night in the factories; and, last of all, there are those who scratch away at paper in the chill offices of the civil service. A thousand ways of expressing themselves and contributing. The idea of the workshop was to break the monotony, to get together to help each other produce a book in many voices.

Yes, says the writer who takes up her pen each morning. We can recreate our little Maghreb in such a way as to reflect our wildest dreams. Yes, we can give this little Maghreb, which has neither enormous wealth, nor scientific laboratories, nor democratic experience, a little paradise of dialogue and understanding where each person, man or woman, leftist or fundamentalist, civil servant or student can come together, acknowledge each other's work and flourish, irrespective of differences.

It is this dream of a potentially other Maghreb which the members of the writing workshop, a collective fired with contradictory desires and buzzing with ideas, wanted, more or less, to share – first, among themselves, then with readers. The idea of the workshop emerged during the tragic days of the Gulf War. A telephone call from Tunis and the indefatigable Rachida En Naifar, with whom I am in constant dialogue, draws me out of my depression, explaining that the right to expression still remains the best way to fight for one's ideas. Why not share with the AFTURD group the experience acquired by the Moroccan research collectives which, after some failures, succeeded, with the aid of a publisher committed to the struggle for human rights (Leila Chaouni of the Éditions le Fennec), in producing several collections and more than eleven books.

In the plane taking me from Tunis to chair the workshop in May, I

was suddenly seized with panic: how was a writing workshop to be successfully launched by three days' work when, in Morocco, it had taken hundreds of meetings, tens of altercations and scores of minor squabbles since 1984? I shall always remember the first collective, set up at the Law Faculty in Rabat with Professors Omar Azzimane, Aicha Belarbi, Aberrazzak Moulay Rachid, Fatema Zrioual, Moulay Ahmed Khamlichi and Alaoui Cherifa, to name but a few. The idea was to meet to spell out our vision of change together, to show how Morocco could be transformed, to offer alternatives. The hall was packed and there were teachers and students there who had come by train from Marrakesh and Fez. It was a touching sight: all these people wanting to come together to learn to express themselves. We started out in a stammering humility, only to end up, after some ten or so meetings, in disaster: politicos had decided to take over the group. They wanted us to agree on a 'platform'. But, as I repeated till I was blue in the face, how could we agree on a programme to change the world since I did not yet know what I wanted?

True writing is never a recipe. It is always a quest!

There never was a platform. That particular group collapsed because Morocco was undergoing some profound changes and the politicos carried on functioning in terms of 'programmes imposed from on high' instead of realizing that we were moving into a new phase of democratic atomization and freedom of expression. Four years later we started out again, but did so on such a humble basis that the majority were discouraged: everyone had to write thirty pages on what was regarded as a key theme. The first book in the 'Approches' series was born. The theme was 'Portraits of Women; Change and Resistance'. Those who wanted to seize power in the group realized there was no power to seize. No power, but articles to write. We did not see the authority-seekers again. The politicos who did contribute had already made a start on the new Morocco, the Morocco of tolerance and difference. We all learned a lot from this experience and many further collective works followed.

The secret of the success of collectives is not to get together to discuss everyone's political preferences, but to correct the titles and structures of articles. As for their content, since we believe in democracy, everyone is entitled to their own notions.

This was, in fact, what we tried to explore in the Tunis workshop, where we went through everything from pitched battles to moments of deep emotion, all of us subsiding at times into bouts of wild laughter. It was a space in which you could expose your weakness and fragility. There was no place there for the traditional pose of doing others down and showing what a great genius you were.

Everyone had a free hand in the choice of sub-theme they wanted

to explore; they had only to convince the group of the connection with the overall theme. It was a fine thing to see Dorra Mahfoud Draoui explaining so very convincingly that cooking had a place in the analysis of ideology, and that the way we stuff our faces is every bit as much self-expression as the most highly crafted political speech.

I refer to Dorra's article, 'Cooking. Power and Women's Counter-power' not because it was the best, but because it is a good illustration of the idea of the freedom enjoyed by each member of the collective. The key idea in the workshop was that no-one was the best writer. We were not there for a boxing match, but to learn to express ourselves. I mention Dorra and her article to give a sense of what the resultant book was trying to do; it was neither a manifesto, nor a programme for women's liberation. That is a job for the ministers and all those whose duty it is to draw up forecasts and plans, in order to maximize our chances of starting out on new foundations.

The book was an invitation to join in some individual intellectual peregrinations, to follow some unusual lines of thought. It presents a series of different approaches to understanding, with reference to the specific Tunisian case, that inextricable knot of destiny which the Maghreb of tomorrow absolutely must unravel, a knot made by those threads – so entangled and entwined – which link 'women, ideologies and society'. Tunisia is one of the rare countries in the Arab world which made a choice, at a very early stage, to commit itself to modernity, with all that that entailed. It was a choice that has turned out to be full of risks and one which concerns us all since, alas, there is no other course for this dear Arab world than to embrace its century. Even if we suffer a little in the process.

So hang on tight now, particularly to your pen, since there are those who would grab it from you! Happy reading! And don't forget the idea we began with: writing is better than skin cream!

Notes

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1. One dirham is roughly 50p.