

# Slamming the “Continuing” Moroccan Revolution: Noussayba Lahlou’s Bittersweet Verses

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## Abstract:

*In this article, I am interested in looking at women’s current mobilization techniques in Post-Arab Spring North Africa. To do so, I draw from the existing literature on the case of Egypt which identifies women’s contemporary resistance in creative disobedience patterns – that is women’s art activism that advocates, concomitantly, for social justice and gender equality. In my attempt to fill an existing gap in the literature, I investigate the existence of such resistance patterns in Morocco, as well as their main characteristics and country specificities. Because (slam) poetry is a traditionally resistant genre in the Arab region, I take as a case study Noussayba Lahlou’s slam poetry to explore the political potential of women’s slams to advocate for women’s rights and sociopolitical liberties in post-Arab Spring Morocco. To do so, I conducted a virtual interview with the artist by administering a structured online questionnaire, alongside a content analysis of eight of her most recent and salient slams. A 24-years-old slam poet from Morocco, Noussayba’s revolutionary verses tackle widespread regime abuse and corruption, alongside women’s rights and many other social woes in the country.*

## Keywords:

*Arab Spring, Gender Paradox, Subaltern Counterpublics, Creative Disobedience, Art Activism, Social Justice, Gender Equality*

## Introduction

In December 2010, the self-burning of a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in his native town of Sidi Bouzid, arguably marked the start of the Tunisian revolution and the beginning of the events now known as the *Arab Spring*. This series of uprisings aimed to overthrow authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North African (MENA) region

through both violent and non-violent protests, coups, and demonstrations. Almost a decade today following the outbreak of the Arab Spring, many feminist and Middle Eastern scholars still wonder what Arab societies have gained from the long and perilous walk towards “democracy,” and whether the Arab uprisings particularly have constituted a significant step forward, or the opposite, for the women’s movement in the MENA region.

In a report entitled “North African Women’s Rights in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring,” Fatima Sadiqi (2014, 305) discusses a *paradoxical situation* that characterized the Arab uprisings, where there has been a spectacular street presence of women from all ages and social statuses during the series of protests, but where women have subsequently been excluded from political representation and decision-making in the aftermath of these revolutions. Kharroub (2016, 1) describes this paradoxical situation as the *gender paradox* of the Arab Spring. Ten years after the start of the Arab Spring, women’s systemic oppression in the region has persisted until the present day, which makes it even more relevant to look at women’s current mobilization and resistance tactics as both a response and a potential “way out” of oppression. In fact, because North African women have faced a significant backlash against their political, social and legal rights in the aftermath of these revolutions, female artist–activists (i.e. *artistivists*) are currently developing effective tactics of resistance and subversion to *talk back* to the gender paradox and continue advocating for gender equality and social justice, concomitantly (Badran 2016; Wahba 2016). In this article, I take the blatant *gender paradox* of the Arab Spring as a point of departure to analyze the contemporary state of North African – and particularly Moroccan – women’s rights, in terms of women’s agency, creativity, and *continued* resistance in the face of both political oppression and gender-based discrimination.

In fact, Morocco had a unique experience of the Arab Spring given that the February 20 Movement (MV20F) for individual freedoms and socio-political liberties did not directly advocate for a change of regime – unlike most revolutionary movements in other Arab countries – but called, instead, for genuine constitutional reforms that would trigger effective

and sustainable social change in the country (Abadi 2014). However, the adoption of mere “cosmetic” constitutional reforms by the regime in June 2011 aimed, primarily, to contain the enthusiasm of the protestors and the cycle of contention created by the MV20F, thereby revealing the failure of the local revolutionary movement in bringing about effective social change (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017). In fact, the MV20F gradually waned in the months following the adoption of the new constitution before dying out completely in 2012, at the same time as the new constitution revealed its failure, on the long run, to effectively disrupt the status-quo and meet the protesters demands, namely on the issues of human rights and gender equality (Boutkhil 2016) thereby revealing another specificity of the “Moroccan Spring” (i.e. the MV20F) which has been effectively co-opted by the regime.

The existing literature which documents and analyzes women’s *creative disobedience* patterns in Post-Arab Spring North Africa focuses primarily on Egypt where women *artists* have been resorting to poetry, theater, music, dance, and graffiti to protest the ongoing social and gender inequalities in their country (Cooke 2016; El Nossery 2016). These creative resistance forms by women emerged particularly following the toppling of Mubarak’s regime in 2011 and the 2013 military coup against the ensuing Morsi’s Islamist government, persisting up to the present day under El Sissi’s military dictatorship (Sadiqi 2016). Therefore, drawing on the prolific literature on the case of Egypt, including Margot Badran’s (2014; 2016) ideas of women’s creative disobedience and the *continuing revolution*, in addition to Dina Wahba’s (2016) concept of women’s emergent *subaltern counterpublics*, my objective is to investigate the new spheres that are currently being created by Moroccan women to denounce their ongoing exclusion from the public sphere.

Because poetry and its contemporary equivalent (slam poetry) have long traditions of resistance in the Arab region, I take a woman slam poet artist as a case study in this article to investigate the idea of the *continuing gender revolution* in Morocco particularly. I ask, what is the political potential of women’s slam poetry to advocate for both women’s rights

and social justice in post-“revolutionary” Morocco? Noussayba Lahlou, a young 24-years-old slam poet from Morocco is revolutionizing the art scene today with her bittersweet slam that tackles widespread social inequalities, alongside regime abuse and gender inequality in the country.

## Literature review

### **On the origins of Arab women’s activism: anti-colonial activism, women’s exclusion in post-independence states and contemporary intersectional activism**

Fatima Sadiqi (2016) notes that North African women’s activism precedes the digital revolution and the Arab Spring and can be traced back at least to the late nineteenth century, where women played active roles in their countries’ accession to independence during the long years of resistance against imperialism and colonial rule. Moha Ennaji (2016) identifies the origins of Moroccan women’s activism in the early years of the French Protectorate (i.e. the 1910s) when feminist activists were fighting on two fronts simultaneously: for women’s rights and the liberation of their country. However, Nadje Al-Ali (2000) argues that, in the context of Arab women’s activism against imperialism, nationalist struggles have often taken precedence over feminist causes. She highlights the contradiction between women’s active mobilization in pro-independence struggles and their exclusion in the aftermath of the revolutions. Therefore, Badran (2016) brings an additional perspective and underscores that North African women’s activism actually finds its origins not in the fight against colonial rule per se, but in nation-building projects that typically excluded women. For example, the creation of the *Egyptian Feminist Union* in the wake of the country’s independence in 1922 marked the birth of the feminist movement in Egypt, in a context where women were denied political rights after independence despite them being at the forefront of the nationalist struggle against British colonial rule.

Recent events have spurred the ideal conditions for the resurgence of Arab women’s activism where their contributions are once again needed, this

time to put an end – not to colonial rule but – to authoritarian regimes throughout the region. miriam cooke (2012) emphasizes the particularly high visibility (and large number) of women during the Arab Spring uprisings, while Wahba (2016) highlights Arab women’s leading roles before, during and after the Arab Spring. More specifically, Dina Hosni (2017) discusses the pivotal roles women played at three important stages of the uprisings thanks to their strategic use of digital technologies: First, during the mobilization phase, when women called on other people to join the protests. Second, women were active in the documentation of the events and experiences of the revolutions, and finally, in the cultural dissemination phase, where women activists have been able to promote a culture of an active citizenry and move from critiquing to contributing to social justice and the development of their societies. Echoing her phrase “Defying Regime, Defying patriarchy,” Wahba’s (2016, 67) suggests that in defying authoritarianism during the Arab uprisings, women not only sought the removal of the ruler but all systems of oppression. In this sense, Badran argues that: “rebellious women had to, and did, confront the authoritarianism of the *patriarchal* state, the *patriarchal* society, and the *patriarchal* family” (2016, 53). Corroborating this intersectional analysis of Arab women’s mobilization during the uprisings, Hanan Sabea (2012) posits that the famous phrase “Isqat El Nizam!” (Topple the Regime!) was directed not at the ruler alone, but at a whole system of economic, social, and political oppression in which women felt alienated. Therefore, Elham Gheytaichi and Valentine Moghadam (2014, 2) conclude that Arab women’s movements and broader social movements have become “intertwined social phenomena” in the context of the Arab Spring, where feminist activists also played leading roles in advocating for regime change and social justice.

### **The gender paradox of the Arab spring and the *continuing gender revolution* today**

However, Sadiqi points out the “paradoxical situation” that characterized women’s involvement during and after the series of (Arab) uprisings; she observes: “On the one hand, there was a spectacular street presence of women

of all ages, ideologies, ethnicities and social statuses during the political mobilization phases of the uprisings, which has been well documented by all types of *media*, but, on the other hand, these women were then excluded from decision-making posts after the uprisings” (2014, 305). Kharroub (2016, 1) describes such a paradoxical situation as the “gender paradox” of the Arab Spring where women’s hopes of achieving equal access to the public sphere thanks to their active contributions to the series of protests have quickly been shattered away by conservative (Islamist) forces that rose to power in post-revolutionary Arab states; these forces include the *Muslim Brotherhood* in Egypt, the *Ennahda Party* in Tunisia and the *Justice and Development Party* (PJD) in Morocco. For instance, one of the first endeavors of the PJD directly following its election in November 2011 concerned the rejection of the *Government Agenda for Equality 2011–2015* that was launched by the previous government (Boutkhil 2016). In fact, Névine El Nossery (2016), Moha Ennaji (2016) and Moushira Khattab (2016) observe how a gender paradox was evident not only in North African women’s lower levels of political representation and access to decision-making in the aftermath of the uprisings, but also in the backlash against women’s legal rights in the new constitutions (including the limitations on women’s divorce and custody rights and the restoration of the long-dated practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGMs) in Egypt and the foregrounding of complementary not equal roles of men and women in the newly adopted Egyptian and Tunisian constitutions), and, finally, in the rise of extreme forms of violence directed at female protesters in the post-revolutionary contexts. These forms included the widespread gang rapes and virginity tests on women protesters in Egypt, the arbitrary jailing and torture of Tunisian women activists and the dissuading death threats on Moroccan women activists to be active in the MV20F. (Errazzouki 2012; Wahba 2016; Yachoulti 2015)

Marwan Kraidy (2016, 2017) coins the concepts of *creative insurgency* and *revolutionary creative labor*, which he defines as a mixture of activism and artfulness that forges a new revolutionary identity, to characterize the nature of activist dissent during the Arab Spring. He refers to the various forms of resistance practices, including street art, graffiti, cartoons, political

rap, videography, satire, slogans, digital memes, and mash-ups that activists and journalists mobilized in the context of the uprisings to denounce regime abuse and corruption. Highlighting their ingenious and inventive character, Kraidy (2016, 2017) argues that such creative forms of activism continue to characterize contemporary patterns of dissent in Arab political life. Similarly, Badran (2014, 2016) uses the term *creative disobedience* to underscore that creativity is increasingly becoming a basic revolutionary tool for Egyptian women today to denounce *systemic oppression* and promote culture and gender transformation as part of an ongoing revolutionary process. She discusses the *longue durée* of revolutionary struggle in the Arab region, which goes back to colonial times, up to the *ongoing* 2011 revolution today, and describes the gender (and cultural) revolution as an ongoing process which exists both in “the before” and “the after” of the political revolutions of the Arab Spring. Therefore, taking Egypt as a case study, she characterizes women’s activism in post-revolutionary North African states as a “*continuing revolution*.” Badran (2016) derives her understanding of revolutions as “continuous” from Arendt’s (1990) notion that (political) revolutions usually constitute new beginnings.

### **The rise of women’s counterpublics and creative disobedience in post-Arab Spring revolutionary states**

Wabha (2016) points out that the Arab Spring and its aftermath constitute another national project through which Egyptians, particularly women, are reinventing themselves and redefining their national identity. Describing women’s contemporary struggle as a *continuum*, she uses the term *subaltern counterpublics* to characterize the new spheres that are currently being created and inhabited by women to *continue* denouncing the ongoing social and gender inequalities in their country: “As film directors, journalists, publishers, magazine editors, and members of organizations and research groups, women are producing alternative narratives that challenge gender norms in their societies” (2016, 66). El Nossery (2016) also observes how Egyptian women *artists* are increasingly resorting to poetry, theater, music, dance, storytelling, sketches, graffiti, and various street performances to produce alternative narratives that promote and trigger

social transformation. She argues that, in this context, women's creative expressions are another means to promote struggle, denounce oppression, mobilize people, and raise consciousness, where women are "leading a parallel artistic revolution that unfolded underground via rhizomatic machinery – clandestine and often anonymous and yet everywhere – and created what Deleuze and Guattari have dubbed 'strange new becomings, new polyvocalities'" (2016, 145). For instance, one of the most popular forms of feminist activism in Egypt today is the graffiti movement. cooke (2016) and El Nossery underscore how the *Women on Walls (Wow)* movement is an enlightening case of women's *subaltern counterpublics* in post-revolutionary Arab countries, where female graffiti artists have been painting Cairo's walls to share and raise awareness about their painful stories of the revolution, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, lack of equal opportunities, female genital mutilation, and the necessity to carry on both the political and the feminist revolutions today. El Nossery (2016) discusses several such examples such as Shihadeh and Zeff's stencil "Circle of Hell" in reference to the horrors of mass sexual assault faced by female protesters in Egypt, and the stencil by an unknown artist that reads "You can't break me" which celebrates the case of Samira Ibrahim, a female protestor who brought a court case against the military for subjecting her to a so-called virginity test. Other examples include women's presence in installation art in post-revolutionary contexts. Badran (2014) discusses Egyptian artist Huda Lutfi's piece "Continuing" which depicts the revolution as a woman that stands half decapitated among the mutilated; at the 2014 Cairo exhibition, one can see a female torso standing with a head sliced off at the top and covered in bands that repeat the word *Al-Mustamirra* (Continuing), as a reference to the *continuing* revolution. Finally, women's music and literary works have also been part and parcel of the process of social change. El Nossery (2016) refers to Dina El Wedidi, a female street singer who has gained popularity in Egypt since the uprisings of 2011, thanks to her thoughtful lyrics that pack a political punch and her call for self-realization. In fact, cook discusses how Arab women's writing has particularly been productive in the wake of the revolutions: "Beyond social change, writing may also produce new identities, turning activists into artist-activists" (2016, 43).



In addition to Egyptian women *activists*, women activists in Yemen (and other parts of the Arab world) have also been producing counter-hegemonic discourses, notably through poetry, to denounce the outbreak of the war in the country when, in 2015, a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the United States intervened to reclaim Yemen on behalf of the internationally recognized government against the Iranian-backed Shia Houthi rebel-group which swept down the country with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2012 to denounce widespread corruption in the administration of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. These Yemeni women's poems provide critical discussions about rebuilding the nation after the war and the necessity to achieve peace – namely through their opposition to the Saudi Intervention in Yemen and the promotion of a national consensus to resolve the conflict (Wadekar 2018). Therefore, as cooke concludes: “It is not in the toppling of presidents for life or in ballot boxes or in new constitutions that the success or persistence of revolutions can be detected, but rather in *the continuity* of [Arab] women's revolutionary activism, consciousness, and creativity” (2016, 43).

## Theoretical framework

### Postcolonial Arabo–Muslim feminism

Postcolonial feminist analyses, which challenge the dominant narrative of the victimhood and powerlessness of Arab and Muslim women, serve as the point of departure for my research (Abu-Lughod 2002; Hijri 2014; Khan 1998; Razack 2008; Yeğenoğlu 1998). Drawing on postcolonial theory, Arab and Muslim feminist scholars have denounced the narrative of powerlessness that is usually ascribed to Arab women which perpetuates the stereotype that Muslim women are helpless victims in need of Western imperial liberation due to their double-minority status – the Arab minority vis-à-vis the white dominant majority and the female minority within the Arab male-dominated community. Intersectionality was first introduced by Crenshaw (1991) to theorize such interlocking axes of oppression – including race, gender but also sexual orientation, ableism, et cetera – for women from marginalized groups which tend to increase

their systemic vulnerability. Postcolonial Arabo–Muslim feminism also denounces the Orientalist Western assumptions that Arab women are complicit in their own oppression (Al-Rawi 2014). Drawing on feminist accounts of women’s agency and a decolonizing theoretical framework, my study constitutes a part of this oppositional discourse in challenging this simplistic and reductionist view which fails to capture the complexity of the social realities in the region and the extent to which women are able to mobilize and organize themselves in order to promote effective and sustainable social change, thereby invoking Lila Abu-Lughod’s famous rhetorical question: “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” (2002, 1). In fact, both Valentine Moghadam (2010) and Monika Mokhrejee (2005) stress Middle Eastern women’s growing agency through their unique strategies for empowerment and their effective use of tactics of negotiation with various regimes of power, from international organizations to state institutions and local NGOs.

### **Art as alternative media**

Theodor Adorno (1991) develops two visions on art. He conceives of artistic production as either hegemonic (i.e. mainstream) or counterculture (i.e. alternative). He considers that the purpose of revolutionary and countercultural art rests precisely on highlighting and heightening social discord because of its “immanently critical” character, whereby it strives to enable greater human freedom and achieve social justice by challenging the hegemonic system. Levine (2015) posits that art as alternative media creates niches for subcultures and countercultures and becomes particularly important to challenge the power of repressive regimes when civil society has little space for protest; he goes on: “Groups of (usually) marginalized young people, drawn together by common cultural tastes (in music, modes of dress, styles of speech, etc.) and performances, gradually articulate a powerful oppositional political vision that challenges authoritarian state power” (2015, 1278). Echoing African American writer Toni Cade Bambara’s famous phrase that “the duty of the radical artist is to make the revolution irresistible,” Levine argues that all great art is by nature revolutionary and all revolutions must have their own art (2015, 1283).

He reasons that “art has always been a handmaiden to revolution and culture its fuel” (2015, 1278). Levine also argues that, because of their essentially performative and affective character, artistic and cultural productions have a substantial power to draw people into political mobilization.

### **(Slam) poetry as a traditionally resistant genre in the MENA region**

While Levine (2015, 1289) posits that poetry has always been the most ancient and preferred form of expression in Arab civilization, the contemporary equivalent of poetry today is “slam” – or street poetry. This genre flourished in the early 1990s worldwide to address issues of race and gender. Poetry as a genre also flourished in the context of the Arab Spring to denounce regime abuse and corruption (Levine 2015). In fact, Levine argues that poetry suffuses most other art forms in revolutionary struggles as “everything is poetry,” from the slogans chanted by masses of protestors to the rhymes dropped by musicians and the captions written by political cartoonists. Underscoring the core role of affects not only in art but in all revolutionary upsurges, he highlights the affective power of poetry – “tarab” in Arabic – in triggering both pleasure and reciprocation of emotion between performers and their audiences (2015, 1282). Levine also emphasizes the unique historical role of poetry within Arabo-Islamic culture and Arabic language, from classical Arab poetry to modern poetry and hip-hop. He discusses the historical role of poetry in Arab nationalist struggles and politics where poetry was almost an “antibody” against authoritarian regimes and human rights abuses, as well as the most recent role of hip-hop, which is almost the sung equivalent of slam poetry, as the most favored cultural forms of the Arab revolutionary youth today. Similarly, in *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, cooke and Lawrence (2005) argue that against the backdrop of the Orientalist trope which aims to champion Western civilization by framing Muslims (in the Media) as regressive outsiders who reject modernity, 21st century Muslim hip-hop, a genre that is very much similar to slam poetry, has emerged as one of the major networks for Islamic identity to contest this Orientalist frame and provide a counter-hegemonic discourse which foregrounds social cohesion in Islamic societies and a deep awareness of and sensibility about social

justice issues. For instance, in 2014, Sana al-Yemen, a then 23-year-old journalism graduate born in Yemen and raised in London, composed an anti-ISIS poem which went viral on YouTube to denounce the atrocities and human rights violations committed by the Islamic State in Northern Iraq. Titled “This is not my Islam: a message to ISIS,” the poem aimed to provide an alternative discourse on Islam and Muslims, one that promotes peace and social unity and rejects the extremist ideology of Islamist Wahhabism (Finn 2015). Amal Kassir, a Syrian–American slam poet also defies the dominant Western stereotypes which depict veiled Muslim women (like her) as passive, submissive and without agency. In her slams, she displays a strong social and political awareness by tackling topics of social justice – ranging from the suffering of the Syrian people during the country’s ongoing civil war to the complete apathy of the U.S government towards the Syrian humanitarian crisis (Kerkhoff 2016). In this study, my objective is to investigate the role of slam poetry particularly, and I am interested in the ways that slam is increasingly being re-appropriated by Arab (and especially Moroccan) women *artists* today to advocate for women’s rights and social justice, concomitantly.

## Methodology

As mentioned previously, (slam) poetry has long historical roots with political resistance and revolutionary tides in the Arab region. Because slam poetry is the modern equivalent of ancient poetry and has, therefore, become one of the favorite resistance genres for political activists across the region, especially for the youth, I chose to focus on slam as an artistic genre in this article. As I am originally from Morocco and that Morocco has witnessed a unique experience of the Arab Spring where the MV20F was quickly co-opted by the Moroccan regime (i.e. the King and the political elites) with the adoption of a reformed constitution in June 2011 that did not yield effective and sustainable social change (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017), I chose to focus on Morocco as a country and on Noussayba Lahlou as an artist, who is currently one of the most famous female slam poets in Morocco. Noussayba is a 24-years-old Moroccan slam poet and doctoral student in French literature. For the past three years,

she traveled across the country to denounce rampant social inequalities in Morocco with her bittersweet slams written in French. She is best known for her famous slam “Identity Crisis,” which she performed in 2015, where she denounces widespread regime corruption in the country.

For the purposes of sharing and disseminating her slam poetry, Noussayba Lahlou is present across all social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. She currently has around three thousand followers on Instagram (Noussayba 2020a) and 835 subscribers on her YouTube channel (Noussayba 2020b). While she only has 14 followers on Twitter (Noussayba 2020c), her Facebook page (Noussayba 2020d) gathers over five thousand fans (i.e. subscriptions); she also has more than six thousand friends on her personal Facebook account. As Noussayba told me during her interview, social media and digital technologies have been particularly helpful for her to disseminate her slam poetry and acquire the notoriety she has today. She first publishes her poems on her social media platforms; these are then picked up by her fans and followers and shared again on their (own) private accounts:

My slams are first published on my YouTube channel, then on my Facebook page and sometimes I would share an excerpt on Instagram too. The people who follow me on social networks are generous in terms of sharing; they do not hesitate to share my content as soon as it is published and this encourages me enormously. All my published texts are accompanied by a video and sometimes with subtitles. These are necessary steps in creating the form and shape that I give to my “art.” Once the writing of a text is finished, I usually select an instrumental and then I record my slam. (Noussayba 2019)

However, Noussayba confided that whereas she has been particularly active across all social media platforms from 2015 to 2018, today, she is no longer as present on social media: “My current presence on social networks is almost non-existent, because of the period of personal transformation that I am going through at the moment. I am taking some time to reflect

on the future directions of my art” (Noussayba 2019). Noussayba has a modeling account as well (Creative Talent Evolution S.L. 2020), but, as she told me, this account is not linked to her activities as a slam poet: “I’ve always separated the two. The ‘modeling’ was a parenthesis that I used to make a living as a student” (Noussayba 2019). My methodology in this article is essentially qualitative. As feminist interviewing allows the researcher to gain a new and fresh perspective on the lives of respondents living in a particular community or society, I chose to conduct a (feminist) interview with the selected slam poet and activist Noussayba (Hesse-Biber 2013). In *Feminist Research Practice*, Nagy Hesse-Biber (2013) defines the practice of feminist interviewing as the retrieval of the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated, by focusing on issues of social change and social justice for women and other oppressed groups. As I am currently based in Canada and that Noussayba lives in Morocco, I decided to conduct an online interview whereby I administered, by email, an online questionnaire to the slam poet and activist who chose to receive and answer all my questions in English. The structured interview included questions such as: *What is the overall objective of your art? What does it talk about and which audience does it target primarily?; Why did you choose slam poetry specifically as an art genre? How is it appropriate to the message you aim to convey to your audience?; How does your art tackle the theme of social justice?*

In addition to conducting an online interview with the activist, I also did a content analysis of eight of Noussayba’s most recent slams written in French. These slams were selected with the help of the artist by paying attention to factors such as contemporaneity, relevance, and saliency (i.e. in terms of the most famous and the ones which convey the ideology of the artist the best). As Noussayba told me during our interview: “these selected texts represent my overall ideas and thoughts at the moment. They also represent me and my art the most” (Noussayba 2019). The selected slams were the following: “*Introduction*” (“Introduction”), “*Maladresse*” (“Clumsiness”), “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”), “*Crise d’identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab Winter”), “*Ces Gens-là*” (“Those People”), “*Reste en Fourmi*” (“Stay Brave”) and, finally, “*Ana Machi Mchicha*” (“I’m not a Cat”).

All these slams were produced between 2015 and 2019, a few years only following the events of the “Moroccan Spring” of 2011.

### Analysis findings

My analysis has revealed that Noussayba actively advocates for political resistance and social change through her art (i.e. slam poetry). Her slams are a direct call for political mobilization and a celebration of revolutionary figures and symbols, including herself. In her slam “*Crise d’identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), she particularly emphasizes this point: “*C’est pour ça qu’on va lutter / Je reste là et je ne vais pas quitter*” (“That’s why we’re going to fight / I’m going to stay here and I’m not going to leave”). She also advocates for social change by denouncing various forms of social injustice, including regime abuse and corruption. In the same slam, she underscores: “*C’est vrai que mes paroles ne sont pas pour plaire / C’est de l’art; il dérange... il est tout doucement révolutionnaire*” (“It’s true that my words are not here to please / It’s Art; it bothers... it is gently revolutionary”).

In fact, the content analysis of Noussayba’s eight most salient slams, including a cross reading of those poems, and my interview with the artist, have revealed major patterns in terms of the themes (and issues) that she is interested in and effectively addresses. Under the main theme of social justice, Noussayba’s poems tackle several subthemes such as the corruption and authoritarianism of the Moroccan political regime, the lack of societal awareness in the country, women’s rights, anti-imperialist and environmental concerns, and the rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrants’ sentiment in today’s world. As Noussayba told me in her interview: “My work celebrates tolerance, human values, love, gender equality, friendship, solitude and a lot more” (Noussayba 2019). In fact, in one of her most famous slams, “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab Winter”), the slam poet contrasts the violence, hatred, and animosity of the Moroccan political system with the peace, love, and compassion that her slams aim to convey: “*Je t’écrirai les battements du coeur que la haine oppresse / Je jetterai des cris d’amour parce que j’adore comment tu*

*stresses / Que tes larmes coulent sur ma peau sèche/Qu'ils cessent cesdiscours de bassesse dans ces oreilles de poétesse* ("I will write you the heartbeat that hatred oppresses / I'll shout love because I love how you stress / May your tears flow on my dry skin / Let them stop these speeches of meanness in these poetess' ears").

## Slamming the corrupt "poli-Dogs"

The major theme of Noussayba's slams is the corruption of the Moroccan political elite and the political system as a whole. There are clear references in her work to the corruption of the political dissidents whom she consistently describes as untrustworthy people who only pursue their personal interests. Her slam "*Introduction*" is particularly geared towards expressing her deep-seated distrust of the Moroccan politicians. She begins by addressing her audience and inviting them to beware of their manipulative rhetoric: "*Repose-toi du slam politique des politiciens et leur petitesse*" ("Rest from the political slam of politicians and their smallness"). Here, Noussayba's use of the idiom "political slam" refers to the politicians' (public) speeches and discourses. She underscores their "smallness," in terms of their content and intentionality, probably due to their lack of transparency and consistency. In fact, in "*Ces Gens-la*" ("Those People"), the slam poet denounces the politicians' ability, and even skillfulness, to deceive the people through their speeches by avoiding to address serious woes and issues. They focus, instead, on depicting a fake happy state of the affairs in order to escape criticism and keep the people under control, as she deplors: "*Et puis y a les gens bien / Comme la politique chez nous et quelques politi-Chiens / Ils embellissent les mots, ils ne prononcent pas le cancer / Ils embellissent les maux, et oui monsieur le commissaire!*" ("And then there are the good people / Like politics at home and some poli-"Dogs" / They embellish words, they don't pronounce the word 'cancer' / They embellish all evils, oh yes, Mr the Commissioner!"). In these verses, the word "cancer" refers to the social issues plaguing and devastating the country such as illiteracy, political abuse, and corruption, as well as rampant social inequalities that the woman activist tackles in her other slams.



In the same slam, Noussayba discusses of one the main techniques used by those “*Politi-Chiens*” (“poli-Dogs”) to fool the people, that is by making fake promises of social change during election times that will never be fulfilled afterward. She then denounces how their failure to meet social and political demands has led to an exacerbation of the already widespread social inequalities in the country between the all-rich and powerful and the most vulnerable: “Even after Hitler’s death, there are still Arians in our country / We give them everything, even if they don’t do anything / When they get sick they are reimbursed / And the people hold him tight, during the elections and then we push him away.” Here, Noussayba probably alludes to one critique that is consistently addressed to the Islamist *Justice and Development Party* – that of their failure to fulfill the main promise of their election campaign and agenda’s “top priority” of improving social (and economic) justice in post-Arab Spring Morocco. In “*Maladresse*” (“Clumsiness”), she uses the technique of contrast and comparison to better describe the utopian ideal those politicians should actually incarnate – that is an ideal of honesty, dedication, and benevolence towards the people, as she writes: “*Je te lirai des discours bien moins sinistres / Je me réveillerai en bonne heure, active au parlement / Je te jure amour et honnêteté loin de leur parler qui nous ment*” (“I’ll read you far less sinister speeches / I’ll wake up in a good hour, active in parliament / I swear love and honesty away from their talks that lie to us.”)

Therefore, in “*Introduction*,” Noussayba expresses her feelings of loss and confusion, that of a whole young generation who does not hold big hopes for the future because of the actual corruption of the people who are in power, which, in turn, creates a sense of despair and disillusion in the Moroccan youth; she deplors: “*Mais sais-tu comment est-il mon futur?*” (“But do you know what my future is like?”). In fact, during our interview, Noussayba explained the main reason why her slams are particularly geared towards a critique of the Moroccan political dissidents, as she told me: “Most people find that politics comes back a lot in my writing, and that’s because, I think, since our politicians represent and decide for us, I feel like I need to act and react with my poems, refusing to be fearful, shy or quiet in front of any kind of injustice, especially social ones”

(Noussayba 2019). In this testimonial, she underscores the political orientation of her slams, which finds its origins in the politicians' corruption and lack of accountability. For her, the politicians should be accountable to the people and as long as they will attempt to escape their social and political responsibility, her slams will continue to tackle and criticize them.

Subsequently in "*Introduction*," the slam poet emphasizes she is angry not at the political dissidents alone but at an entire *system* of abuse and corruption, indignation that reflects in her writing which has now become "saturated" or *fed up*: "*Je te montre mon talent d'écriture / Bourré de faute et de quelques ratures / Apparemment il est devenu rageur de nature / Ton système moyenâgeux le sature*" ("I show you my writing [skills] / Stuffed with faults and a few scratches / Apparently it became angry by nature / Your medieval system *saturates* it.") She characterizes this system as "medieval," probably in terms of it being outdated and unfit for today's world as well as abusive. The term "outdated" could also be a reference to the failure of the Moroccan Spring and the MV20F in successfully reforming the political system in 2011 where the people's demands for effective social change were co-opted with the adoption of mere "cosmetic" constitutional reforms that, on the long run, only had the effect of maintaining, and even furthering, the status-quo under the newly elected Islamist government (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017). Therefore, Noussayba seems to suggest that, subsequent to the wave of social and political consciousness that swept the country during the events of the "Moroccan Spring" back in 2011, the unreformed Moroccan political system (that, in addition, is now run by the Islamists) has become "outdated").

Therefore, in the same slam, the activist also describes this (political) system as "*déboussolé*" or "disoriented," probably due to its several malfunctions and contradictions. This realization has led her to take on her role as an activist in the society, which is to denounce a system that she perceives as a total "mess" and a "chaos", as she slams: "Unfortunately I can only relay this mess here and all this chaos." In her very famous slam "*Crise d'Identité*" ("Identity Crisis"), she further elaborates on what she means by

a *disoriented* system – that is a system filled with contradictions and devoid of logic, where principles and values are turned upside down, where the bad has become a transvestite for the good and vice versa; she explains:

When logic commits suicide in my country  
 When the rich come first and the poor have to pay  
 When the honest becomes a traitor and the truth remains denied  
 And instead of talking the law pushes us to scream [...]   
 A corrupt system that contradicts itself

Here, the choice of the word “disoriented” is also very subtle as it implies that the system can only be fixed by being turned upside down, which is a direct hint at the idea of the *toppling* (i.e. the revolution). In fact, at the end of “*Introduction*,” she invokes the political elite to either start working towards such an ideal or to leave (not only their positions but also) the country: “Leave the society and take the country with you.” However, in “*Maladresse*” (“Clumsiness”), Noussayba elucidates that she does not advocate for a radical revolution as we traditionally understand it: “*Je ne suis pas anti-système, je suis bien d'autres saletés / Car avant d'être anti un système, il faut d'abord être anti sa société*” (“I’m not anti-system; I’m much other dirt / Because before being anti system, you must first be anti-your-society”). Hence, the slam poet refuses the label of anti-system because that would mean she and her art stand against her society, which she argues is definitely not the case. She further elaborates on this idea in her slam “*Reste en Fourmi*” (“Stay Brave”): “*Le pays t’aime mais souvent le gouvernement est infidèle*” (“The country loves you but more than often the government is unfaithful”) – meaning that the government does not represent the overall society and that although it is undeniably corrupt, this does not justify the people turning against their own country. The above verses express a tough negotiation between the idea of being a revolutionary and yet remaining faithful and loyal to one’s homeland. In fact, Noussayba does not seem to advocate for a revolution in its traditional sense, that is a toppling of the system. She is rather in the favor of a slow but definite reform of the society, as well as a re-building of what she characterizes as a “disoriented” system towards a less corrupt,

more equitable, and just one. In this sense, Noussayba carries on exactly the same revolutionary spirit of the Moroccan Spring where activists of the 20MVF did not seek to topple King Mohamed VI's regime, but rather to implement a series of political *reforms* that aimed to restrict the King's powers, improve political transparency and the separation of powers (Ennaji 2016). In "*Maladresse*," the following two verses convey quite skillfully this idea of a more pragmatic, reformist, and sustainable kind of social change: "*Je serai la rebelle conformiste; Et nous vivrons ce rêve de démocrates réalistes*" ("I will be the conformist rebel; And we will live this dream of realist democrats"). Therefore, by continuing to advocate for unfulfilled political demands from the time of the Arab Spring in Morocco and adopting the same reformist (i.e. not radical) political stance of the 20MVF, Noussayba's bittersweet slams exemplify Badran's (2014; 2016) idea of the "continuing (gender) revolution" in post-Arab Spring North African states.

### Slamming your "disposable diplomas"

A secondary theme in Noussayba's slams is the corruption of the educational system which, in her sense, reflects the corruption of the politicians and the political system as a whole. First, in her slam "*Introduction*" where she conveys her distrust of the political dissidents in the country, she also describes most politicians as undeserving of their role and status because of their lack of educational qualification: "*Un foutur pour toi c'est ajoutable / Rien à faire de ton diplôme jetable / Un diplôme qui ne sait même pas se consoler*" ("A fool-tur for you is addable / Nothing to do with your disposable diploma / A degree that can't even console itself"). Describing their degrees as useless and "disposable," Noussayba underscores again the politicians' skill at fooling the people by being able to earn high positions in the government despite their low educational and cultural capitals. These verses could also speak to a wider problem of corruption within the educational system in Morocco today where some people resort to paying private schools or Universities to earn their degrees (Hamid 2018). Moreover, through the use of the phrases "*disposable*" (i.e. fake and throwable) and "can't even console itself," Noussayba seems to

suggest here it is not impossible some politicians have earned (i.e. bought) their degrees in the same way.

In “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), the slam poet further elaborates on the many flaws of the educational system in Morocco which she perceives as highly deficient and ineffective – like the politicians who run it; she deplores: “*L’éducation nationale a démissionné très tôt / Les gamins naissent avec leurs fardeaux*” (“The national education resigned very early / Kids are born with their burdens”). Here, Noussayba denounces the inefficiency of an educational system which creates many hurdles within the society; one of them is the phenomenon of social reproduction. Some children, especially those who belong to less privileged social backgrounds, are doomed not to receive a proper education nor to improve their (low) social status. As Badran (2016) points out that women’s creative disobedience in contemporary post-revolutionary North Africa states aims to protest the ongoing social inequalities in their societies, Noussayba’s slams do reveal patterns of women’s creative activism by tackling issues of social injustice in her country. Finally, in her slam “*Ces Gens-là*” (“Those People”), Noussayba also talks about the deficiencies of a capitalist system of education where students have to either get indebted to get an education today or to compete very harshly for lousy sums of government scholarships that are only granted to a meager minority, as she denounces: “*Et les étudiants qui se battent pour quelques Dirhams de la bourse*” (“Students are fighting for a few Dirhams... those of the scholarship”).

### Slamming the “human dream”

In fact, another secondary theme that Noussayba tackles in her bittersweet slams are the defects of the capitalist system and its devastating consequences not only on individual people and the society as a whole but also on Nature itself. In “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”), Noussayba deplores: “*Le temps c’est l’argent, le capital, le pétrole*” (“Time is money, capital, oil”), thereby denouncing how life’s most precious gift (i.e. time and therefore life itself) has all become about material pursuits in today’s capitalist societies. The title of the slam itself “I accuse” is very revealing in the

sense that the slammer holds the neoliberal system responsible for several societal woes.

In “*Reste en Fourmi*” (“Stay Brave”), Noussayba deplores, for instance, the role of the neoliberal system in contributing to the rise of a materialist and individualist society that has furthered our social isolation and alienation: “*Une société qui consomme / Mais quels cons nous sommes / Un cocon et vivre seul*” (“A society that consumes, but what jerks we have become / A cocoon and live alone”). In “*Introduction*,” she denounces yet another evil product of the capitalist system which is the military-industrial complex that has turned us all into war machines and made us forget about love, solidarity, and companionship – including the artist herself: “*J’aurais aimé tiré sur imbéciles qui vendent des mitraillettes pour s’épanouir*” (“I would have liked to shoot idiots who sell machine guns to flourish”). In the following verse, Noussayba goes on: “But I’m just a little spoofer who doesn’t even know how to harm,” thereby emphasizing her refusal to resort to violence to end to violence despite being tempted to, as well as her powerlessness and helplessness in front of such a barbaric and vicious system. In fact, what the slam poet characterizes as the “disoriented system” discussed above finds its origins not only in the political elites who run it but also in the type of economic system that governs it; in “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), Noussayba provides an example of such a sense of *disorientation*: “*Et même si les Smartphone se vendent en vitrines et les livres par terre*” (“And even if today smartphones are sold on shop windows and books on the floor”). Such a blatant contradiction exemplifies one of the flaws of today’s capitalist system and underscores how the society has become “disoriented” by giving more worth and value to material possessions (even the most toxic and least productive ones) over immaterial ones (i.e. cultural, educational and spiritual).

In “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”), Noussayba also links these critiques of the capitalist system to environmentalist concerns, in the sense that she perceives the consequences of the system on people and Nature are the same and emanate from the same origin: “*Nous ne connaissons pas une autre plaine pour nous réparer / Possessifs de nature, la terre nous nous en*

*sommes emparée*” (“We don’t know any other place where we can breathe / Possessive by nature, we have taken over the earth”). Here, Noussayba denounces the role of today’s (capitalist) system in alienating and destroying our nature, the only eco-system where we can live and thrive, which has furthered our sense of confusion and *disorientation*. Therefore, as an alternative to the capitalist society, the artist advocates for the “Human Dream,” probably in contradistinction with the American Dream that is at the origin of today’s neoliberal system. In “*J’accuse*” (“I accuse”) again, she claims: “*Je prône le humain dream, et il n’a pas besoin d’une boussole*” (“I advocate the human dream, and it doesn’t need a compass”). The use of the word compass is also strategic here as it could be a direct reference to the “disoriented” system she alludes to in her slam “*Introduction*.” To find one’s way in a disoriented space, one needs a compass. However, if we were to live in the Human (not the American) Dream, we will no longer live in a system full of contradictions where we constantly need a tool to *re-orient ourselves* and re-discover our (more humanist) nature.

### **Slamming against social backwardness**

Noussayba also links her attacks on the corrupt political system and the exploitative neoliberal economic system in Morocco to an overall problem of social awareness in the country. In this sense, she does not reject the entire blame on the politicians (and the system) but admits a part of the responsibility is also shared by the people themselves who are either inimical to social change or too fearful to stand up against corruption and injustice. In “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), she first tackles the problem of toxic and backward mentalities in the country which impede the society from evolving towards a more just and egalitarian one; she decries: “*Tout le monde se mêle de tout le monde même si c’est pas leur affaire*” (“Everyone meddles with everyone even if it’s not their business”). She then goes on to enumerate the flaws of what she perceives as a particularly passive and unproductive society: “Everyone wants change but no one is ready to change;” “We’re unemployed and often we don’t have anything to do;” “Our society is still a teenager / She doesn’t want to move just to receive gifts.” In this sense, Noussayba presents an intersectional

analysis where she posits that political corruption, economic exploitation and lack of social awareness contribute altogether to the reproduction of social injustice in present day Morocco.

Therefore, in “*Crise d’Identité*” (“Identity Crisis”), the slammer invokes the Moroccan people to become more mature and better aware of the situation in the country, as well as to stop living the fake picture that the politicians have depicted for them so skillfully: “*Une société enfantine [...] / Un peuple en enfer qui se croit au paradis / Qui croit qu’on a une vie pourtant ne vivons que sa parodie*” (“A childlike society [...] / A people in hell who think they’re in heaven / Who believes that we have a life yet live only his parody”). She also sends a call for the people to become more aware of systemic oppression, including the extent of corruption and social injustices plaguing her country, and therefore, to get a sense of dignity and freedom: “*Vivez librement, dignement ou au moins perdez la vie à essayer*” (“Live freely, with dignity or at least lose your life trying”). In this sense, Noussayba argues that change starts first at the individual level and that a societal change in people’s mentalities and attitudes is needed for Morocco to start evolving towards a more just social, political, and economic society. Hence, the slammer claims she will be the first to stand still in the face of corruption and social injustice, and that she refuses to leave until she sees the change she hopes for her country turn into a reality; her slams become her weapon through which she brings hope and resilience: “*Je reste là et je ne vais pas quitter*” (“Despite all this I’m staying here and I’m not going to leave”). As mentioned previously, because human dignity was the core theme of the Arab Spring, Noussayba’s slams are inscribed in a specific sociopolitical context that the aftermath of the revolutions where the artist-activist continues advocating for social justice. Finally, talking about her role as an individual in impacting wider social change, Noussayba also underscored this aspect during our interview:

I’ve always considered myself a superhero. Part of me knows I am not and might never be, but it’s like that sweet lie or little hope that keeps me going. It motivates me to go forward. It justifies my existence and role in this world, thinking that



I might, through my writing, make a change and push this world to become a better one. (Noussayba 2019)

## Slamming xenophobia and radical nationalism

Another social theme that Noussayba's slams aim to tackle and where change is required both at the individual and the institutional levels is the rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrants' sentiment in our day and age. The beginning of her slam "*J'accuse*" ("I accuse") is particularly full of references to the vocabulary of dreams (of travel), frontiers and foreignness whereby she introduces skillfully the theme of migration: "*Nous Sommes tous nés quelque part / Dans un coin du monde entouré des remparts / Et on veut partir on rêve d'un départ*" ("We're all born somewhere / In a corner of the world surrounded by ramparts / We want to leave and we dream of departure"). In the following verses, the rhetorical question: "*Peut-on vraiment se permettre de rêver?*" ("Can we really afford to dream?") introduces the difficulty of dreaming and therefore leaving and becoming a migrant in today's world. The contemporary (gradual) rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment is best conveyed in the following verses: "*On ne peut pas toujours se permettre de rêver / De sourire aux étrangers, et accueillir des étrangetés; Je ne suis qu'un immigré, je cause la migraine, bon gré, mal gré*" ("We can't always afford to dream / Smiling at strangers, and welcoming strangeness; "I'm just an immigrant, I cause migraine, willingly, unwillingly").

Then, Noussayba moves on to convey her feelings of anger in the face of this difficulty and even impossibility (of migrating), especially when she realizes the extent of racism and radical nationalism today: "*Mais être rejeté par un terrier pour une différence de nationalité? / Me met les nerfs / Ça m'énerve*" ("But to be rejected for a difference of nationality? / Gets on my nerves / It pisses me off"); "*On en a ras-le-bol d'attendre un visa pour mettre les pieds sur un sol*" ("We're fed up with waiting for a visa to set foot on a floor"). Subsequently, she underscores her indignation at one of the consequences of radical nationalism today – that is the rise of isolationism and the need to build frontiers between people, as she deplores: "Are there

public and private lands? / Once upon a time, a world became a small village and now it is on the pavement;” “Citizen of a torn world, divided into ten poles.” These verses also convey a sense of nostalgia for a time when there were no dividing lines between human beings, where all the people were just one (i.e. a village), and now this sense of unity is slowing falling apart, and with it the entire whole (i.e. on the pavement). The title of the slam “*Jaccuse*” (“I accuse”) is also revealing here in the sense that it addresses a direct critique to the governments that promote and/or adopt such anti-immigration policies. At last, she concludes by re-affirming her sense of being against all human divisions (on the basis of national origin, ethnicity or religion) and frontiers, and thereby re-invokes the need to bring back that lost sense of human solidarity and unity, which once made the world one, and still does for those who stand against racism and divisions:

Too bad the universe is in me I am neither Moroccan nor foreign  
 Keep clinging to your little homeland and its colossal borders  
 Because as long as there are human beings on earth  
 You'll only have your only small country  
 And we'll have the whole earth

### Slamming a feminist “cancer”

Noussayba’s poems also address the crucial theme of women’s rights which she tackles primarily in her slam “*Ana Machi Mchicha*” (“I am not a Cat”). She is concerned about the degree of corruption of the political system which also has negative consequences on the women’s condition in the country. Her main argument is that the Moroccan government (and the people) should be concerned with more fundamental issues in relation to women’s rights rather than merely superficial and ornamental ones. In “*Ces gens-la*” (“Those People”), she particularly underscores this idea by pointing out: “*Et les femmes on les défend juste quand il s’agit des jupes, des bisous et des blouses*” (“And women we only defend their rights when it comes to skirts, kisses, and blouses”). In fact, the slammer deplors how the Moroccan people and government are not concerned with crucial

issues when it comes to the women's condition in the country, such as the extent of domestic abuse and the low levels of female education and literacy. What Noussayba also denounces here is that when the government seems concerned with women's rights, it is, in fact, only a manifestation of "feminist pink-washing." This phenomenon designs a strategy of "state feminism" whereby the leaders of developing countries aim to boast gender equality and modernity on the surface to align with imperialist feminist agenda and attract Western funding while avoiding to tackle more serious issues in relation to women's rights that will have a more substantial impact on their societies. A prominent example of this phenomenon was former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi's army of women bodyguards and fighters which he used to boast feminist commitments on the surface (i.e. gender equality) while, in reality, those women were captive sexual slaves in Gaddafi's palaces and victims of several forms of abuse (Rogers 2016).

In the same slam, Noussayba addresses a woman and informs her that she has a "cancer": "Good morning, ma'am! You have cancer, go outside / you can't have a life or a husband, our society is made for the strong." The word "cancer" could refer to the multiple social constraints that women have to deal with on a daily basis in Morocco and that Noussayba addresses particularly in her slam "*Ana Machi Mchicha*" ("I am not a Cat"): from the social pressures to get married ("Nice girls get married right way") and conform to the ideals of femininity ("Be sweet, beautiful, and take care of your face [...] A woman who gets angry is not beautiful to look at") to limited geographic (and intellectual) mobility ("Don't come home late / Do not change your mind often / [...] Do not get mixed up with thoughts... shopping will make you feel better"), and limited divorce rights ("Never a divorce, don't be crazy and learn to bear"), these social constraints have become a sort of burden (i.e. "cancer") on Moroccan women to bear. This idea is further reinforced through her argument that the "society is only made for the strong," that is the men and the government; in the same slam, she points out the extent of sexual harassment in Morocco: "Street, work, hospital café / Don't think too much, you're still prey to the male," thereby denouncing the impact of those social woes and injustices against women which have resulted in giving them "cancer." Her earlier invocation for

women to “go outside” aims to emphasize that they do not have their place in such a society where they are constantly discouraged from claiming their place in the public sphere, a space that belongs to men only. Subsequently, Noussayba denounces the unachievable beauty ideals and standards and their devastating effects on the bodies (and lives) of Moroccan women: “We can’t take a picture of you, you’re going to break the décor you’re pale, without hair / You don’t even have a beautiful body;” “Why do you want to know how much I weigh / you see we can’t all be J-Lopez / [...] I can do better than a model who walks off”). Therefore, by denouncing the effects of the beauty industry on women, the slam poet tackles a serious feminist issue, thereby distinguishing her committed art from the government’s pink-washed concerns and invokes her (male) audience to start considering and treating women as fully-fledged beings and their equal: “Behind every woman, there is her experience, her thoughts, and herself.”

Finally, during our interview, Noussayba underscored how slam poetry was an appropriate medium for her to work around those social pressures, including the necessity of conforming to one’s gender role, in order to express herself freely in public:

Considering the environment and the society I was brought up in, where rap is still largely perceived as a man-dominated domain, and due to the social pressures I was subjected to for thinking about rapping in public, slam poetry was an alternative medium I could use to express myself. Self and peer censorship, along with the traditional gender roles, had drawn me to find a “suitable” art form for my gender. (Noussayba 2019)

## Slamming the Moroccan Winter

Finally, Noussayba’s slams also aim to protest against the extent of despotic rule and authoritarianism in the Arab region by taking Morocco as a case study and its devastating consequences on the people and the society. As mentioned previously, her slam “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab

Winter”) is a direct reference to the events of the Arab Spring of 2011, a series of uprisings which aimed to overthrow authoritarian regimes across the Arab region through both violent and non-violent protests. The artist uses the metaphor of the “Winter” to underscore the failure of these uprisings in positively affecting social change in the country, an aspect that will be discussed later in this section.

In this slam, the activist first compares the despotic Arab rulers to Gods: “*Nos dieux ne se cachent pas derrière les nuages mais dans des grottes*” (“Our Gods do not hide behind the clouds but in caves”), that is probably in reference to the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein who was found hiding in a hut in Iraq in 2003 when he was on the run before being sentenced to death, and the rumors around former Al Qaeda leader Ben-Laden being found in a cave in Pakistan before he was shot in 2011 (Foster 2018; Ross 2011). In another verse, she also highlights the greed, malice and opportunism of these Arab God-like Kings: “The walls have ears and your Gods have a big belly.” Hence, the metaphor of Kings incarnating Gods also alludes to them acting all-powerful and exploitative as if they are above all human and mundane laws.

In “*Hiver Arabe*” (“Arab Winter”), Noussayba particularly compares the Moroccan King Mohamed VI, who also holds the title of *Emir el Muminin* (i.e. the Prince of the Faithful), to God and talks about her newfound “heresy”, which she refers to repeatedly in her slam: “*Je suis devenue infidèle, oui et je le crierai sur les toits*” (“I’ve become unfaithful, yes, and I’ll shout it from the rooftops”); “*Hérétique je ne suivrai plus votre troupeau*” (“Heretic I will no longer follow your flock”); “*Je suis un être désormais sans religion*” (“I am now a being without religion”). This allegory of the heresy actually alludes to her switching from a loyal follower of the regime to a fierce opponent (and, perhaps, even a revolutionary) due to her refusal to recognize its leader as legitimate. However, this shift does not come for the slammer without the realization of the danger it entails for her life, thereby further underscoring the regime’s despotism due to its hostility towards all forms of opposition and contestation: “*Seigneur je vous annonce que j’arrête la prière / Et je sais qu’après cette amorce j’irai tout*

*droit au cimetière*” (“Lord I announce to you that I renounce the prayer / And I know that after this confession I will go straight to the cemetery”); *“J’ai choisi le clan des infidèles même s’il y en a que très peu / Et pas la peine de me dire qu’en parler fait mourir*” (“I chose the clan of infidels even if there are very few / And you don’t have to tell me that talking about it makes you die”). By emphasizing the fact that there are only a few infidels in the country, Noussayba seems to suggest there are a few people who dare to revolt against the system or express their opposition – for they are either too afraid for their lives or corrupt themselves. Then, the activist officially declares herself a stateless person after her newfound “heresy”: “Take this nationality card and never give it back to me / This little piece of paper does not identify me!”

Subsequently, Noussayba moves on to elucidate the motives behind her becoming a stateless activist that is, first, her deep-seated distrust of the leader of the system: “Goodbye to the God you are, your power stops when the people are suspicious” as well as the hatred that it has instilled in her: “Nothing comes out of nothing and I have reasons for my hatred / [...] What nation are you talking about, I feel hatred for all that I loved.” In fact, in *“Maladresse”* (“Clumsiness”), the slam poet explains that the main reason behind her becoming an activist is her “suffering,” a feeling that finds its origins in the many injustices of the political system which instills distrust and animosity in the people, including her: *“La souffrance a fait de moi une activiste sur la piste”* (“The suffering made me an activist on the trail”). Such suffering is also caused by a system that abuses and brutalizes its people; in *“Hiver Arabe”* (“Arab Winter”) she explains: “You don’t even back down to give us room / While we used to fight to keep you out of the way / Perched on thrones made up of human corpses.” In *“Crise d’Identité”* (“Identity Crisis”), she deplors how this suffering is due not only to the physical violence but also to the mental and moral violence (i.e. the deception, the humiliation) that the Moroccan system inflicts upon its people: *“Vivons dans la déception, des décès par million, et on t’apprend en t’humiliant”* (“Let’s live in disappointment, deaths by a million, and they teach you by humiliating you”).

Therefore, Noussayba underscores that such forms of abuse and humiliation can only produce revolutionary spirits like hers; in this sense, the revolution becomes a fatality in the face of oppression and despotism: “*Celui qui sème la dictature récoltera un jour des braves / Il récoltera la rage, la révolution mais jamais des esclaves*” (“Whoever sows dictatorship will one day reap from the brave / He will reap rage and revolution but never slaves”). Hence, Noussayba’s newfound “heresy” in “Arab Winter,” that is a direct reference to the events of the Arab Spring, finds its origins in the many forms of social abuses and injustices she was a witness to in her country and which made it impossible for her to give allegiance to the system any longer – like the thousands of Moroccans who slid to “heresy” by expressing publicly their opposition to the regime and demanded a thorough reform of the political system, during a series of demonstrations that marked the Moroccan Spring from February to June 2011 (Abadi 2014).

However, in one of the final verses, Noussayba points out that the Arab Spring has actually turned to be a Winter: “*Je te signale que c’est un hiver Arabe*” (“And I’d like to point out that it’s an Arab winter”). In fact, in the aftermath of the series of revolutions, a blatant backlash against human and women’s rights was evident in most North African post-revolutionary states with the rise of political instability and political Islam to power and the counterrevolution against women’s constitutional rights (Sadiqi 2016). For instance, the “Moroccan Spring” was marked by the rise of political Islam (the PJD) to power for the first time in the history of the country in November 2011. This must be the reason behind Noussayba’s use of the metaphor of the “Winter,” instead of the “Spring.” In Morocco particularly, the February 20 Movement (MV20F) for freedom and individual liberties was quickly co-opted by the Moroccan regime. The adoption of a new constitution in June 2011 that allegedly restricted many of the King’s political prerogatives, by strengthening the role of the prime minister and a newly elected legislature, and reaffirmed the social rights of other marginalized social groups, such as women and the Native peoples of Morocco – the Berber or Amazighs – allowed to alleviate some of the people’s demands without effectively institutionalizing

equality between the sexes or effecting concrete social change in people's everyday lives (Boutkhil 2016; Daadaoui 2017; Ennaji 2016). This power of the King (and the political system) to co-opt an entire revolution is best conveyed in Noussayba's two subsequent verses: "*Mais depuis quand t'as le pouvoir sur les saisons*" ("But since you have the power over the seasons" that is to make a Spring a winter and vice versa), and: "*Celui qui est destiné à tomber, bizarrement un jour se relève*" ("Whoever is destined to fall, strangely one day rises"), that is in reference to the Moroccan King and his political regime still holding steady and unreformed despite the local revolutionary movement of the MV20F. Therefore, Noussayba's slam "Arab Winter" advocates the necessity for the revolution to be carried on exactly because it was co-opted and hijacked by the regime and, therefore, never had the chance to impact the Moroccan society in a significant and meaningful way. In some aspects, it even materialized as a backlash against previously secured social and political rights. In fact, during our interview, Noussayba underscored that the two oxymorons she used in her slam "Clumsiness" ("I will be the conformist rebel" and "We will live this dream of realist democrats") also speak to her (and the Moroccan people's) surrender and resignation subsequent to their crushed dreams of revolution and reform from the time of the Arab Spring (Noussayba 2019). In this sense, her slams advocate that the revolution needs to *continue* until social and political liberties are effectively affected and implemented in the Moroccan society, not merely cosmetically or in the state constitution only, thereby reflecting Badran's (2014; 2016) idea of the continuing (cultural and gender) revolution in the North African region today. While her bittersweet slams appear to be quite bold and daring, Noussayba told me during our interview: "I have never had any reaction from the government" (Noussayba 2019). Therefore, it seems the Moroccan government never reacted to Noussayba's revolutionary slams, probably to avoid any negative reactions against the establishment, whether nationally or internationally, including from the Moroccan artist and activist community, and, thereby, to avoid stirring a national controversy. But perhaps more importantly, the government did not wish to give Noussayba (and her revolutionary slams) any recognition or credits of any sort.



## Conclusion

My analysis of Noussayba's slam poetry and my interview with her have revealed that her slam aims to deplore systemic oppression and several forms of social injustice that continue to plague contemporary (i.e. post-Arab Spring) Morocco. Her revolutionary verses promote such diverse principles and ideals as gender equality, environmentalist awareness, education for all, political transparency, democratic commitment, and other humanist values. This confirms Wahba's (2016) initial argument in relation to women's activism in the context of the Arab Spring where their involvement in the series of uprisings did not only aim at the removal of the ruler but of all forms of oppression, from political corruption to economic exploitation and lack of societal awareness. Such a form of activism where women activists aim to advocate for gender equality and social justice concomitantly has also been carried beyond the revolutions of the Arab Spring to the present context through creative disobedience patterns. In fact, Badran (2016) points out that women's creative disobedience in contemporary post-revolutionary North African states aims to protest the ongoing gender and social inequalities in their societies that have persisted until the present day despite the so-called progressive movements of the Arab Spring. In this sense, Noussayba's slams are an effective expression of women's creative disobedience in Post-Arab Spring North Africa where women activists are increasingly resorting to art as a revolutionary tool to continue advocating for unfulfilled demands from a decade ago.

Noussayba's slam "Arab Winter" is even a direct reference to the events of the Arab Spring. By focusing on the negative outcomes of the Arab uprisings, her objective is to *continue* advocating for social justice in the aftermath of the "Moroccan Spring" which was characterized by the hijacking of the local revolutionary movement (MV20F) by the Moroccan regime with the adoption of a "reformed" constitution in June 2011, the rise of political Islam (the PJD) to power in November 2011 and their rejection of the previous government's *Agenda for Equality 2011-2015*, and a blatant backlash against women's rights in the ensuing period. This also confirms Badran's (2014; 2016) idea of the *continuing (gender) revolution*

in the North African region today which manifests itself, among others, in women's creative disobedience patterns and art activism. In this sense, Noussayba's political slam and revolutionary verses are inscribed in a specific sociopolitical context that is the aftermath of the Arab Spring where the activist is carrying on the same reformist revolutionary spirit of the 20MVF to advocate, not for a mere toppling of the system, but for genuine social, political and economic reforms through her progressive ideals. In fact, as pointed out in the analysis section, Noussayba's writings do not advocate for a radical political revolution per se, but rather, for a gradual revolution and a revolution of the minds and spirits towards a more just and egalitarian society, a sort of more sustainable change that can be carried on beyond the time of the revolutions.

Finally, during our interview, Noussayba told me that the audience's reaction to her slams is generally positive, welcoming, and even enthusiastic. For instance, the music video of her slam "*Reste en Fourmi*" ("Stay Brave"), which was viewed over seven thousand times, received over three hundred and thirty likes on her YouTube channel for only two disliked; she continued: "There have been some negative reactions sometimes but these were rare; this is a truth that cannot be denied but also one of the reasons that drives me to keep moving forward today" (Noussayba 2019). Likewise, the Moroccan civil society also seems to be very enthusiastic about Noussayba's slam poetry; during a recent fieldwork I conducted in Morocco with several *artists* and cultural actors in the artistic scene, a few representatives from *l'Atelier de l'Observatoire*, a local NGO specialized in art and research to develop socially participative projects by bringing artists, students, researchers, and residents together, told me that they have been thrilled to work with Noussayba Lahlou on a recent project where she was officially invited to write and perform a slam in the Moroccan dialect of Darija. The objective of the project was to bring slam poetry in working-class neighborhoods of the economic capital (Casablanca) in order to raise the marginalized youth's awareness about social justice issues and trigger meaningful debates. As for the Moroccan government, as mentioned earlier, Noussayba never received any reaction. They were no encouraging comments nor threats, attempts

of intimidation or legal pursuits. Therefore, for the establishment, it is as if her slams do not exist – or else only exist in a sort of “buffer zone” where she is given no recognition. Last but not least, Noussayba insisted on underscoring the open invitation for peace, freedom, and equality that her slam poetry constitutes for all peoples, regardless of national origin, ethnicity, or religious background:

My poems address different topics such as: politics, social problems, gender equality, humanity in general... which I think are topics that are of interest not only to adults but also to teenagers. So, when I write and publish, I don't choose an audience... but the audience, instead, chooses my poems. (Noussayba 2019)

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