

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

On Writing Identity and Difference in Moroccan Literature: An Interview with Latifa Labsir

Ikram Ben Talha and Brahim Barhoun
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tétouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss2.8288

Ikram Ben Talha is a PhD candidate at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tétouan, Morocco, and a member of the Linguistic, Literary, Cultural, and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab. Her academic research focuses on Moroccan and postcolonial literature, with particular attention to questions of gender, identity, and literary representation.

ikram.bentalha@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3271-0133

Brahim Barhoun is a Professor of English Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tétouan, Morocco. He holds a PhD in the Literature of English-speaking Countries from the Complutense University of Madrid. His research interests include postcolonial literature, narrative identity, migration, magical realism, and gender representations, with a focus on African and Arab literary contexts.

bbarhoun@uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6842-7950

Received: 16-10-2025 Accepted: 04-02-2026 Published: 27-02-2026

On Writing Identity and Difference in Moroccan Literature: An Interview with Latifa Labsir

Ikram Ben Talha and Brahim Barhoun
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tétouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

ABSTRACT

This interview engages with the literary and critical project of Moroccan writer and scholar Latifa Labsir. It explores how her work navigates questions of difference, imagination, and ethical responsibility. Through a discussion of her fiction and critical writings, particularly *Ṭayf Sabība* (*The Phantom of Sabiba*), Labsir reflects on literature's capacity to translate between worlds: between silence and speech, self and other, reality and imagination. She examines the role of narrative in approaching autism, childhood, and family life. The conversation also addresses broader concerns that shape her trajectory, including women's writing, autobiography, visual art, and the relationship between realism and the imaginary in contemporary Moroccan literature. The interview presents literature as an ethical practice that is capable of opening spaces for recognition and inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Literature

Women's Writing

Contemporary Arabic Literature

Autism Representation

Identity

Note: The interview was conducted in Arabic over two separate sessions; the material was later combined and translated into English by the authors.

About Latifa Labsir: Latifa Labsir is a Moroccan writer, academic researcher, and Professor of Higher Education at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Ben M'Sik, Hassan II University of Casablanca, where she teaches modern narrative theory, literary criticism, genre studies, and the history of visual art. Her intellectual and literary project is distinguished by a sustained engagement with autobiography, women's writing, narrative forms, and the intersections between literature, psychology, and visual culture.

Alongside her academic work, she has delivered lectures and participated in conferences across the Arab world, Europe, and Latin America, and contributed regularly to *Women from Morocco* magazine and *Al-Ittihad* newspaper in the UAE. Labsir is the author of numerous works of fiction and criticism, many of which have been translated into several languages and published internationally.

In 2025, her novel *Ṭayf Sabība* (*The Phantom of Sabiba*) was awarded the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature, recognizing a body of work that combines literary imagination with ethical, social, and critical depth. She was also selected as a "Woman Leader" within a Moroccan–American university partnership, which reflects her broader engagement with questions of culture, education, and women's voices in contemporary society.

Contact ✉ ikram.bentalha@etu.uae.ac.ma
©2026

Ikram Ben Talha: I would like to start by congratulating you on winning the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for your recent novel *Ṭayf Sabība (The Phantom of Sabiba)*. This recognition came after years of creative and academic engagement with Moroccan literature. How did you feel about this recognition, and what did the award mean to you personally and artistically?

Latifa Labsir: For me, the prize was a kind of signpost or a form of recognition of creativity, but never its ultimate measure. Prizes do not create a writer, nor do they diminish a writer who does not receive them. This is because literary awards are also shaped by the personal tastes and sensibilities of judging committees. Still, when a writer is awarded and brought into the spotlight, the recognition becomes a meaningful addition to a long literary journey, especially one pursued over many years without institutional backing or visibility.

I see this prize as recognition of both my creative and academic trajectory. Of course, I was happy to receive it. It represents a form of Arab and international visibility, particularly because the Sheikh Zayed Book Award is considered a major international prize with significant symbolic weight. At the same time, such recognition comes with responsibility and with a certain burden of expectation, one that encourages reflection on future work and on the creative paths one has already taken.

It is important to note, however, that not all meaningful or important creativity is necessarily rewarded by prizes. This is a common misconception. Literary awards, whether Arab or international, are almost always surrounded by debate, and each prize generates its own controversy. This has long been the case, both in the Arab world and globally.

We can recall, for example, the debates surrounding the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Bob Dylan, when many writers questioned whether song and lyrical performance belonged to literature in its conventional sense. Similar controversies accompanied other Nobel Prizes. When Annie Ernaux received the award, some critics questioned why a feminist writer centered on the intimacy of women's everyday lives should be honored in this way.

Olga Tokarczuk is another example. I was not familiar with her work before she received the Nobel Prize; yet, discovering her writing afterward opened up a new global literary horizon for me, particularly through her deep engagement with the self and her ability to draw on fields such as biology in literary ways.

What I want to stress is that not every writer who receives a prize is necessarily the most important. However, in many cases, prizes play a crucial role in introducing writers to wider audiences and highlighting creative voices that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

IB: *Ṭayf Sabība* is a touching and finely crafted book that seems to open a new path in your literary career. How has the reception been so far?

LL: When we publish a book, we wait for it with a certain expectation, but books, as is often said, have their own destinies. Some find their way to readers, circulate widely, and generate resonance, while others—books the writer personally cherishes and considers among their most important—remain almost silent. This has happened to me. My short story collection, *Akhāfu min (I Am Afraid of...)*, is among the works I value most, but it received very limited attention and was not widely read. Alberto Manguel reminds us that every book has its own trajectory, and ultimately it is the reader who determines its afterlife.

In this sense, *Ṭayf Sabība* was received very well, and this reception exceeded my expectations. I did not imagine it would resonate in this way, especially when I first chose its

title. The publisher repeatedly asked me to remove the name "Sabiba" and choose another title, arguing that it would not circulate or attract readers. I insisted. I told him that this was a name that would persist in the reader's memory.

And indeed, wherever I went, especially when meeting young people, the name Sabiba lingered and resonated. For me, this confirmed, once again, that each book has its own form of reception. *Ṭayf Sabība* found its readers both before and after the prize. It was discussed in numerous encounters, and multiple readings were organized, particularly by young readers. It also generated critical engagement and, more importantly for me, understanding.

What mattered most was the impact. This is not a book written without consequence. Its effect is real and deep. Many mothers of children on the autism spectrum approached me, including during lectures I gave in the UAE. They told me they had read the book and found themselves in it, as if seeing their own lives reflected. They recognized their daily experiences in the character of Raji's mother and felt, in some way, reconciled with what they live. For me, that is the most meaningful form of reception a book can have.

IB: The name "Sabiba" and the title of *Ṭayf Sabība* carry multiple resonances. Could you tell us more about the choice of this name and the meaning of "*Ṭayf*" in the story's universe?
LL: *Ṭayf Sabība* is inspired by the notion of the autism spectrum. Autism is understood today as a neurodevelopmental condition that manifests in diverse ways and affects many individuals around the world. What remains striking is not only its increasing visibility, but also the fact that there is no single profile or fixed model. Each case is different; a person on the autism spectrum resembles no one but themselves.

This plurality made it essential for the title to remain flexible. I could not simply title the novel "Autism Spectrum." The title needed to leave space for imagination and creativity. Creativity is not algorithmic or mathematical; it is not governed by calculation. It adds something else, something that can only emerge within its own terrain. This is how I arrived at *Ṭayf Sabība*, a formulation that allows Sabiba to carry autism in a particular way and to transmit it differently.

I chose the name Sabiba deliberately. It is not an existing name; it is an invented one. It does not belong to a person or a doll. I created it myself, and it carries meaning. Its root relates to the idea of "cause" or "reason," the possibility of being a cause, even a cause for healing. In the novel, every name is meaningful. Each one carries a symbolic and semantic charge.

The mother is named Radiya; she is reconciled and accepting. The child is Raji; he hopes and waits. The daughter is Hiba, a gift. The companion is Amal, hope. There is no name in the novel without significance. Each is placed intentionally and carries its meaning within the narrative.

Many readers found themselves searching dictionaries to understand the name Sabiba. This act of searching becomes part of the reading experience itself. The title invites curiosity and engagement, just as the novel invites readers to approach autism not as a fixed definition, but as a spectrum of lived realities.

IB: Given your long-standing literary trajectory, do you see *Ṭayf Sabība* as a continuation of your earlier work, or as the opening of a new creative phase within it?
LL: I have always considered *Ṭayf Sabība* not as a turning point, but as a continuation of a long creative trajectory. My writing has moved through the short story, and I continue to work within this genre, which I consider one of the most demanding literary forms to shape and master.

The short story has always struck me as an exacting genre, and the fact that many major writers worldwide have struggled with it only confirms this. Naguib Mahfouz himself spoke of

the difficulty he faced when writing short stories, which, for me, underscores the precision and rigor this form requires.

Of course, some writers move between short stories and novels, and others work exclusively in one form or the other. These are, ultimately, variations related to literary genre. Each writer creates within a form that allows them to generate something new.

What was genuinely new in my own trajectory, however, was not a rupture with my previous work, but the fact that I had never before thought of writing for young readers. This was new for me, even as it remained connected to a broader creative path that had already been unfolding over many years.

IB: This is the first book that you address to young readers, marking a shift from your previous works, such as *Raghba Faqat (Just a Desire)* and *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa (It Happens in That Room).* What led you to turn toward writing for younger audiences, and why through the lens of autism?

LL: This is indeed my first work addressed to young readers, and it differs significantly from texts such as *Raghba Faqat* or *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa*. Your question is therefore very important, because this subject confronted me directly. Some readers, and even some academics, asked me quite explicitly: Why did you write about the autism spectrum? Are you a doctor? It was a direct question, and one that I took seriously.

Writing about this subject cannot happen without an understanding of what the autism spectrum actually is. For this reason, I spent a lot of time reading extensively on the subject. I engaged with scientific literature and came to understand that there is not a single form of autism, but multiple and varied spectrums. Through this work, I also came to know young people on the autism spectrum who, after support and guidance, live ordinary and socially integrated lives. Yet within society, autism remains poorly understood. Despite recent developments, it is still often treated as taboo.

Before turning specifically to *Ṭayf Sabība*, I had already been working for years on themes related to disability in its various forms, including speech impairment and physical disability, across different texts within a broader creative project. I had never imagined that I would write for young readers; I even stated this openly at the award ceremony. On the one hand, I often feel that I am no longer young enough to inhabit a child's or adolescent's perspective fully. On the other hand, I clearly perceive the gap between my perception of the world and that of younger generations. I have children, and I also teach students of a certain age, so I notice differences in perception, imagination, and worldview.

Yet the subject itself remained present. It accompanied me across different stages of life, not as an autobiography nor as a personal story, but through proximity. It exists among neighbors and friends; it reaches me through ordinary life. There was a psychological necessity that pushed me toward it: the voices of children with autism and their sounds and cries, which persist and resonate deeply. Additionally, there was another necessity, scientific and intellectual in nature, that required serious engagement beyond the emotional response.

Ṭayf Sabība emerged from this conviction: that a story can be woven from scientific understanding, yet delivered through a narrative form that remains accessible, humane, and emotionally resonant for young readers.

IB: The novel often situates autism within the context of Moroccan family life, exploring tensions, tenderness, and silences among mothers, fathers, and children. How important was it for you to highlight the family's collective experience rather than Raji's alone?

LL: For me, this question is closely connected to the need to lift the ambiguity surrounding autism and to re-situate it within a social framework, rather than treating it as an isolated medical condition. In this regard, I was particularly struck by a recent book, *Bayna al-Lugha wa-l-Dimāgh* (*Between Language and the Brain)*, by Said Al-Hansali, which reflects a long-standing engagement with autism and other disabilities. One of its key contributions is precisely this shift: moving autism from an exclusively clinical space into a social and relational one.

When we speak of a child on the autism spectrum, we are also speaking about differences in perception, eye contact, gesture, communication, and rhythm. Repetition of movements, words, and sounds becomes central. Speech may be delayed, habits become fixed, and change is often difficult. These are not abstract characteristics; they structure everyday family life and shape how parents, siblings, and caregivers relate to one another.

This is why, in *Ṭayf Sabība*, I chose not to isolate autism within Raji alone. The novel situates it within the family as a collective experience. Mothers, fathers, and siblings all carry part of this reality, each in a different way. By bringing together the medical and the social dimensions, the narrative seeks to show how difference is lived, negotiated, and sometimes transformed through shared daily life.

For me, this combined approach is essential. Our attitudes begin to shift when we realize that these conditions require not only medical attention but also social, emotional, and relational awareness. Literature, precisely because it works through proximity, detail, and voice, can make that collective experience visible in ways that other forms of discourse often cannot.

IB: The novel also introduces scientific elements, like the "blinklab" technology. Was this meant to bridge imagination and science, or to demystify autism?
LL: Writing *Ṭayf Sabība* led me to field research. I visited centers and associations, participated in workshops, and came into close contact with children on the autism spectrum. I observed early-detection techniques, such as eye-tracking technology, which allows specialists to diagnose autism by monitoring repetitive eye movements through video tracking. This is not a cure, but a form of correction and accompaniment. I recorded observations and gathered material, and I found myself facing what I would call an "internal creative laboratory," dense and full of complexity. The central question then became: how can I write all of this scientific richness in a literary form that remains smooth and flexible? How can information pass through the text without turning the narrative into a display of knowledge?

For me, literature is not merely the narration of events or the telling of a story. Literature is knowledge. It has the capacity to absorb other forms of knowledge—scientific, psychological, and social—provided they are transformed internally through imagination and creative labor. Literature can contain science only if that science is reshaped, refined, and woven into a narrative in a way that reaches the reader with fluidity and ease.

As I mentioned earlier, this inspiration came from proximity. I lived these experiences through families, centers, and even neighbors who shared this reality for years. All these voices, habits, and daily rhythms accumulated within me until the idea took shape. An idea that does not pass through feeling cannot be written. This one passed through emotion and shared suffering before it became literature.

IB: Your writing shows a delicate balance between emotion and information, neither sentimentalizing nor over-explaining. How do you achieve that equilibrium as a storyteller?
LL: This is exactly the issue I mentioned earlier: information must pass through the text naturally, almost indirectly. When I describe Hiba, for instance, as she narrates these moments, or when we witness her astonishment as a child discovering that her brother is different, this astonishment becomes a narrative entry point. She wonders why her brother does not look at

her directly, or why Raji does not smile at all. These are traits often associated with children on the autism spectrum, who may avoid direct eye contact or be disturbed by sounds.

Even small, everyday details matter. Certain noises are unbearable to Raji; even something as ordinary as brushing teeth can be difficult. Many aspects of daily life are learned very slowly. Hiba keeps asking, "Why are there pictures on the walls of the house?" These images are not decorative. The mother places them on purpose, following techniques taught in therapy centers: visual maps made of signs and symbols that help the child navigate the house because he is forgetful. He navigates his environment through images and symbols.

There are other details as well. Raji does not like his routine to change. He wants the same bed, the same colors, and the same objects. Repetition is central to his daily life: repetition of sounds, actions, and numbers. When counting from one to nine, for instance, Raji refuses to move to ten. When the teacher insists, he jumps directly to eleven, and when she persists, he repeats the number nine twice. These details are not there to explain or justify; they are there to acknowledge difference. First, we must accept that differences exist.

During this period of writing, I also came to know the philosopher Joseph Schovanec, who is himself on the autism spectrum and who has written and lectured extensively on the subject. When I meet him, he sits, speaks, and engages, and when he finishes, he simply stands up and leaves. At first, this behavior seemed difficult to grasp, even though I had read widely about autism. Gradually, I realized that this is simply another way of being. People are different, and they differ from us in profound ways. This difference should not be softened, explained away, or sentimentalized.

IB: *Ṭayf Sabība* expands the conversation on difference and disability in Moroccan literature. Difference is often what distinguishes us from others, and this theme appears strongly throughout your writing, where identity emerges as fluid and relational rather than fixed. How do you approach the question of identity in your work, and what draws you to portray it in such nuanced and multilayered ways?

LL: Identity in writing is not the same as identity in everyday life. Creative work inevitably carries traces of our personal inclinations. At times, I ask myself why I chose one character over the other. This is often a conscious decision. I would not claim that there is no relationship at all between the writer and what they write. There are always points of connection. At the same time, there are moments when the writer has no direct relationship to their characters.

I recently read a book that posed an important question: Can we separate the writer from their work, or at least partially separate them? This question matters because many texts appear immoral on the surface, and writers are often judged on the assumption that everything they write reflects who they are. But this is not always the case. There can be darkness in writing without the writer themselves being dark. A writer may inhabit the voice of a villain, an outcast, or a character far removed from their own life. There is always a relative distance between the writer and the text.

This is why identity functions differently in literature. Literature is relative and not absolute. It is not governed by formulas or mathematical certainty. In mathematics, one plus one equals two. In literature, one plus one might equal twenty-four. Literature speaks about things that do not occur elsewhere in the same way. When I write, I do not reproduce reality as it is. Reality passes through language and a complex creative process. So, eventually, it emerges transformed.

For this reason, identity in literature is never fixed. It is multiple, shifting, and relational. It is shaped through language, perspective, memory, and imagination. This is what draws me to exploring it in such careful and layered ways.

IB: In *Ṭayf Sabība*, you write from a child's perspective, and you also foreground the often-invisible burdens carried by siblings and mothers. What drew you to the child's gaze as a narrative lens? Heba is both an observer and a translator of her family's emotions. How did you craft her voice to remain childlike yet profoundly perceptive?
LL: In my earlier work, whether I wrote in the masculine or feminine first person, I was relatively free because I was often working close to my own inclinations and personal tendencies. In this text, however, I am not inside the narrative in that way.

Although I inhabited the figure of the mother or the character of Hiba, since Hiba is the one who narrates the events, it was extremely difficult for me to strip away the skin of the mature writer, with a certain age, formation, and level of awareness, and become a child again. Entering the skin of the young girl Hiba, who recounts everything that happens to her brother with autism, was one of the most difficult aspects of writing this novel.

I drew this idea from situations very close to me. The sibling of a child with a condition, whether autism or epilepsy, is always different from other children. That sibling, whether younger or older, is almost always burdened with responsibility. In Hiba's case, although she is the younger sister, she is treated as the elder one. Why? Because she is "responsible."

She is constantly told, "You are Raji's sister." She is not called Hiba; she is identified only through him. When she finally retrieves her name at the end, she is deeply happy. The children around her call her "Raji's sister" because Raji is the one with the condition. As a character, she is erased, marginalized, and deprived of her own identity. She exists only as an extension of her brother.

Even when she asks her mother for permission to have a friend, the response is that she cannot, not now. Her childhood is postponed. As a result, she chooses to play with Raji, adapt her daily habits to his needs, and reshape her world around him. I felt deep compassion for her when writing this character. It is extremely difficult to write from within the body and consciousness of that age.

IB: In *Ṭayf Sabība*, scenes in which mothers speak about abandonment and responsibility reveal how disability can expose deeper gendered inequalities within the family. Do you see literature as a space for questioning inherited norms around care, motherhood, and women's social roles?
LL: We must acknowledge that many of the situations women live through in our Arab societies still require profound change. It is not enough to say that women have advanced simply because they study at universities or hold high positions. This does not mean that we have moved beyond inherited concepts and ready-made assumptions that continuously repeat themselves. These assumptions are deeply embedded in everyday life, and they often surface most sharply in moments of crisis, such as when a family confronts disability.

Alongside my creative writing, I also write essays and have worked in multiple directions, including my long-standing involvement with 'Women from Morocco,' a project spanning many years. Through this work, I accumulated and sustained deep exchanges with readers, especially women readers, and this experience represented a qualitative addition for me. It allowed me to reflect more carefully on issues related to Moroccan and Arab women, particularly the invisible labor they carry and the expectations placed upon them.

Every woman carries her own light and her own inner worlds. However, without self-development and without working on oneself, especially on the psychological level, no real change is possible. Psychological work is daily work. We are often shaped by inherited discourses that circulate within families, language, and behavior, even when we try to resist them.

This is why I often think about how women might reclaim space for themselves, through persistence, self-work, and repeated attempts, until they discover their own light. Identity, for

me, is not something given once and for all. It is something that is built, questioned, and reshaped, both in life and, perhaps even more intensely, in writing.

So rather than constructing Raji's mother according to any idealized image, what guided me in *Ṭayf Sabība* was proximity, observation, and empathy, especially toward the invisible burdens carried by mothers and sisters, and the silent forms of responsibility that shape their lives without ever being named.

IB: You were selected as a "Woman Leader" in a Moroccan–American university partnership. What forms of leadership do you think creative writing and literary projects can cultivate *in society?*

LL: There is always a story behind creativity, a personal and a private one. There are questions that we, as writers, do not always ask ourselves, and this is precisely what gives such projects their meaning. These questions touch on ordinary aspects of life: how do we write? How did we live our lives? Did we have children or not? These questions may seem simple, yet they are deeply embedded in the social context of the woman writer, or the woman creator, regardless of the form her creativity takes.

This is what motivated my work on 'Women from Morocco.' The idea was to bring together women from Morocco and from an American university context to weave their experiences together. The documentary value is what gives these narratives their importance. They trace life trajectories that can serve as material for sociological reflection, because they reveal real differences, differences in ways of living, thinking, and negotiating ready-made ideas within society.

These differences appear in relationships between men and women, in professional life, in workplace pressures, and in psychological strain. The narratives bring to the surface questions that are often left unspoken: pressure at work, emotional exhaustion, and the difficulty of navigating professional demands and social expectations. All of this forms part of a broader lived experience that deserves to be recorded.

This work resulted in a published book, in both Arabic and English, as well as in long-form reports and extended pieces. But the project did not stop there. It became an ongoing process, carried out with great commitment by students of English language studies. I am deeply grateful to them, because this was not simply an academic exercise. It became another form of creation, one rooted in experience rather than abstraction.

For me, this kind of documentation is not secondary to literature. It is another form of leadership: making voices visible, preserving everyday experience, and creating spaces where women's lives are taken seriously as knowledge. These narratives matter not only for literary reflection but also for social analysis, cultural memory, and future research. They remind us that creativity does not emerge in isolation, but is always grounded in lived experience, shared histories, and social structures.

IB: Yet public recognition and visibility often come with their own tensions, particularly around how women writers are named, classified, and read. In your collection, *Raghba Faqat* (*Just a Desire*), your short story "Dawāʾir" ("Circles") captures a moment of discomfort when the narrator is described as a "women's column writer." This moment seems to echo the reservations that many Moroccan and Arab women writers have about being classified as "women writers." How do you personally relate to this categorization?

LL: You've reminded me of this story; I had almost forgotten it. A long time has passed, and I no longer return to that collection often. It was my first collection, and the first always carries a particular intimacy. It is the initial spark, the first work I not only wrote but also published.

I will say something perhaps amusing. When I published that collection, there was a kind of boldness in it, especially in how it approached the relationship between women and the body. On the very night it was released, I could not sleep. I remember wishing that the next morning I could go and collect all the copies from the bookstores. My first fear was my father. I thought, "My father reads literature. What would he say if he read this?" Then I feared others, their gazes, and their judgments.

Gradually, I became accustomed to this. I later realized that my father reads many of my texts, yet he never commented or questioned me. On the contrary, he takes pride in the fact that his daughter writes literature. Your question brought all of this back to me.

As for the feminist label, it does not bother me in itself. What matters to me is the distinction between feminism and women's criticism. There is a difference. Some expressions of feminism, in my view, can take on a more extreme form. At times, it becomes a radical liberation movement that rejects what is considered natural: motherhood, relationships with men, and the lived roles of women in their everyday complexity. For me, this vision is reductive.

I see women as both natural and cultural beings, situated at the intersection of these two worlds. From this perspective, women's criticism, rather than feminism as ideology, has achieved important developments. It introduced significant shifts in how we read heritage and history by revisiting them critically and questioning dominant masculine discourse. This, for me, is intellectual work rather than ideological positioning.

In the Arab world, there are diverse experiences in this field. Scholars such as Shereen Abou El-Naga have explored what she calls "the effect of difference." She calls for an alternative women's discourse that is not built on ideological rigidity. There is a desire for another critical language, but not one that is shaped by harshness or exclusion.

I personally object to this severity. Without a genuine intermingling between the natural and the cultural, meaning cannot be produced. Human emotions are indivisible. They cannot be fragmented or categorized without loss. Writing, for me, must remain attentive to this complexity rather than confined within rigid labels.

IB: Your reflections sometimes recall Hélène Cixous's notion of "bisexual writing," a mode that resists fixed masculine or feminine positions. Do you feel affinities with Cixous's thinking, or does the Moroccan cultural and linguistic context produce a different form of gender ambiguity in writing?

LL: In truth, I have approached the question of women's writing primarily as a critical and methodological issue. When I worked on women's autobiography, for example, I sought to show that there are shared elements in women's writing, recurring axes and concerns, but this does not mean that women's experiences or voices are identical. In my own case, I view my work as bringing together two worlds, often described as the masculine and the feminine worlds, in a kind of interweaving between them.

This brings to mind the work of Hélène Cixous, whose critical practice attempted to inhabit and combine these two worlds. She worked to dismantle inherited histories of language and discourse in her own way. A text such as "The Laugh of the Medusa" is particularly resonant in this regard. Medusa, mythologically, is known as the beautiful woman transformed into a curse, whose gaze turns others to stone. Cixous reclaims this figure and rewrites it from within.

This also reminds me, in another register, of Milan Kundera's *Identity*, where the female character draws men into a kind of trap, as though her identity could only be defined through the rhythm of the male gaze or desire. Even there, identity remains unstable, relational, and constructed through others.

In the Arab world, and in Morocco in particular, I would point to the experience of Fatima Mernissi, whose work deconstructed dominant religious discourses and their interpretations,

and revealed how they marginalized many perspectives. Her work remains foundational. We can also mention figures such as Halim Barakat and Ghita El Khayat, among others, who contributed to more mature representations of women in Arab cultural production.
For me, these experiences confirm that writing today often involves a blending of multiple worlds. There is an interweaving of realism and imagination, of what is called magical realism and lived reality, with imagination functioning as an integral part of the work. In *Ṭayf Sabība* in particular, there is an invitation to imagine certain worlds, because autism itself sometimes exceeds what we conventionally define as reality. In some cases, it is imagination in itself.

IB: You often move between creative writing and literary criticism. In your critical work, *Al-Jins Al-Multabis* (*The Ambiguous Gender)*, you distinguish between a self-aware feminine identity and a literary feminine identity that slips into the text through the unconscious. Could you explain how this distinction operates within your own narrative practice?
LL: My own experience of writing is, in truth, an act of creation that brings together two distinct but inseparable worlds. I cannot say that when I write, I simply put on the page everything I have already arranged in my mind. My understanding of writing itself has evolved over the years, especially in how I view the act of creation.

At the beginning, I believed I had to wait for inspiration, that spark often associated with poets, a kind of inner "genius" that arrives unexpectedly. All these ideas exist, of course. But over time, I realized that creativity is not only inspiration that descends upon us. It can also be something that is made. Alongside talent, there is craft. Sometimes we must move toward the work ourselves, and through this movement, a particular experience unfolds.

I will give you a concrete example. When I wanted to write about a small insect, the ladybird, I encountered it in my short story collection *ʿInāq (Embrace)*. Before writing, I read extensively about the ladybird; its role in agriculture, its symbolic relationship with reproduction, and its presence in songs, poems, and folklore. There is even a legend in which a ladybird prevents the execution of an innocent person by landing on the execution tool. All of this knowledge surrounded the insect.

I absorbed these elements, then set them aside, and allowed them to merge with the idea that my female protagonist resembled this ladybird. She collected insects and placed them in containers. I even used the English term *ladybird*, which appears translated online. What I am describing here is part of the internal writing workshop, what I call "the inner kitchen." This is craft. Creativity is not only spontaneous; it also involves conscious work. When an idea arrives, it needs to be nourished with knowledge, and that knowledge must quietly enrich the text.

This knowledge does not appear as exposition. It unfolds through symbols and signs. The ordinary reader may not immediately notice it, but the experienced reader will sense the layers beneath the surface.

There is also a second stage. Initially, the text emerges spontaneously and almost unconsciously. When I write, many things pass through the discourse without my full awareness. But when I decide to publish a text, I revise it. Revision belongs to the second degree of writing. The first act of creation happens in its rawness, its rebellion, even its foolishness. The unconscious speaks freely at this stage.

When I reread and rewrite, I sometimes discover that unconscious elements have slipped into the text, things I did not intentionally place there and might not wish to keep. Yet they appear nonetheless. In such moments, it is not the writer who is responsible for them, but the act of writing itself. Writing carries its own logic, beyond the author's conscious control.

This is where the distinction becomes clear: between a self-aware identity and a literary identity that emerges through language, imagination, and the unconscious. In narrative practice, these two dimensions constantly intersect, negotiate, and reshape one another.

IB: In much of your writing, the room appears as a symbolic and psychological space, sometimes as refuge, sometimes as confinement. In *Ṭayf Sabība*, Raji has his own room, which reflects his particular perception of the world. Can the room also be read as the mind itself, a space where identity sometimes dissolves to be reconfigured anew?
LL: These are wonderful questions. In fact, you reminded me of *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa (It Happens in That Room)*, and you are absolutely right. Since I began writing, I have been writing about rooms. Perhaps the room is the closest space to girls and women; perhaps it is the most intimate one.

From the beginning, the room has been a constant presence in my writing. What I discovered later, even before writing *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa*, is that it was not only the room that preoccupied me, but also the figure of the neighbor. I realized that the neighbor has not been sufficiently explored in literary criticism, yet this character appears repeatedly in my texts. I asked myself why this was so. Perhaps because we remain close to home for long periods of our lives, we know our neighbors very well, whether as friends or adversaries. In my writing, the neighbor can be both.

So yes, the room can be read as the mind. A space of repetition, protection, and constraint, but also a space where identity is patiently reorganized, piece by piece, until it finds another form of expression.

IB: Many moments in *Ṭayf Sabība* show Heba animating objects or reshaping reality, a strategy that also appears in works such as *Kūfīd al-Ṣaghīr (The Little Covid)* and *Raghba Faqat (Just a Desire)*. Sabiba, the toy Heba creates, becomes a central character and symbolic thread throughout the book. How was Sabiba born in your imagination?
LL: Someone once told me that they wished there had been another part where we could read Raji's own imagination. But for me, this was extremely difficult. It is very hard to transmit, through my own voice, how he imagines the world. I can imagine it, yes, but can I truly inhabit it with precision? Perhaps literature can approach such spaces, but only in its own way. This is why Heba becomes essential. Through her astonishment, at her age, she conveys the transformations that take place in Raji.

This brings me to the question of symbolism. Why did I choose this particular form? Before I began writing the novel, I was searching for an object that could connect the family to Raji. I observed that many children, especially children with autism, become deeply attached to something: a doll, a toy, an object, sometimes even a stone or a piece of metal. They repeat gestures with this object every day. Repetition is central.

I wanted to focus on repetition not only as a limitation but also as a possibility. The doll that became the link between Raji and his family is dismantled and then re-stitched. Raji tears it apart and reassembles it. His mother notices that he is training himself through this act, so she brings him more materials. He begins producing many figures that resemble Sabiba until Sabiba disappears among them. There are now many similar faces.

The symbolism here is clear: there are multiple spectrums of autism, and we must recognize this plurality. What appears as obsessive repetition can also become a form of production, of creation, of skill.

During my visits to different centers, I saw practices that left a strong impression on me, for instance, children making necklaces, often in black and white, and refusing other colors. Even

when offered different colors, they would say that they liked only those two. This is a way of seeing the world.

I brought this into the novel. I made Raji place nine white beads, then move to the black ones, refusing the number ten. This detail was imagined. It was not something I witnessed directly, but it was inspired by repeated patterns I encountered. These details may seem strange, but they are deeply fertile for imagination and writing.

IB: *Ṭayf Sabība* repeatedly engages with the idea of *idmaj* (integration), particularly within schools and everyday social life. How do you perceive the current state of social and educational inclusion for autistic children in Morocco? And how did literature allow you to imagine forms of inclusion where reality often falls short?

LL: The text begins with astonishment, an initial moment of awareness, before moving into a series of impasses. Many of these are linked to language and learning, since linguistic expression is not easy. Others are more deeply connected to social integration, especially within schools, where inclusion remains extremely rare. Many schools still refuse to accept children with this kind of disability. I observed numerous cases closely, where children were straightforwardly rejected. This reality compelled me to shed light on the question of *idmaj* or integration into social life.

Integration is difficult because these children experience the world differently. The question then becomes: how do we integrate them? How do we learn to understand their world? And perhaps we must also accept that, from their perspective, we are the ones who appear different. They imagine and perceive reality according to their own internal logic.

For this reason, the novel traces a gradual process of transformation, not only through imagination but also through lived experience. We witness changes in Raji's behavior over time: through drawing, learning small things, memorizing numbers, adjusting daily habits, and gradually engaging in new activities. His young mind begins to process the world differently, step by step.

At the same time, Hiba manages to send a message to the other children through the doll, Sabiba. The doll accompanies Raji even to school, where it initially becomes a tool for bullying. The children mock him through it. Yet the very same object is later reactivated in a different way to restore Raji's dignity.

Sabiba becomes the one who delivers the message. We know, of course, that a doll cannot speak. But in literature, everything can speak. Animals speak, and so do objects; literature grants voice to what is silent. This is why the message needed to pass through a gentle, indirect path, one that opens another possibility for communication.

Through Sabiba, Hiba addresses the other children. She tells them that Raji is different, asks them to understand how much his family has endured, and invites them to recognize these realities as part of the world they share. The message is not accusatory; it is invitational. It asks for recognition, empathy, and inclusion.

In this sense, literature allowed me to imagine forms of integration that reality often fails to provide. Where institutions reject, the text opens a space. Where language falters, symbols speak. And where exclusion dominates, storytelling offers a different way of seeing, understanding, and ultimately accepting difference.

IB: You have taught art history and written on the Orientalist painter Ludwig Deutsch. In your short story "Ismī Fān Kūkh" ("My Name Is Van Gogh") in *Yahduthu fī Tilka al-Ghurfa (It Happens in That Room)*, a child turns to painting after failing to find himself reflected in his mother's gaze. In *Ṭayf Sabība*, we sense a similar movement as Raji reshapes his world through

art, by fragmenting and reassembling Sabiba or multiplying her into new figures. Do you see art, across your work, as a way of rebuilding the self when reality or the social gaze fails to recognize it fully or in time?

LL: I worked on the Austrian–French Orientalist painter Ludwig Deutsch. What fascinated me was not only his work, but also his life, particularly his chosen isolation. He disliked exhibitions and public appearances and lived in a kind of seclusion. This solitude fascinated me deeply, and I wrote a text about it titled "The Solitude of Ludwig Deutsch," included in *The Little Covid*. In that text, I imagined a researcher who travels to Cairo during the pandemic to search for documents related to this painter. She becomes stranded there and begins to imagine that Deutsch is following her. At times, she even tries to complete unfinished paintings of his, including one titled "The Woman of Life." She says, "I am the woman of life, the one he loved but who arrived too late."

I taught visual art for many years, and it had a profound influence on me. This influence appears clearly in the story you mentioned, "My Name Is Van Gogh." Van Gogh himself carries a powerful narrative, perhaps not entirely factual, but symbolically rich. He was given the name of his deceased brother, and it is said that his mother never truly looked at him, but rather at the absent child. He says, "My mother looks at me, but she does not see me. She touches me, but she sees the other." This absence pushed him to paint his face repeatedly, to inscribe his existence through repetition. Paradoxically, it was only after his death that his identity became undeniable. I was also influenced by artists such as Frida Kahlo, who recreated herself through painting during long periods of physical confinement.

In *Ṭayf Sabība*, Raji needed to turn toward drawing. Many children on the autism spectrum are drawn to art. When a child perceives a day as blue or red, readers may say this is fantasy. But in fact, some individuals on the autism spectrum genuinely perceive days as colors. This is not magical realism in the conventional sense. It is a lived reality that appears imaginary only because it is unfamiliar to us. In this sense, it is more real than what we usually call realism.
So yes, for me, art is precisely that: a way of rebuilding the self when reality or the social gaze fails to reflect it. Through art, the self can reappear, take form, and insist on its right to exist.

IB: Speaking of colors, you mentioned in a previous interview that the color blue dominated much of your earlier work. In *Ṭayf Sabība*, however, yellow becomes the prevailing color. What does this symbolic shift in color signify for you?

LL: In truth, I have changed my colors. I remember a novel I read long ago by Halim Barakat, in which he reflects on the idea that a narrative about the relationship between men and women is often confined within a fixed duality. He speaks of the relationship remaining trapped between the string and the arrow, the string as something sensitive and taut, the arrow as something that strikes and wounds. Why, he asks, must the relationship remain imprisoned within this binary? Why should it not move beyond it?

I changed my colors in a similar way. Even in everyday life, colors shift. During the COVID period, for instance, we saw how certain colors suddenly dominated our surroundings: red, gray, pink. These colors reshaped our emotional relationship with the world. In one of Halim Barakat's novels, the female character tells the male protagonist, "You killed me and changed my colors." The act of violence alters her entire way of perceiving life.

In my own writing, blue dominated many of my earlier works. At first, I was deeply attached to this color. But over time, I moved away from it. In *Ṭayf Sabība* in particular, yellow takes center stage. This color carries multiple meanings for me. It symbolizes pallor, fragility, and unease. It also reflects the disturbances associated with autism, a sense of imbalance, heightened sensitivity, and exposure.

So, this shift was not accidental. Changing color was part of changing perspective, changing emotional temperature, and allowing the text to inhabit a different sensory world. In this novel, yellow is not only brightness. It is also vulnerability, tension, and a form of quiet alertness. It was the color that the text itself demanded.

IB: Looking back at your creative trajectory today, what do you think defines Latifa Labsir's voice and message as a writer?
LL: In truth, I believe that voice and message are ultimately defined by readers. We write, but others engage with our writing in their own ways. The reception itself adds many layers to the text. Reader-response theories have contributed significantly to this understanding, particularly the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, who introduced concepts such as "the horizon of expectations" and "the implied reader."

The implied reader, in particular, is essential to creativity. When you write, even from the first sentence, you are already shaping a path for this reader. The opening line implicitly establishes a mode of reading, a direction. For me, creativity has always been tied to moments of transformation in literary history, moments that produced qualitative shifts in how writing was imagined and practiced.

We can see this clearly in works that unsettled readers from their very first lines. In short fiction and the novella, for instance, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* opens with a radical transformation: a man wakes up to find himself turned into a giant insect. From the first sentence, the reader asks why this happened. On the surface, the event appears fantastic and strange, but at a deeper level, it reflects what happens to a person when they become a burden and are reduced to excess and expelled from social usefulness.

All creative transformations operate through such moments. They unsettle expectations and open new interpretive spaces. If there is something that defines my writing, perhaps it lies here: in this movement between worlds, between silence and speech, between knowledge and imagination, and between the self and the other. Writing becomes a form of translation, not one that offers answers, but one that creates paths for readers to walk, question, and reshape meaning for themselves.