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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Ahdad traces her storytelling roots to her family's Amazigh oral heritage and describes how that inherited orality presses on her written Arabic prose. She reflects on the impact of her journalistic background, her character-driven writing discipline, and the central role of female solidarity in novels such as *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*) and *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*). Challenging the trope of female rivalry, Ahdad frames patriarchy as the central adversary in her work. The discussion also addresses the balance between realism and social critique, her deliberate choice of Arabic over French or English, the possibilities of translation, as well as the digital demands on contemporary writers. Throughout the interview, Ahdad explains that authentic local storytelling serves as a vital tool for survival and universal human connection.

KEYWORDS

Moroccan Literature

Female Solidarity

Social Realism

Patriarchy

Arabic Fiction

This interview was conducted in English.



About Karima Ahdad: Karima Ahdad is a novelist and former journalist from Al Hoceima, in the Rif region of northern Morocco. She studied print journalism at the Higher Institute of Information and Communication in Rabat and worked for Moroccan newspapers and online platforms before leaving the field for literature. Her works include three novels: *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*, 2018), *Ḥulm Turkī* (*A Turkish Dream*, 2021), and *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*, 2024), and several short story collections. Ahdad's latest works include another short story collection titled *Jurhun Asfala al-Batn* (*A Wound in the Lower Belly*, 2026). She won the Moroccan Writers' Union Prize for Young Writers in 2016 for her first short story collection, and her work has appeared in English, Spanish, and Slovenian.

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Imane Derrazi: How did your journey as a writer begin? Was it a dream you had since you were a child, or was it an ambition that grew over time?

Karima Ahdad: I began writing at a young age. At the time, it wasn't a dream or an ambition, but rather an instinctive outpouring of feelings, images, and stories that stirred within me. I found myself putting them into words in an old school notebook on the rooftop of our home in Al Hoceima. Perhaps I was influenced by the stories I heard from my grandmothers and the women around me, as well as the children's books I read. Or perhaps a love of storytelling is something inherited in our family. My mother, my grandmothers, and the women in our family are all gifted storytellers who cherish stories, each in her own way.

Over time, my love for storytelling grew and gradually evolved from the oral to the written. I began reading books and novels, discovering different literary forms along the way. During my teenage years, I started dreaming of becoming a writer. I wrote long pieces, though I'm not sure whether to call them long stories or short novels, before turning to short fiction, and eventually entering the vast and fascinating world of the novel.

ID: How has your career in journalism influenced the way you observe, research, and craft your fiction?

KA: I wouldn't say that journalism shaped my path as a writer, because I chose journalism in the first place out of my love for writing and my belief that it was the field closest to it. I even specialized in print journalism during my studies at the Higher Institute of Information and Communication in Rabat, and I worked for Moroccan newspapers and online platforms, focusing on major journalistic genres that allow for a certain degree of literary skill, such as reportage, profiles, interviews, and analytical articles.

At the same time, a writer is inevitably influenced by the experiences they go through, the people they encounter, and the things they see and hear. These details can find their way into their writing, consciously or not. Since I write realist literature, my experience as a journalist—going out into the field, traveling to different regions to produce reportages, interviewing various individuals, and writing profiles about them—has likely added depth and richness to my work.

The paradox is that journalism, at least in my own experience, is exhausting and consuming. That is why I decided to leave the field and focus my creative and writing efforts on literature.

ID: What was the definitive spark that launched your journey as a novelist, and how do you feel your creative voice has evolved from *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*) to *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*)?

KA: Winning the Moroccan Writers' Union Prize for Young Writers in 2016 for my first short story collection was my first real push as a writer. It brought me out of a dark room where I used to write alone, with only my friends and relatives as readers, into the light, into a wider circle of readers. I still remember the sense of pride I felt seeing my name on the cover of a book, but also the sense of responsibility: a responsibility toward myself, as a writer who must continue on this path.

In 2018, I published my novel *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, which I consider the true turning point in my journey as a writer. I felt supported by established and renowned writers who read the novel with care and encouraged me to publish it. It was, of course, my first experience in novel writing, and I believe that writing novels is something that is refined through continuous work, reading, and lived experience. It is always evolving. What I have never abandoned in my writing,

from *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* to *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, and what I later came to realize as its essence, is sincerity, along with a constant desire to learn and grow.

ID: You have been remarkably prolific, publishing three novels and several short stories within seven years. Could you reflect on your writing discipline? Do you maintain a structured routine, or do you prefer to write in response to moments of inspiration?
KA: I wake up every day at six in the morning, sometimes a little before or after, to write. I write consistently, even when I don't feel inspired, and I read constantly, even if it's just ten or twenty pages a day. Neither work, nor obligations, nor difficulties have ever stopped me from writing. I deeply believe that discipline is the only way for a person to become a writer.

ID: When starting a new work, do you meticulously map out the plot and character arcs, or do you allow the narrative to unfold organically as you write?
KA: I always begin with an outline, especially when it comes to a novel, but I often stray from it. Once the characters fully take shape, they begin to take control of their own destinies, leading me to places I never expected and territories I have not personally experienced. Storytelling is a process of discovery. Let's say, then, that I create an outline in order to begin writing, but once I start walking along its mysterious and winding path, I don't know whether I'll encounter a bear or a snake, or find a breathtaking garden unlike anything I've ever seen before.

ID: Across your three novels, female relationships seem to form the primary axis of the story; brothers and father figures are often peripheral or absent. Is that a conscious structural decision, and what does centering those female-only spaces let you do that a more mixed dynamic would not?
KA: I grew up surrounded by women. I have seven sisters, and in my family, women were storytellers who loved telling stories. They taught me this passion, or perhaps I inherited it from them. I always had the impression that what is written about women is often far removed from their real worlds, from what they share among themselves, and from their inner lives and experiences. Moreover, I am, first and foremost, a woman and a writer deeply drawn to realist literature; I write about what I know. It feels only natural, then, that I write about women's experiences from my position as a woman.

Men are not absent from my work—quite the opposite. They are present even in their absence, powerfully and profoundly, through the impact that absence leaves on women's inner lives. In *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, for instance, the father dies at the beginning of the story; he is physically absent throughout, yet he remains present through memory and through the effect of his absence on the lives of his wife and daughters. In *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, there are prominent male characters, such as Saad, Sheherazade's husband, as well as the publisher she works with, among others. The father is absent here as well, having died when Sheherazade was seven, yet his profound influence on his daughter continues to shape her and reappears throughout the novel as she remembers him.

There is another point I would like to make in this regard: men are rarely asked why they choose male or even female protagonists in their works, whereas we, as women, are constantly questioned about this choice, as though we must prove that what we write is worthy of being considered literature.

ID: Your writing vividly captures lived realities and broader social experiences. Do you view fiction primarily as a mirror of reality? Beyond reflecting society, how can literature actively intervene in or reshape those realities?
KA: Of course, literature is a mirror of reality, but it is equally a reflection of history. We do not remember what politicians and rulers said about people centuries ago, but we do remember what stories and narratives said about them. Political statements, slogans, and falsehoods disappear, while literature and stories endure. Through them, we come to know the concerns of people in the past, their dreams and their suffering.

How do we understand life in nineteenth-century Russia? What about France? What do we know about the lives and hardships people endured after the French Revolution? Aren't the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Victor Hugo the very images we carry of those periods in history?

ID: Coming from a conservative Riffian background, how do you navigate the "freedom of the pen" when addressing sensitive topics such as the body, sexuality, and patriarchal constraints?
KA: I believe that freedom is one of the fundamental pillars of writing, the freedom to think, to create, and to imagine. When I write, I do not think of anyone, and I try as much as possible not to impose self-censorship on myself. Not thinking of an imagined reader is, of course, no easy task; I don't believe there is any writer who does not, at some point, consider how readers might judge their work, whether it will be good enough or not. A good writer is, by necessity, someone who doubts themselves and constantly reexamines their work. Yet this should not overshadow a deeper, essential belief in the necessity of writing in one's life. Honest writing that fears nothing, writing that unsettles, that disturbs, and that digs into the deepest wounds.

ID: Themes of patriarchy, inheritance, and displacement feature prominently across your body of work. How do you balance the drive for social critique with the need to maintain a compelling, artistic narrative?
KA: We do not write novels with the aim of changing the world or advocating for specific causes. Yet, by telling a story rooted in reality, we inevitably engage with themes and issues that touch human life in both its simple and complex forms. For instance, in *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, I tell the story of a family of women, a mother and her daughters, after the death of the father, their sole provider. The novel portrays how this family becomes vulnerable to displacement due to laws that grant the deceased's brothers a share of the inheritance when the deceased leaves only daughters.

As you've noticed, this issue remains a sensitive and widely debated one in Moroccan society. However, conveying it through a story, through the voices of these women, from their perspectives, within a literary and creative text, gives it different dimensions. It grants it a power that other forms of discourse may not possess: the power of empathy.

For me, then, the novel, and storytelling more broadly, has a deeper role than merely providing entertainment or advocating for specific causes. It is about creating empathy between human beings.

ID: Your latest short story, "A Slender Thorn Digs Deep into My Foot," offers a poignant portrayal of Alzheimer's. What does the short story form allow you to explore that a novel might not? Are there themes or subjects you feel are better suited to one form rather than the other?
KA: I feel that the short story is sharper than the novel, precisely because it is shorter. Its sentences must be more powerful, condensed, and precise. It says many things within a very

limited space. In my case, I don't consciously choose whether a subject is better suited to a novel or a short story; rather, the nature of the idea itself determines the most fitting form.

In "A Slender Thorn Digs Deep into My Foot," I knew from the beginning that I wanted to write a short story. The idea came like a spark of inspiration, and I found myself writing and completing it in a single sitting.

In the short story, the narrative time span is not very long, and there are not many characters. Every sentence and every word must contribute strongly to the progression of the story and the development of the character. A novel, on the other hand, can unfold over a long period of time and can involve many characters shaping its development.

I am currently writing a novel set in Al Hoceima across two different time periods, the 1950s and the early 2000s. It tells the story of two girls from different generations, but it is also a portrait of the city across these periods. I don't think I could achieve this in a short story, because I need a wide space to build my world and make it convincing and cohesive for a reader who may know nothing about this city, its social and historical richness, the hardships it has gone through, and the ways it can intersect with other marginalized regions of the world.

ID: In *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, you delve deeply into the psychological struggles of Sheherazade. Why did you choose this iconic name, and what are the implications of invoking the *One Thousand and One Nights* legacy in a modern, psychological context?
KA: Sheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights* told stories to save herself from Shahryar, to stay alive. But Sheherazade in *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* tells her story to save herself from herself, from her psychological struggles, her failures and frustrations, from corruption, and from the judgments of society.

In my own life, storytelling has always been synonymous with survival. The women I grew up among, simple women, turned to it, perhaps unconsciously, as a way to preserve their culture from disappearance. Amazigh women, and Moroccan women more broadly, have safeguarded their cultural heritage through storytelling and oral narratives. They told stories to survive their reality, to live, and to endure forever.

ID: Beyond Sheherazade, how do you select the names for your characters? Do they carry symbolic weight, or are they chosen to reflect a specific social realism?
KA: I always choose the names of my characters carefully, as part of the elements that reflect the geographical and cultural setting of the story. In *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, for example, the mother's name is Louiza, a name common in the Rif region, particularly in Al Hoceima, among a certain generation of women. I have never, for instance, heard this name in Casablanca, which is why I would not have chosen it for Sheherazade, the protagonist of *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*, whose story takes place in Casablanca.

I believe that character names are an important element in achieving cohesion and realism in a story.

ID: Besides their names, your characters are often described as "sharp and real." What is your process for crafting characters with such sensory depth that the reader can visualize, see, and hear them so clearly?
KA: As I mentioned earlier, characters grow and develop as the story unfolds. Once they are fully formed, it becomes difficult for me to control them because they begin to act according to their own instincts, responding in ways that align with the overall logical arc of their story. If a fictional character is well-built and cohesive, they become realistic and convincing to the reader, even if the reader disagrees with their ideas, actions, or viewpoints. In fact, the reader may even empathize with them, understand them, and accept their behavior, choices, and mistakes.

ID: Women's writing is often unfairly reduced to "fictional biography" or a mere extension of the author's life. What is your take on this association? How much of your work is an extraction of self versus a construction of "the other"?
KA: This is merely a way to cast doubt on women's ability for creativity and imagination. But those who make such claims do not realize that autobiography is a literary genre that also requires imagination and creativity! I no longer feel the need to defend myself when asked whether my novels relate to my life, nor do I feel ashamed that I draw inspiration for my stories, themes, ideas, and narrative seeds from my own life, reality, past, and memory. On the contrary, I feel proud that writing makes it impossible to distinguish between reality and imagination, between what actually happened and what did not.

This is something I myself am never entirely sure of. I believe there are things I have written, thinking they sprang purely from imagination, that actually happened and remained lodged in my subconscious and deep memory. That, for me, is the magic of writing.

ID: In *Banāt al-Ṣabbār*, there is no "Hollywood ending"; redemption instead emerges through sisterhood and mutual support. How do you approach the theme of sisterhood and female relationships in your work?
KA: There is a common belief that "women are women's enemies," implying that women harbor feelings of hatred, envy, or malice toward one another, and that they undermine themselves and each other. In my view, this statement is not only incorrect but also dangerous, because it distorts reality and misrepresents the truth.

The truth, as I have observed in my own life and in the environment where I grew up, is that women, even the simplest, most uneducated, and poorest among them, stood in solidarity with one another in critical moments and helped each other in times of difficulty. When a woman gave birth, neighbors and family women would rush to her aid and prepare meals for her. When a woman fell ill, it was entirely natural for neighbors to come help with cleaning and childcare. My grandmother, who spent much of her life in the village, fought for my sisters and me to have the right to education, and the women in my family sympathized with one another in pain, grief, and death, or when they were wronged by their husbands or fathers.

I grew up hearing claims that women enjoy harassment or even seek it to feel desired. This idea shocked me, because I have never met a woman who wants to be harassed. Women always showed understanding toward one another in these situations, and often defended each other when such incidents occurred.

A woman's enemy is not another woman; it is the patriarchal mindset, which both men and women can internalize. It is the same mentality that tries to distort reality and replace it with cheap, stereotypical images.

ID: What informed your decision to write primarily in Arabic? How does the language shape the nuances of the Moroccan stories you tell?
KA: Arabic was the first language I learned after my mother tongue, Amazigh. Of course, when I was in school, Amazigh had not yet become an official language, so it was only the language of conversation, of the streets, and of oral storytelling. I learned to write for the first time in Arabic, and it was through Arabic that I discovered literature. Although I later learned French and English, mastered them, and read extensively in them, Arabic had already chosen me, and that was that.

I do not, of course, think in only one language; I think in all the languages I know, and then I translate them into Arabic, which, with its richness and beauty, allows me to express all the languages within me, the languages through which I learned about life.

ID: Excerpts of your work have already appeared in English, Spanish, and Slovenian. What is it like to read your own sentences rearranged in another language, and are there full translations currently in progress?
KA: It is an incredible feeling for a writer to sense that their readership is expanding to include other parts of the world, other cultures. Every reader adds something to the text through their reading, understanding, and perception, so imagine what it means when that reader comes from a completely different culture, from a distant part of the world. It is a unique experience.
Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra is now being translated into Slovenian by the wonderful translator Barbara Skubic, and it will be published this year by the Slovenian publishing house Hirondelle.

ID: As an active author on social media, how do you think those platforms contribute to promoting literary works and helping them reach a wider audience?
KA: I always say that these platforms are a double-edged sword. On one hand, they can help promote literary works by spreading them to wider audiences and reaching a larger base of readers among their users. On the other hand, they can become a maze, posing yet another challenge. Creating content about books for social media requires a writer to devote part of their time to producing this material, which may not receive the attention it hopes for, or may be swallowed by the fast-paced, consumptive nature of these platforms.

Here I raise an important question: Is a writer obliged to focus solely on their literary production, or should they dive into these platforms with all the effort, competitiveness, and speed in creation and publication that they demand? Doesn't this pace conflict with the very nature of literary work, which calls for patience and reflection?

ID: How do you perceive the current state of the literary space in Morocco? Which local writers, past or present, have had the most profound impact on your own work?
KA: I have read many Moroccan authors, and their works have profoundly influenced me. To name just a few: Fatima Mernissi, Mohammed Choukri, Abdelkader Chaoui, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Malika Moustadraf, and Mohammed Zafzaf.

ID: While your work is deeply rooted in Morocco, the struggles of your characters resonate globally. Do you write with a specific local audience in mind, or are you addressing a universal female experience?
KA: I always say that a writer must start from the local in order to reach the universal. Our human pains, dreams, and fears are the same, no matter where we are in the world. We all seek love, and we all fear death and the unknown. This is the essential function of literature: it connects us to others, no matter how different they are from us. The situation of women is just one of these representations. Patriarchal mindsets, gender discrimination, and the struggle for women's rights and dignity are universal issues. Morocco is no different from France, America, or Japan in this regard.

I have read the novels of Elfriede Jelinek and found myself in them, even though they explore the condition of women in twentieth-century Austrian society. I have also found myself in the writings of Erica Jong, who writes about American society. The temporal and geographical contexts, of course, differ, as do the details and perhaps even the intensity, but the suffering and aspirations remain the same.

ID: Your new short story collection, *Jurhun Asfala al-Batn* (*A Wound in the Lower Belly*), has just appeared with Almutawassit Publications in Italy and was recently showcased at the Rabat International Book Fair. The title points to a wound that is intimate, bodily, and hidden from view. What binds the stories of this collection together, and why did you return to the short story after three novels? Does this book mark a shift in your concerns, or does it dig deeper into the wounds you have been writing about all along?

KA: *Jurhun Asfala al-Batn* is a phrase borrowed from one of the stories in the collection, the one that gives the book its title, but it captures the atmosphere of the whole text. It is the thread that ties all the stories together, because at their core these are stories about humanity's first wound: the wound of birth. The wound of coming into this world, and the wound of bringing others into it, this vast, complicated, frightening world.

Birth is never merely a biological event. It can leave scars on the soul that never heal, and that is the spirit running through these stories. Beyond that, the collection takes up other concerns as well, through the lives of women bound together by a grinding search for their own identity and for some meaning to their lives, in a society that swings between clinging to the old customs and longing for modern ways of living, with all the freedom and individuality those promise.

As always, I worked in a register that joins realism to irony, in order to bring out the estrangement of the individual in our contemporary world, and to go down into the strangeness and complexity of the human soul.