

# Raysa Fatima Taba'mrante

## Poetry Has a Melody

Interview by Julia Varley

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*You are a well known Berber singer and dancer. You live and work in Morocco, and sometimes tour Europe. How did you start your career?*

My mother died when I was three years old and from the age of twelve, I used poetry as a means of overcoming my sorrow. I did not think of becoming a singer. Although my father is still alive, I feel like an orphan and one of the subjects I was most interested in at that time was orphans. A mother's place can never be taken by anyone else.

*Do you remember your first poem?*

[Fatima sings] I am sad, I cry because I have lost my mother, I do not have an image of her waist or of her face...

*You started at twelve by declaiming poetry, normally your mother would have taught you. How did you learn to make poetry and sing?*

I don't think that poetry can be learned. Our poetry has a melody. When the words and the melody go together it is good. First I need to explain how I passed from my family of origin to an artistic family. In our country, a woman who enters the field of art is not well looked upon. My father even wanted to kill me, when he heard I frequented an environment of artists. The field of song is traditionally male. Women are always in second place, relegated to chorus roles or dance. I wanted to challenge this situation and impose myself as a poet singer and composer of my own songs. I have now managed to do this, but first I had to fight against my family and detach myself from them in order to sing. I ran away and left home for seven years. After I had made some recordings, been on the radio and become famous, my family accepted me as a singer and member

of the family again.

*How did you run away?*

I was interested in poetry, but I had no idea how to start singing and join a family of singers. I liked to listen to them so I knew them, but it was difficult to meet them directly and have the opportunity to work in that field.

I left one night, leaving my father and my home. I had been married before. My aunt had arranged the marriage. I was not happy with it so I let it fall apart. I had returned to my father's house during a holiday saying that I would not return to my conjugal home. To run away, I took advantage of a time when my father's wife had gone on a family visit and I was alone with my father. The idea had only come to me the same evening when my father let me understand that his wife and son had left the house because of me.

I was accused of breaking up my marriage, even though it was not my fault. I decided I wanted to leave. I thought of kissing my father good-bye, but I was afraid that he would wake up and hold me back. So I left without saying good-bye and left my house keys by my father's head.

I went to see a woman who moved in between my village and Tiznit, a town not far away. She took me there, and I started to work as a maid with some teachers with this woman's recommendation.

*How old were you?*

I left in 1981, and I was born in 1962, so I was nineteen.

*Did you have any children?*

No, but I was pregnant when I left home. The people I worked with had relations in

Agadir, so I travelled from Tiznit to Agadir. The family there had some daughters who liked being with me in the kitchen, because I used to sing to them while working. I would cry every time I had to go to Tiznit, so the girls would stop me. They accepted me as part of the family and kept me in Agadir.

I knew a woman who visited that family who worked with a very well known male singer in Morocco, called Rays Jamâ El Hamidi. Rays means director of a music troupe and an itinerant singer for the Berber people in South Morocco. One day she could not accompany the singer and he asked her to find another young woman who could go instead. She asked me. I did not have a costume, but the woman told me not to worry because the troupe would be provided with costumes.

When I returned home after the evening with the singer, the family did not want me anymore. It was all right that I sang in the kitchen, but not outside the house. A woman who sings and dances publicly has a bad reputation. Then I went to live with the woman who had got me the job and I started mixing with different kinds of people. Hamidi's troupe already had a female singer, so I could work with them as a dancer in respect of her seniority.

While I stayed with the woman, I gave birth to my first child. The father already had other children and he lived very far away from where I was. I had left the village without even asking for a divorce. I did not care to have papers, I was not worried by this.

Keeping my child was problematic when they called me to go to work. I had to leave my daughter with some milk and food, with a woman who looked after many other children. I earned our living with dance.

*Had you studied dance?*

The dances belong to the village feasts, they

originate from collective peasant dances and everyone knows them. Children always dance these dances, they learn from observation, there is no apprenticeship.

Later I worked for another great singer, Said Achtouk. But just as before, the troupe already had a female singer, so I was obliged to keep to a secondary role. I was still not able to do what I was really interested in. I waited.

By chance, another well known singer called Moulay Mohamed Belfqih had to go to a wedding and he needed women. He called me. For the first time I had the possibility of being a singer in a wedding and not just a dancer. When Moulay Belfqih heard me sing, he asked me if I wanted to make a "poetical duel" with him. The Rways (plural of Rays) have a tradition of making poetical duels, games in verse, during which one singer says something and the other answers.

*Is it normal to have a man and a woman doing this together?*

The man praises the men and the woman praises the women. There is a kind of competition and if the woman is a better singer, then women are better than men!

For the duel, we have the men's and the women's corner. The game settles the problems between sexes in an artistic way.

I made eleven recordings of this kind of poetical duel. After I had done two of these, the producer said that I could become a singer, and that he would produce a recording. The first took a whole year to come out. I was impatient to see something of my own on the market, so I went to see a competitor, who agreed to record another one although he thought it would make a loss because women are not successful and they don't sell. Suddenly both recordings were on the market together and both of them sold well.

*What was the quality that made you known?*

There were already female singers on the market when I started, but they sang texts given to them by other singers, who only gave them bad texts. The novelty was that I was singing my own poems. The words were my own and not second hand leftovers from others. The songs I composed spoke about women. Previously only men composed. I was the first *woman* to talk about *women* in the texts of the songs. I did everything myself. I also sang about social problems. People advised me to sing love songs, but I was interested in new subjects like encouraging women to be aware of themselves and what is good for them, for example concerning the education of children, moral or religious education and the preservation of Berber culture.

It was difficult to speak about the rights of the Berber language and culture before. I gave the Berber song a different face in Morocco. I was helped by books, which gave me access to the Amazigh Berber culture. One of the books was by Mohammed Chafiq.

I had the idea that I should not work only to eat, live in a house or make money, but for what will be left after my death. I should do something that would remain after me. Some students even started writing thesis about my work. I was moved by this because it created a relationship between my work, education and Berber culture.

Leaving home made me understand that what I did was important. I opened up and realised that there were Berbers in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger. I did not know this before. If I had stayed only within my local framework I would have been like all the other singers, just singing the same themes as before. I got to know biographies of other singers before me like Rays Lhaj

Bl'aid, Boubakr Anchad, who died in the 1940s. I was passionate not to leave this world without being the subject of something important. If I wanted to reach that level, I had to do something of quality.

*So you represent something for your people. Do you have a responsibility towards Moroccan and Berber women?*

I cannot say this myself. But from what people say, I praise the Moroccan woman in the Berber song. It is true that it is a responsibility. I can give a practical example. In a song I composed I say that women must learn to fight ignorance and to read and write. Associations that work to teach reading and writing in rural communities use this cassette to convince women who are doubtful to get out of their houses. My songs help the associations that teach reading and writing in the most distant parts of the country, even if I did not compose with this purpose. There is a reticence for women to go out and go to school. My songs say that there is nothing wrong in women going to school, that they should have no reticence in doing anything they want to.

There is a paradox for women who stick to the old code. If their husband sends a letter from town, a religious man reads the letter for them. The husband writes to the Taleb, to the teacher of the Koran School, rather than to his wife. This is not normal. A husband should be able to tell his wife what he wants, without having to pass through another man.

Every time I see a woman, I think of my mother. If I look at a woman as a model, I think of my mother because I do not have an image of her face. In a poem I say, "My mother is always with me". For human beings, woman is something beyond words. No words express her tenderness. In a new



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song of which I am thinking, I speak of the jewels that a woman wears and I think of my mother. My mother always comes back as an image for woman.

I did not go to school, but someone taught me to decipher Arabic. After I had learned a bit of Arabic, I started on the written Berber characters. I put up a board with Arabic on one side and Berber on the other. The twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet helped me learn the thirty-nine letters in Tifinagh, the Berber language. I can understand some texts, but I cannot write.

*To transmit your knowledge you use your songs and the declamation of your poems?*

Yes. What I give orally is stronger because singing touches the sensibility, it communicates at the level of the senses.

*How did you form your group?*

Time did this. In 1988 I started working with one of the greatest modern poets and singers, Lhaj Mohammed Demsiri. He died in 1989, so I only worked with him for a very short time. With Demsiri I passed to another level. Again it happened by chance. A female dancer and singer was needed for a wedding feast. I was alone at home when they came to look for a troupe for the wedding. I told him that Belfqih, the person I was working with, was in the mountains, but that twelve of us were available. That day we played in full freedom without the pressure of the master and with people similar to me. I felt very comfortable in this situation and the wedding went very well at the musical level. I have always been a rebel against the pressure and the violence of the director. Art is linked to freedom for me.

On the way back our car broke down and I was the first one to push the car. I concretely took the role that belonged to a man. That day the musicians and dancers said that if I wanted to make a troupe they were available.

We celebrated other feasts with this troupe. I was invited by an association to celebrate a feast at the University of Agadir for several days. The Moroccan Radio from Tangier and Rabat was there. I had to sing various times, so it was an occasion for me to get known. A journalist who worked in the radio in Tangier helped me; they spoke of me in the newspapers.

After this, I had the courage to make a video cassette and with the money I received

from the cassette I made costumes for my troupe, sewing them myself.

Before I could not give them costumes and now that I could I was very happy. When the producer heard that the first thing I did with the money was to make costumes, he said he had never known such a mad singer.

Then I only made the costumes for the women as I did not have enough money to make the costumes for everyone. I left the men in second place! Even now when I want to choose the costumes for my troupe I spend much more time on the women's. They tell me off for this. But I excuse myself saying I don't have men's taste so I don't know what to choose for them!

*Is it difficult for you to decide everything, with male musicians?*

I do everything not to appear different, as if they all were my children. When I go to a wedding or a similar event, I never accept being put in a better hotel than the others. I try to behave as if we are the same, without distinctions. I cannot go on stage if one of us is missing. We work as a group.

I try to be just when I pay. We do not always play in places where there is money. Sometimes the organisers do not have enough money, but what I receive I show the others and then we share. Sometimes families without money come to me saying they love me, and they ask me to agree to give an evening performance. I do it, I am not demanding.

A poor man came to see me saying he wanted me to sing. He would not make the feast, unless I went. When we got paid I divided the money equally and 100 Dirham (10 Euro) were left for me. I put it aside. The next day the musicians came to ask me for money to buy the soap to wash the costumes, and suddenly no money was left!

We think of ourselves as brothers and sisters in the troupe. We meet amongst ourselves to sing and dance even if there is no feast, no celebration. It was difficult to come here to this Festival of Women's Voices, because I had to leave some other people from the troupe behind. They cried.

*What does it mean for you to be in a Festival of Women's Voices?*

It is a great honour for me to be present at such a festival. It is also an honour for the Moroccan woman in the artistic field. It interests me to see what level women have reached here away from my own home. This allows me to see also through comparison what position we are in. I thank the organisers of this kind of festival and hope for a lot of success in all that has to do with your work for the good of humanity.

*Did you find images of your mother here at the Festival?*

Yes!

Translated from Arabic by Lahsen Hira  
and from French by Julia Varley

FATIMA TABA'MRANTE (Morocco) belongs to a Berber tribe of South Morocco, the Aït Bamran. She is the first Rayssa (a Moroccan and Berber musician/singer) woman to direct her own troupe, and compose and sing her own songs. Being a well-known artist, she has an important role in defending women's rights and the Berber cultural tradition in Morocco. In 2002 she participated in the Women's Voices Festival, Belgium, with ten musicians of her troupe.