

**HAJAR RACHEDI Walid**

### **Is There Any Magic Left?**

For me, literature has always represented the possibility of exploring other realities.

When I was a kid, I was an avid reader fascinated by the power of stories. And the ones capable of crafting them were true magicians to me.

My desire to write initially came as I realized very early that I was observing things with a unique perspective. I grew up on the outskirts of Paris to Algerian parents that spoke French at home. I was a banlieue teenager too nerdy to meet the thug stereotype. Then I became a “class defector” when I went to Paris for my studies. This type of journey was not reflected in the literature I could read. “Does this book even exist?” I recall asking myself.

At first, I tried to make sense of the worlds I was passing through, imagining the lives of the people I met on the RER trains that link Paris to its outskirts. At the time, a first-time novelist whom I could identify with, Rachid Djaidani, published a pretty successful book. But when he was invited on TV, it was obvious that he was not taken seriously as a writer. At best, he was seen as a designated witness of his social context. More than once, journalists asked him if he really had written the novel.

It traumatized me.

I decided to write stories setting characters very different from me to prove to myself that I can be a “real writer.” I wanted to reconnect with the magic of the unknown worlds of my childhood readings.

And at the same time, Jean-Paul Sartre’s writing questioned me a lot when speaking of Richard Wright. He said, “Can one be an African-American in the 1960s and not talk about segregation? I still wonder: Can one be French of North African origin in the years 2010-2020 and not speak from this position?”

Along with JP Sartre, the other source of reflection at the time was my reading of Milan Kundera. For Kundera, the novelistic form must prevail over the message. Always.

For ten years, I tried to find the right balance between these two visions of Literature, mixing characters, tones, and stories. My first manuscript, *Chaises Musicales* (Musical Chairs)—for which I won the Prix Littéraire des Grandes Ecoles in 2007—bore this ambition. Later it became a novel that interested many renowned publishers, but none of them would give it a real shot. Some told me to develop more characters from immigrant backgrounds as if I were not capable of writing anything else. Worst—my stories seemed more harshly criticized when they involved middle-class white characters. Once, the Director of a renowned publishing house told me bluntly: “Is there a market for that?”

As the years went by, the position I was writing from was getting even trickier. After living a few years abroad, when I came back to France, I felt disconnected from the realities I depicted at first. I had also become ‘other’ to the others.

But in 2015, in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks, I felt the urge to write. I understood that the trauma caused by Islamist terrorism led to the fear of Islam. I also knew that a

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Angel Igov (Bulgaria); Hajar Rachedi (France); Sara Jaramillo Klinkert (Colombia); Shehan Karunatilaka (Sri Lanka)

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majority of French Muslims found elevation, dignity, and purpose through their religious practice. This story needed to be told. And I realized that there were not so many of us who could summon this famous "double consciousness" stated by the African American writer and sociologist W.E.B. Dubois to tell it in a consistent and intimate way.

That is how emerged the story of Malek, the main character of "What Would I Do in Paradise?"—my debut novel, published this year. His quest for purpose leads him to go and see the world with his own eyes, from Paris to London, passing by North Africa and the Middle East.

As a writer, the challenge was not only to make Malek's quest intelligible, but also to tell the story of the others: Atik and Wassim, the Afghan twins aka the East made chaotic by foreign intervention, and Jeffrey, the NGO Director aka the West that thought it was doing the right thing.

If Malek is the one who carries the novel, the two other voices were for me just as important and fed my idea about the clash of narratives: we are prisoners of our narratives, of our vision of the world and how to grieve it without betraying ourselves and our loved ones?

In this novel, despite what one can imagine, the intimate dimension has not much to do with the question of French-Algerian identity but more with personal and existential events: loss, mourning, the impossibility of rebuilding things identically, the inability to find a new narrative of oneself and the world...

And I do believe that is what binds us whether we come from Paris, Kabul, London, Algiers, or Iowa City.

And that's what fascinates me.

The magic.

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