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### 'Poetic Justice': A Snapshot of Contemporary Moroccan Poetry

M. Lynx Qualey / 19 Mar 2021



Mohamed Hmoudane reads extracts from his poems on YouTube. Hmoudane is one of more than 80 contemporary Moroccan poets included in Poetic Justice, a new anthology edited and translated by Deborah Kapchan.

It was 1994 when Deborah Kapchan began work on an anthology of contemporary Moroccan poetry. She was on a Fulbright fellowship, studying Moroccan verbal art and performance when, one night, she found herself at a zajal performance that featured the poets Ahmed Lemsyeh and Driss Mesnaoui.

"I was enrapt," Kapchan said over an email conversation. "They both introduced me to this genre of poetry as well as the movement to write literature in Moroccan Arabic (Darija) which, at that time, was in full efflorescence."

What followed was more than a quarter century of reading, listening to, and translating Moroccan poetry. The result is *Poetic Justice*, a new anthology that brings together work by more than 80 Moroccan poets. It is by far the most comprehensive collection of Moroccan poetry in English, an excellent companion to Abdellatif Laâbi's *Anthologie de la Poésie Marocaine de l'Indépendance à Nos Jours* (Anthology of Moroccan Poetry from Independence to Today), which appeared in French in 2005.

Kapchan's collection brings together a rich and varied tapestry of Morocco's many poetry traditions, addressing themes as various as desire, political prisons, and spirituality. The introduction begins by quoting the prolific zajal poet Driss Mesnaoui: "Our business is to count the stars, star by star / to chew the wind's haughty arrogance / and watch the clouds for when they'll throw us a handful."

But while Mesnaoui begins by patiently counting stars, he ends with a call to action: "and time, never will its letters fall between our hands / until we write what we are."

The collection writes down a vision of a complex, multi-lingual Moroccan poetry. With help from Driss Marjane, and bridge translations for the poetry in local North African languages, Kapchan assembled hundreds of poems written in Darija, Modern Standard Arabic, French, and Tamazight. (See a pair of related articles, "*A Battle Flares Up in Morocco's Language Wars*" and "*The Berber Language: Officially Recognized, Unofficially Marginalized?*")

## From Trickles to Abundance

Moroccan literature, Brahim el Guabli wrote in 2016, has had a marginal place in the recent Arabic canon. This, he said, "carries over into the translators' selection and anthologizing decisions." Until the last decade, relatively little Moroccan poetry had appeared in English translation.

As Kapchan notes in her introduction to *Poetic Justice*, only one Moroccan poet appears in Salma Jayyusi's influential anthology *Modern Arabic Poetry*, and there are only a handful in Issa Boulatta's *Modern Arab Poets 1950-1975*. No Moroccan poets were included in the Everyman Library collection *Arabic Poems*.

Slowly, this has begun to change. Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour's *Poems for the Millennium* anthology includes a long section on Moroccan poetry. In the last decade, several collections by Moroccan poets have been published in English translation: by Laâbi, Rachida Madani, Ahmed Bouanani, **Mohammed Khair-Eddine**, **Hassan Najmi**, and Mohamed Hmoudane.

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Deborah Kapchan

Yet when Kapchan began reading and collecting Moroccan poetry in 1994, poetry was in vibrant flower, but it was scattered around the country. "I collected books. I met poets and asked them who they read and admired. Mohamed Bennis donated many volumes that he had published with the Ministry of Culture (his work and the work of others)."

In her search for poets, Kapchan said, she left no stone unturned. "But sometimes, it was pure serendipity: one of my favorite poets—Khireddine Mourad—I met purely by accident at a Sufi gathering in the north of Morocco."

The anthology includes an excerpt from Mourad's 2001 collection *Pollen*. In the excerpt, wind, pollen, water, and grain are described with a musical reverence. "The waiting is for us, / supplicants of the sky for a happy downpour."

Finding poetry in the North African languages of Tamazight, Tarafit and Tashelhit, and in Hassaniya Arabic, involved more serious searching. Eventually, Kapchan made contact with Mohamed Farid Zalhoud, who had already translated a number of poets from Tashelhit into French. She added: "Hassaniya is missing, however. The volume is not complete."

## Making a Broad Tent

The collection is diverse not only in the languages used and the poets' varied backgrounds, but also in their styles. It includes work by acclaimed and award-winning authors, such as Bennis, Bouanani, Laâbi and Madani.

But it also includes poems by authors whose work is known only inside Morocco, including popular poetry. "This is not a book of 'high' culture only," Kapchan said. "It contains the tastes of many aspects of Moroccan society."

Among the poets are also lyricists, including Ali Chouhad and Ahmed Tayeb Laâlaj. Chouhad, who is also a popular musician, wrote his "Oh poetry!" in Tamazight. It was first translated to French by Hassan Oumouloud, and then to English by Kapchan. His verses are tender, opening with a sigh about the difficulties around poetry: "Poems do no harm to garner blame / They make no one a gainful income."

There are several poems that comment on the challenges around writing and publishing in Morocco. One of the reasons she called the anthology Poetic Justice, Kapchan said, was because much of the poetry she included addressed social and political issues. "It just seemed right; especially as the project began with zajal, an oral poetry that was first published in newspapers and journals as social critique—that is, for justice." (See a related article, "[Zajal, a Folk Poetry Form, Reaches a New Generation.](#)")

One of the zajal poets who first inspired Kapchan, Ahmed Lemsyeh, has two poems in the anthology. The first, "A Fool's Scribbles," weaves together social commentary and a playful dark humor. The poem narrates the difficulties of writing a book. In it: "Your words become a pickaxe / to dig your own grave / knowing your exact measurements."

The poem ends: "Death is roaming around / Watch your mouth / Wall it and shut it up / Don't blame anything said on me / I said what I had to say / And you keep what you have to yourself."

## Beyond the Book

Originally, Kapchan, she had hoped to publish the anthology as a trilingual volume. However, "As the project grew in size and scope, this became impossible. The book would have been more than 800 pages long!"

For that reason, Kapchan and the poets included decided to make the originals available on her website: [deborahkapchan.com](http://deborahkapchan.com).

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In addition to the original-language poems, the website also includes videos of several poets reading, including Lemsyeh and Mesnaoui, the two poets Kapchan saw perform back in 1994.

Naturally, the book does not capture all of Moroccan poetry. There is no work by Soukaina Habiballah (b. 1989) or Mohammed El Khadiri (b. 1986), for example. Kapchan writes in her introduction that "with a few exceptions, the youngest generations of poets are *not* represented here. That is a future project."

She added, over email, "The translation of new work is a perpetual project, and I hope to be translating work all of my life."