

# Agency and Resilience within Black Womanhood in Tunisia

Within the context of post-independence nationalism, we look at examples of how black Tunisian women resist to the devaluation of blackness and black femininity, and how they build a sense of dignified self and belonging in their communities.

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## **BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE SOUTH SERIES** – *FIELD REPORT*

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Postcolonial academic and militant works have been trying to decenter the way knowledge is produced at least since the 1980s. “Bottoming-up” knowledge, as in reversing whose experiences gets to define and shape the way issues are understood, is a crucial challenge to how we understand today’s world.

This paper’s methodological approach departs from a desire to understand how certain social constructions, advantaging some and marginalizing, inferiorizing and invisibilizing others operate, not from the point of view of the dominant group but from the positionality of the dominated.<sup>1</sup> We posit it is crucial to understand a phenomenon as complex as contemporary racism in the Maghreb to allow a

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<sup>1</sup> To use Gayatri Spivak’s concept, the point of view of the subaltern. See: in Morris, R. C., & Spivak, G. C. (2010). *Can the subaltern speak?: Reflections on the history of an idea*.

platform to those whose lives are structured by its logics, and place their situated point(s) of view at the very center of how we understand racism.

Based on interviews conducted by the author with Black Tunisian women in Southern Tunisia and the capital Tunis in March 2022, this paper will attempt to highlight how “bottoming up” knowledge production could work within a context of gendered racism.

Departing from a specific postcolonial and post-slavery context, Tunisia, we ask these questions: How do black Tunisian women make sense of racism, how do they rationalize it, how do they integrate it into their identity construction, and what resilience strategies, if any, do they develop within a patriarchal-racist system in order to construct a dignified sense of identity, femininity and belonging?

### **TUNISIANITY AND THE UNITARY PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY**

It would be useful at this point to place contemporary racism in Tunisia in a recent historical framework, in our case post-independence. The unitary performance of national identity through Habib Bourguiba's modernist '*Tunisianity*<sup>2</sup>, stems from a hegemonic understanding of belonging. According to *Tunisianity's* conceptualization of national identity, resolutely cut off from its *Africanity*, Tunisia is a melting pot, a mosaic of diverse origins which have somehow converged towards a single national identity. National identity is always a matter of choosing who to include in the collective imaginary, who to over represent and who to invisibilize, what contributions to the national narrative to encompass and which to leave out. Tunisianity clearly inherited the French Jacobin republican model of a one and indivisible republic, which then framed Tunisians as sharing the same race, culture, and religion. The country's minorities were consequently invisibilized in the name of national unity.

It should be noted that the term minority is itself problematic in our context, contested by many black Tunisians as trajectories and genealogies greatly differ. In Tunisia, there is little comparison to be made between the black experience and the Amazigh or the Jewish experience for instance, as the latter two present either a linguistic or religious particularism, whereas the black phenotype does not

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<sup>2</sup> Habib Bourguiba is Tunisia's first post-independence president. He is usually remembered as the founder of the Tunisian modern State.

constitute an ethnicity, in its sociological understanding. As such, there are no specific customs, dialects or aesthetics that all black Tunisians share which would constitute them into a separate group, a proper minority. The common denominator between black Tunisians is rather racism as a structuring collective experience, a racism that evolves without a collective race consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Mustapha El Miri draws this parallel for sub-Saharan African migrants transiting by or migrating to Morocco, which “become black” on the migratory routes linking West Africa to North Africa without ever self-defining as members of the same group.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, it is not what race is but what race does that interests us.

Amongst the pillars of *Tunisianity* is the concept of *La Femme Tunisienne*.<sup>5</sup> An integral part of a project of female liberation through State institutions, also known as State feminism, *La Femme Tunisienne* is represented as holding specific characteristics. She is university educated, she works, she is urban, she is secular<sup>6</sup>, she comes from the upper-middle class<sup>7</sup> and, as we argue, she is often light-skinned. This hegemonic representation could be easily observed looking at institutional flyers, urban billboards, school textbooks and cultural productions.

## RESILIENCE AND AGENCY UNDER A DUAL GENDERED AND RACIALIZED ASSIGNATION

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<sup>3</sup> “Racial and ethnic consciousness refers to the awareness of membership in a racial or ethnic group that is displayed by both group members and the larger society in which they reside. The concept embodies both popular *and* social scientific understandings of classification and membership. Popular perceptions often attribute race and ethnicity to biological origins. In contrast, social scientists insist that these categories are the consequence of a social construction process. Despite the social basis of race and ethnicity, social scientists acknowledge that these categories are real in their consequences. Race and ethnicity shape social stratification, underlie individual and group identities, determine patterns of social conflict, and condition life chances. In fact, so important is the notion of consciousness to the comprehension of race, that the eminent scholar George Fredrickson (1988: 3) defines race as “*consciousness of status and identity based on ancestry and color*” (emphasis added).” Steven J. Gold, Paula Miller, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> El Miri, M. (2018). Devenir « noir » sur les routes migratoires : racialisation des migrants subsahariens et racisme global. *Sociologie et sociétés*, 50(2), 101–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066815ar>

<sup>5</sup> Which translates to “The Tunisian Woman”.

<sup>6</sup> This should be understood within the Tunisian framework of secularity. A conventionally secular woman is a follower of moderate, Maliki, Sunni Islam. Ideally, she does not wear the veil. While this perception has been challenged post-2011, she still remains dominant in the Tunisian elite’s discourse.

<sup>7</sup> Debuysere, L. (2016). “La femme” before and after the Tunisian uprising (dis)continuities in the configuration of women in the truth regime of “Tunisianité.” *MIDDLE EAST LAW AND GOVERNANCE*, 8(2–3), 201–227. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-00802005>

Our primary fieldwork in Tunisia highlighted different trajectories in the articulation of female agency and resilience when racism is experienced. Depending on whether a black woman considers the experience of racism to be structuring or not, identity construction is articulated differently. This articulation does not necessarily depend on the violence of the racism experienced, but the meaning each woman allocates to it. Notably, if the racist account is integrated into race consciousness and beyond an individualistic explanation of the phenomenon to place it in a broader structural historical process, rationalization and resilience will differ.

Lamia<sup>8</sup>, a sixty-year-old woman who lives in Arram<sup>9</sup> and grew up in Gabes, has suffered from direct and indirect forms of racism throughout her life. Racism has been a structuring force in her construction of self. Amongst her first experiences with racism and self-consciousness was as a child in Gabes where she spent her childhood:

"When I was a child, I did not know I was black. My first experience with racism was when I was 5 or 6 years old. Our neighbor, a *meddeb* (tutor or instructor in a Koranic school) would tell me "Go away black ant, may your day be *mchoum*<sup>10</sup>" whenever he would see me in the neighborhood, immediately covering his face whenever I simply greeted him. And this was coming from a Quranic tutor. I didn't know what it meant, what I had done wrong. I just said hello."

Another example from Lamia's life highlighting the impact of a classificatory slave status<sup>11</sup> is the imposition of certain words on her and her family to address "white" neighbors:

"My maternal grandfather died on the same day as our (white) neighbor's young son. The grieving mother was weeping at the idea that her son "will be buried on the same day as the *uci*<sup>12</sup>". This was around ten years ago; I

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<sup>8</sup> All names have been changed to ensure the anonymity and safety of the women the author spoke with.

<sup>9</sup> An urban town around 40 km from Gabes.

<sup>10</sup> Bearer of bad news, cursed.

<sup>11</sup> When it is assumed that, because one is black, one is automatically descendant of enslaved ancestors.

<sup>12</sup> Derogatory term to qualify a black person, synonym of slave or servant.

am not talking about the 70s. My family was asked to delay the burial, which we eventually agreed to."

The last example relates to Lamia's son whom she calls her "black pearl": "The neighbour's family who owns a local grocery shop ordered my son, under threat of beating, to call the grocer *sidi*<sup>13</sup>. I immediately told to never call him that, and if they ask him why, to tell them that "Our only *sidi* is God and we are his disciples".

Lamia raised three black children, two boys and a girl, and the counter-discourse to racism that she did not receive from her parents; she has actively learned and passed on to her children and grandchildren. As a child, when she would complain about someone calling her *ucifa*, her mother would tell her:

"You are only an *ucifa* in the end". Afro-American civil rights activist Du Bois calls this process double consciousness, the gaze of a racist society laden with prejudice forcing the black man or woman to see themselves through the eyes of the other, distorted by the veil of racism, and as such to consider themselves from outside, foreign to oneself in this first grasp of double consciousness.

On the contrary, Lamia pays particular attention to emphasizing features of black *Africanness* that are denigrated by colonial beauty standards. During our exchange, Lamia emphasized her quotidian celebration of afro features that she, as a mother and grandmother, actively associates with a positive imagery of blackness. For instance, Lamia showed me numerous images of dark-skinned black men and women that she always keeps in her phone, specifically to show them to one of her grandsons who is darker than his brother.

"These images are never represented in Tunisian media; they represent a subversion of the whitening beauty norms celebrating a light complexion, a thin nose and straight hair".

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<sup>13</sup> Which literal translation is master, as opposed to the Tunisian words to say uncle. Note that the word *sidi* is not necessarily an expression of subordination but has evolved to express respect, especially when addressed to an older man (*lalla* is the female equivalent). However, the injunction to use it in this context clearly indicates racial hierarchization.

Monjia, another black Tunisian woman I spoke to, had a drastically different perspective on race and race relations. Monjia is a young woman who grew up in El Hamma<sup>14</sup>, did part of her studies in Tunis and now lives and works in Gabes. As opposed to Lamia's perspective, Monjia deracializes the issue of racism in Tunisia and associates it to other types of discrimination. Racism, in her eyes, is equivalent to regionalism, sexism or simply intolerance. As such, she perceives no specificity or historicity to anti-black racism in Tunisia.

Monjia's perspective is interesting as it stems from a form of refusal to consider oneself a victim of an immutable condition, and consequently be perceived as such. Her position is different from the dominant point of view which denies the existence of racism. Monjia does not contend racism does not exist, as all the women I spoke to clearly consider anti-black racism as embedded in Tunisian society. She rather clearly states she does not allow it to affect her identity construction and sense of self-worth. As a mother, Monjia never mentions race to her son as she believes talking about racism creates an inferiority complex. In this sense, Monjia is critical of black activists' anti-racism narrative that, to use her words, "puts race everywhere".

When we started our interview, I asked Monjia if she had ever been a victim of racism and how it had impacted her. At first, she could not think of any specific account, but she then shared an incident she was a victim of in secondary school<sup>15</sup> in Al Hamma. Monjia was a brilliant student and received a prize yearly for obtaining the best grades in school. Yet, she noticed her prize was not as nice as that of a male classmate who was simply first of his class. As the situation repeated itself year after year, Monjia's parents demanded an explanation from the school's headmaster, to which he replied:

"It is not today that an *ucifa* is going to colonize us".

Then, in her early adulthood, when she joined university in Tunis, Monjia experienced a violent account of sexual harassment coupled with racism in the public space. One day, while walking down a street downtown Tunis, she heard a comment:

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<sup>14</sup> An oasis town located in the Gabes Governorate, 30 km west of Gabes.

<sup>15</sup> Between the ages of 12 and 14.

"What a beautiful black woman to spend the night with". Monjia confessed this was when she started wearing the veil, to "avoid problems". Avoiding problems simply signifies in this context signaling her refusal to objectify her body, but also perhaps indicating her belonging to the national community. Monjia was clearly mistaken for a West African migrant that would not understand the Tunisian dialect, a denial of *Tunisianity* that stems from a perception of blackness as external to Maghrebi societies.

Lamia and Monjia's stories are amongst many different trajectories black Tunisian women have been undertaking to construct a sense of self and belonging to the national community. The interview excerpts highlighted above demonstrate how heterogeneous their paths are. In the face of pervasive social racism, stereotypical images of blackness and a national identity conceptualized as a closed vessel, each resists in her own modalities to the devaluation of black femininity. Some embrace militant forms of anti-racism while others believe avoiding talk about race will minimize its impact. This shows agency cannot be understood as a homogenous matrix to transpose indifferently to every case, as some hidden or non-traditional forms might be lost.

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## About the BIC

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