



All About Tahar Ben Jelloun's Mother: An Interview with the Franco-Moroccan author



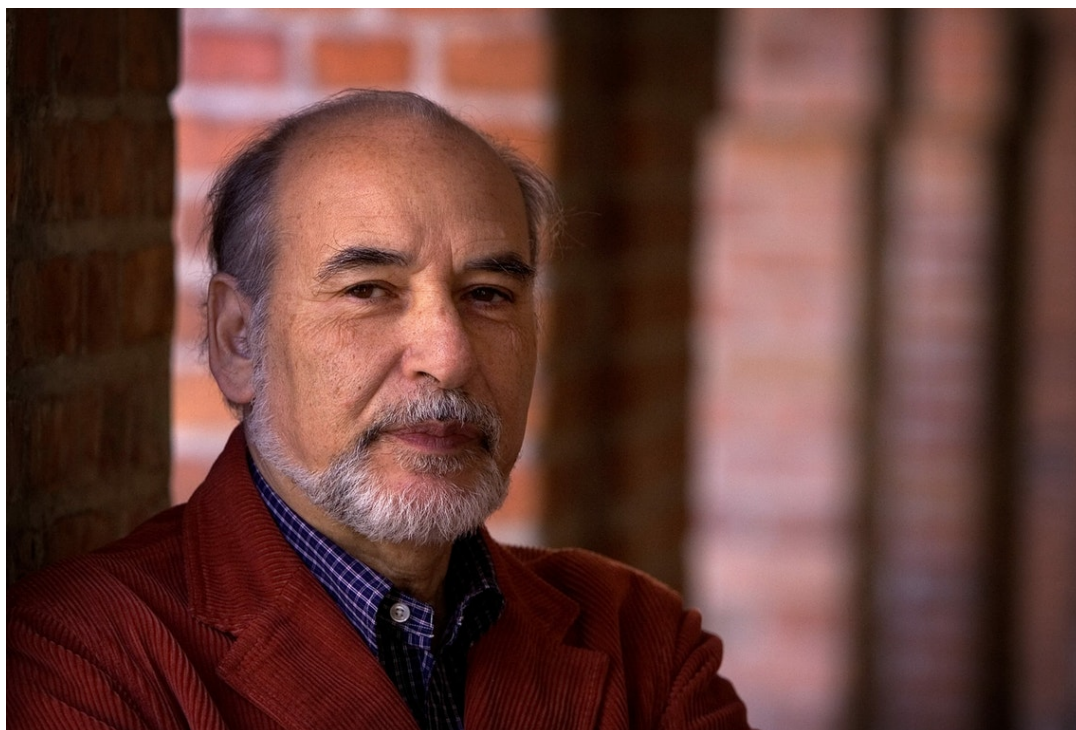
By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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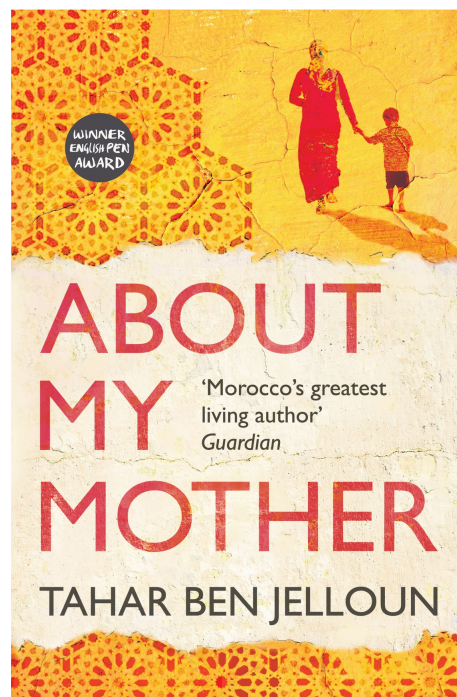
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Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun hardly needs to be introduced. Regularly shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Ben Jelloun, who was born in Fez, writes in French. A number of his books have been published in English; his 2008 novel, *About My Mother*, loosely based on his own relationship with his mother at the end of her life, was recently published in English, translated by Ros Schwartz and Lulu Norman. He answered a few questions about his mother for Bookwitty:

Is it tedious to talk about a book you finished almost ten years ago?

It's a book that has been accompanying me all along because many readers talk to me about it. They talk to me about their experience with their parents, it's a book that goes beyond my own experience—that's literature, I've been able to touch people by talking about my own mother. But this is also a story I invented; my mother was very discreet and didn't reveal much, so I reinvented her life.



This modesty and discretion comes across in the novel and at the same time you very openly describe the workings of the human body, including sexuality. It's a difficult exercise to imagine one's parents' sexuality. Can you talk about his?

It very much bothered some people, one of my brothers was shocked when I described a moment when I was leaning over my mother and I wrote "My mother smells terrible. She smells of shit. She's soiled herself and doesn't realise...." I told him, "That's literature, *mon cher*."

Regarding her sexuality, I imagined it. I did ask her if she had been happy. Women from that era were completely submissive. So it was guesswork. But I was also a child who was ill quite often, so I was there in a corner and I could observe and listen to women when they were alone. They would talk about sex sometimes. The anecdote in the book is true—I had an aunt who was known as being "indecent", and once they were making cakes and she made one in the shape of a penis.

You describe a European friend, Roland, in the book, who is dealing with his ageing mother at the same time. Was this in order to compare cultures and relationships?

Yes, this story is true and I really did travel to visit his mother. She was living life independently. Roland represents “the Westerner” in all his splendor. He’s an individual. With us, the difference is, we are not separate from our parents. The tie between parents and their children is very strong; it’s almost a religion. My own children were born in France and I have a good relationship with them but it’s not the same relationship as with my parents. They can openly criticize me, whereas I would never have dared with my own father.

In the book, your mother, who is very devout, is also instinctively open-minded but it’s your father who is very tolerant concerning religion, telling his sons one day that they should only pray if they feel the need; that they shouldn’t pretend...

This really happened and it completely liberated me. My father doubted a lot. He was a rebel, who was shocked by the injustice of our politicians. He thought and spoke freely. But like everyone, he was afraid for his children. In 1965 during protests in Morocco he told us, "In America, Kennedy was assassinated and the world heard about it, while here in Morocco, 100 people were assassinated and no one ever heard about it."

You have so often written about women. Was this book, based on your relationship with your mother set during the time of her impending death, the culmination of writing about women?

From very early on in my life I was surrounded by women. I saw things that shocked me, the manner in which they were treated. When I began to write, I wanted to denounce this. I have written about romantic heroines, they are so much more interesting than men, there is so much complexity and mystery, it’s not a coincidence that all heroes in literature are actually heroines. That said, I will never understand anything about women nor can I claim to understand female psychology. I was once

at a talk with [the American feminist writer] Kate Millett who said that one should stop practicing hyperbolic feminism. Men must be liberated. We should start by liberating men. I didn't agree with her. After those talks, I wrote about the masculine identity in *The Sand Child*.

What is the status of women in Morocco today?

Their status has changed and women are liberating themselves little by little, they are fighting for legislation. They want to get involved in the political life. But things are evolving very slowly, and the majority of women still follow tradition.

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