

## **Sowing Salt**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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### **Aims and General Description:**

*Sowing Salt* will be 100-120 pages of a novel about two women navigating paths home, both geographically and emotionally. Yousra, a middle-aged Muslim woman living in Casablanca, Morocco and Dana, a young, Jewish pediatric resident in Tel Aviv, Israel discover a shared family secret that compels each of them to embark on a quest to learn more about their families. What starts out as a focused investigation into the life of others develops into a journey in which each woman confronts history, culture, family ties and, ultimately, self.

The novel will be set in Morocco and Israel. Both countries, with their tumultuous politics, rich cultures and circumscribed traditions, are key shapers of the destinies and characters of Yousra and Dana. The transformations that both countries have undergone over the past several decades, as well as the wider changes sweeping through the region where the promise of new freedoms has been marred by attempts of fringe groups to reinstate the values of a medieval Salafist past, parallel the emotional transformations of the protagonists.

This novel will be written in two strands, close third-person narrations, following approximately nine to twelve months in the lives of both Yousra and Dana in alternating chapters that traverse the Mediterranean.

## **Conceptual Background**

*Sowing Salt* will be about the facets of self-exploration and identity that are deeply linked to one's past, whether on a family, community or even national level. Often, the key to finding oneself lies not in carving out a new future, but in acknowledging, accepting and even embracing the past.

Key themes explored in this novel will include displacement, tradition, family ties and the dilemma of belongingness. Many works about the change of the socio-cultural position of a people focus on displacement from a homeland and the yearning of a group to return to a geographic location that has rejected them because of politics, war or socioeconomic factors. What follows is a struggle between preserving the past and creating a future. This tension often results in either an unwillingness to assimilate or, in sharp contrast, total assimilation and acculturation.

The displacement in this novel is complicated by the fact that Moroccan Jewry was cast into their homeland and not out of it. The Israeli experience over the past 68 years is unique in that it may be one of the only places in the world where homecoming and displacement exist simultaneously. Although immigrant groups in Israel share the struggles of acculturation, assimilation, isolation and belongingness with their displaced counterparts all over the world, that a longing to return to Zion was a cornerstone of their religious and oftentimes cultural identities prior to displacement makes grappling with their feelings of loss of even more difficult. This complexity extends well beyond geographic boundaries, and *Sowing Salt* will examine how the push and pull of being both lost and found sits at the center of the characters' souls and shapes their notions of self, the families they build and their abilities to be part of a community and make meaningful contributions to it. I was inspired to think about the intricacy of connections to homeland by the Moroccan

Israeli poet Mois BenArroch who wrote that "homeland is always somewhere else, not on maps, it is the smell of an orange tree in Granada on an evening that never existed."<sup>1</sup>

A strong literary influence in conceiving this novel has been a genre termed migrant or immigrant literature sparked by mass migrations globally during the twentieth century, though I personally do not feel comfortable with this classification as so many people today find themselves pursuing lives very far from their places of birth. I drew from poetry, short story collections and novels that focus not on the migration from, but rather the arrival to a new home that is culturally different from the one left behind, and which present the inner struggle of characters straddling two worlds. Works by Jhumpa Lahiri, Amy Tan, Anzia Yeziarska and Abraham Cahan bring to light the prominence of tradition, the role that family ties play in individual identity and the effect of generational differences on the immigrant experience.

In her first novel, *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri shows readers that aside from our genetics, we inherit from our families a complex set of ideas and values. No matter how far we try to move away from this inheritance and create our own versions of ourselves, it is not only impossible to escape, but also this inheritance is ultimately the key to our emancipation. As Jean de la Fontaine wrote, "A person often meets his destiny on the road he took to avoid it."

The difference between the connection that first and second generation immigrants feel to their new home will also play a role in this novel. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan investigates the fragility of relationships between mothers and daughters against the backdrop of the cultural gap between generations that

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<sup>1</sup> Mois Ben Arroch, *Bilingual Poems* (Moben, 2008).

immigration creates. In her novel, Tan emphasizes the importance of family ties and the fact that no matter how hard one tries to untie them, they bind us, define us and propel us to move in a specific direction.

The characters in *Sowing Salt* have been formed by the political turmoil, culture, traditions, sounds, tastes and folklore of Morocco and Israel. This novel could not have taken place anywhere else. I am looking to works by Abraham Varghese, particularly *Cutting for Stone*, Amitav Gosh and Khaled Hussein as examples of how to transform a place into a character and successfully ensure that the spirit of a nation is reflected in the humanity of the story.

To learn more about life in Morocco, I am reading fiction set in the country and look forward to reading fiction by Moroccan authors as well, including Leila Lalami, Mohammad Berrada's *Game of Forgetting* and Tahar Ben Jalloun's *The Sacred Night*. I am also reading non-fiction about Jewish life in Morocco, independence from French colonial rule, the opposition of the Istiqlal and the Years of Lead. To add dimension to Yousra's character regarding what a woman in Morocco today may be grappling with, I am avidly following blogs by Moroccan mothers including *MorocMamma* and *Morocomamma*.

As a member of the executive management of a homeland security consulting firm, I am involved in projects for planning and managing the protection of Jewish community institutions in Europe today. I have spent the last four years immersed in intelligence and analysis that address new trends in world jihad, the movement of European nationals to the Middle East, their return home to take part in acts of terror and the shifting modus operandi of terror groups. Despite the relative quiet in Morocco, a growing number of Moroccans have been involved in terror plots and

attacks across Europe. This knowledge will shape one of the sub plots involving Yousra's son's flirtation with radical Islam in Europe.

Notions of tradition, both religious and literary, studied in Jewish Arts Seminar, helped me refine the relationship between past and present and the power that tradition needs to play in this novel. Dana will move from inhabiting an "in between" space to living in the overlap, a place of richness that draws from the cultures of a country left behind and one being built. Dana's ability to move through this space results from wrestling with how to accept the presence of the past. Yousra also struggles with how to integrate her Jewish roots and the new family that she discovers into her life.

T.S. Eliot, in his essay "*Tradition and the Individual Talent*," sets forth the claim that the ability of the individual to make a tradition his or her own demands an intimate knowledge of the past and an accepting of the presence of the past. He asserts that, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists." This model can be extended beyond the artist to every human being. It is only after Yousra and Dana begin uncovering their family histories and place themselves in a continuum with Eliot's "dead poets" that they are able to truly see themselves and accept, even embrace, the presence of the past. For Yousra, this will mean risking everything she has and ultimately force her to rebuild her family. For Dana, owning her history allows her to become a part of her tradition which means that she has the responsibility not only to preserve something, but also to expand it. It is this ability to see herself as a smaller part of a greater whole that ultimately allows her to build a fuller life.

## **Shape of Project**

This novel will follow Yousra, a middle-aged woman living in Casablanca, Morocco, who discovers that she was kidnapped as a child from a Jewish family and raised as a bride for the son of a wealthy Muslim contractor. As Yousra embarks on a journey to learn about her true identity and the fate of her family, she is forced to risk everything in return for a link to her past which may or may not cure her of a perpetual restlessness that she has worked her whole life to quiet, unsuccessfully.

Yousra undertakes this quest alone. At first she hides her true identity from her husband and three children out of fear of what claiming her birthright might mean for their future as a unit. Very quickly, Yousra understands that something broken cannot be made whole by ignoring its cracks and remains in the shadows for fear of her own future.

In the meantime, her husband, who also learns of the secret, tries to avert Yousra from discovering the truth about herself in an effort to prevent any mark on the good name of his parents and to preserve the family that he has created and loves.

Although Yousra is a product of the elite sector of a society reaching to the West, Morocco's newfound openness and political reform of the twenty-first century rests uneasily on the foundation of hundreds of years marked by rule with a strong hand and strict patriarchal values. It is these values, threatening to pierce the surface of society, that still steer Yousra's choices and the lives of her family.

Geographically, Morocco is a gateway between North Africa and Europe where radical Islam is promoting the values of yesterday and gaining force throughout the region. Despite government efforts to crack down on terror and prevent its growth by fighting poverty and teaching moderate Islam, thousands of young Moroccans join



terrorist groups and flow to Syria and other locations to join the fighting. Yousra's son flirts with radical Islam in the mosques of London's suburbs while at university.

Ultimately, Yousra's journey of self-discovery becomes intertwined with a mission to save her son from his path to jihad. Her birth family in Israel will play a crucial part in rescuing her son. It is only after the crumbling of the foundations of Yousra's life, built on a succession of lies and secrets, that she is able to make real choices about how to unite all of the fragments of her identity.

At the same time, across the Mediterranean in Israel, Dana, a pediatric resident living in Tel Aviv, learns of a well-protected family secret—an aunt left behind in Morocco when her grandmother trudged eastward toward Israel, six children in tow, decades before. As she considers marriage and starting a family of her own, Dana is pulled to do what is never done in Moroccan families, dig up old graves. She begins to tug at the fabric that binds her family, and is forced to confront her own conflicting feelings about her place in it. Dana has spent most of her childhood trying to free herself of what she considered the primitive ways that her family preserved from Morocco in return for achieving the status of being a "real" Israeli. Feelings of embarrassment about her family always shadowed the comfort she felt in their tight grasp as she straddled two worlds, never quite allowing herself to be fully present in either one.

During Dana's efforts to learn more about the fate of her missing Aunt, she is forced to confront the history of her family, including their displacement from Morocco and the political and economic struggles they faced when they arrived in the Jewish homeland. Rather than distancing herself from who she is, Dana for the first

time allows herself to stand in her own shoes and feel what it is to be herself,  
propelling her true, albeit late, coming of age during this novel.

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