

# From *Souffles* to En Toutes Lettres: Moroccan Independent Publishing Across Generations

## Interview with Kenza Sefrioui

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Kenza Sefrioui is a cultural journalist, publisher, and literary critic based in Casablanca. Her engagement with the world of periodical publications and the editorial landscape in Morocco is both long-standing and multifaceted. From a scholarly perspective, her work is particularly remarkable in relation to the magazine *Souffles*, which she explored extensively in her PhD dissertation in comparative literature, and published in 2013 under the title *La revue Souffles, 1966-1973. Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc* [The Journal Souffles (1966-1973), Hopes Of a Cultural Revolution In Morocco], as well as in her 2017 book *Le livre à l'épreuve, les failles de la chaîne au Maroc* [Books under Threat, Voids in the Publishing Ecosystem in Morocco], in which she provides a thorough analysis of the dynamics of the Moroccan publishing world.

Sefrioui's involvement with the editorial sphere extends to her current role as co-founder, together with Hicham Houdaifa, of the independent publishing house En Toutes Lettres (Casablanca), dedicated to essays and narrative journalism, where she also coordinates the project 'Arab Humanities' with Dar Mohamed Ali (Tunisia) and Dar Atlas (Syria), seeking to highlight and translate contemporary modern Arab production. Although *Souffles* and En Toutes Lettres emerged within different socio-political contexts and frameworks, both respond to a common need to serve as platforms of free expression for authors whose access to such spaces has been hindered, largely due to restrictions imposed by state institutions.

This contribution takes the form of a first-person testimonial in which Kenza Sefrioui looks back at these publishing experiences.<sup>1</sup> It is supplemented with ques-

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this testimonial was published in French as Sefrioui, Kenza. 2020. 'Être éditeur au Maroc: La pensée au triple défi du marché, du droit et des libertés', *Relief — Revue électronique de littérature française* 14 (1): 32-48. doi:10.18352/relief.1065. The English translation is by Anna M. Drzewiecki. We would like to thank Kenza Sefrioui for generously allowing us to publish an edited version of this article and for answering our questions.



Fig. 1 Kenza Sefrioui. Image: Mohamed Drissi.  
Courtesy of Kenza Sefrioui.

tions addressed to Sefrioui by the editors of this special issue, related to the main ideas, questions, and problems underpinning it. The text draws parallels between the historical trajectory of *Souffles*, which sought to diversify the publishing world after Morocco's independence in 1956, and the current work of *En Toutes Lettres* in a presumably 'post-authoritarian' situation, yet not free from repression.

**Lola Visglerio-Gómez and Juliane Debeusscher:** *Could you tell us about the barriers or difficulties that have historically existed — or continue to exist — with respect to progressive, experimental, or alternative publishing in Morocco, in light of your own experience?*

**Kenza Sefrioui:** It is impossible to talk about publishing in Morocco without connecting it to other key players in the production and dissemination of knowledge and ideas. One of the most important is the public education system. Since Moroccan independence in 1956, public schools have embodied the duality of the hope for social advancement and the failures of the government. Overcrowded classes, rote learning techniques, violence... The state of public education is now in total

disarray. Partial illiteracy remains very high at 40% on average, illiteracy is around 70%; nearly 250.000 high school students abandon their studies each year without a diploma, leaving 1.7 million young people aged between fifteen and twenty-four with no studies, technical training, or employment. It is clear that school curricula do not instill a love of reading.

This dramatic situation is the result of various failed attempts at Arabisation and multiple ineffective reforms following an era of repression, from which Moroccans carry painful memories. Among them, the deadly repression of 23 March 1965 against students protesting the Ministry of Education's decree prohibiting access to the second cycle of secondary schools for people over the age of seventeen. A few days later, King Hassan II denounced schools on television as a 'place of training for dissent' (Rollinde 2002: 122) and declared: 'There is no danger as serious for the State as that of the so-called intellectual. You would be better off illiterate!' (Rollinde 2002: 46). Three years later, in 1968, at the request of the Royal Cabinet, the anthropologist Mohamed Chafik drew up a report on the state of education and advocated the abolition of Koranic schools, calling them 'one of the main causes of our civilisational backwardness'. In response to his report, he was subsequently ordered to advocate for their generalisation (Aït Mous and Ksikes 2014: 46).

In the same way schools were seen as potential sites for the promotion of rebellious attitudes, universities (the first, Mohammed V University, was founded in Rabat in 1959) were stifled and crushed as poles of production for critical thought. Repressive actions included closure of the Institute of Sociology in Rabat in 1970, the Arabisation of the philosophy curriculum, reducing it to the most rigid Islamic thinking, and the radical rupture between high school and university level studies, with the Arabisation of public education in the early 1980s and the maintained prevalence of French in universities. The aim was to re-traditionalise society through reliance on religion (Daoud 2007).

After thirty years of this policy, universities were no longer able to play their role as centres of critical thinking. The *coup de grace*: structural adjustment plans in 1983 demanded the dismantling of the public sector and kept access to quality education in the private sector for wealthy, mainly urban, Moroccans. This neo-liberal reality was coupled by the rise to power of political forces who sought to centralise the role of religion in the state. Today, we are experiencing the consequences of this discourse, both reactionary and neoliberal, which has penetrated minds and threatens individuals' agency over their own existence (Bessis 2014).

**LVG/JD: This historical erosion of intellectual infrastructure extends beyond the university and the educational system. How does it affect the broader cultural and publishing landscape?**

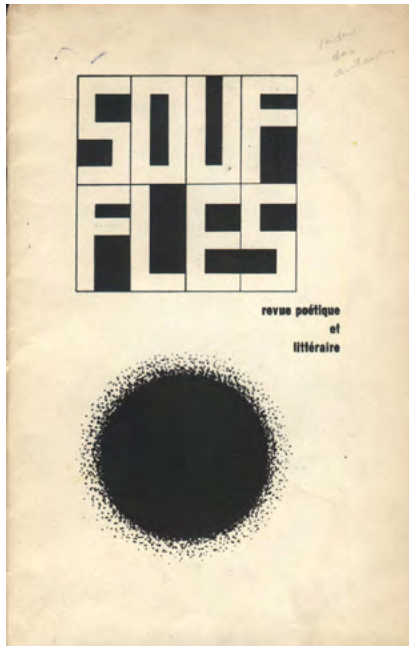


Fig. 2 *Souffles*, first quarter, 1966.  
Image: Internet Archive.  
<https://archive.org/details/Souffles/Souffles%201%20-%201966/>

**KS:** To begin with, in Morocco, there is no governmental structure to monitor the distribution of books, which is essential for the transmission of information between publishers and booksellers before publication. Moreover, simply selling books in bookshops is not enough. First and foremost because Morocco's network of bookshops is extremely weak. From 2012 to 2014 I conducted a survey on books, publishing, and literacy as part of the 2014 General Assembly on Culture, an initiative supported by the Racines Association (ArtMap 2014). In this study, I counted no more than eight hundred bookshops in the whole country, where thirty-eight million people live. Among them, no more than fifteen or so are active all year round with staff trained to help readers and able to host gatherings and author talks. This is a fragile infrastructure, threatened by competition from distributors who sell directly, especially to schools, taking advantage of the fact that there are no laws to set ceilings on book prices and discounts.

In addition, and despite obvious needs, the authorities' inaction has kept the publishing sector in a precarious state. The Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports is not committed to establishing the legislative and administrative frameworks required for its development. No official policy has been created to regulate public access to books, which creates serious deficiencies in infrastructure. There are no more than two hundred and forty public libraries nationwide: less than a third of the municipalities have them, with deserts in rural areas where only civil society is active in promoting literacy (*Étude sur l'Édition* 2014).

Some university towns have neither a library nor a bookshop. Furthermore, their acquisition budgets are very low and Morocco, with an estimated one and a half million books across all its libraries, is far from the standard UNESCO recommends: at least one book per inhabitant. Under these conditions, and considering the disappearance of bookshops, the price of books has emerged as an acute issue, aggravating existing inequalities in access to knowledge and culture.

**LVG/JD:** Your career, both as a researcher and as a publisher, has demonstrated the significant role played by periodicals in contexts of political change or transition. You have conducted extensive research on *Souffles*, a poetry and culture magazine that emerged after Morocco's independence, in a context of decolonisation and nation-building. Where do you think the significance of *Souffles* lies within this period of political, social, and cultural change in the country?

**KS:** In the 1960s and 1970s, the State felt increasingly threatened by a highly politicised left-wing student population and responded by stifling any hint of critical thinking. In this context, cultural magazines like *Souffles*, but also *Lamalif*, which were very active at the time, served as hubs for the development of collective thought and intellectual and political mobilisation. All were censored (Sefrioui 2013).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Lamalif* was published between 1966 and 1988 by Zakya Daoud and Mohamed Loughlam, in French. It was conceived as a political and cultural alternative after the events of 1965 and the repression of popular democratic aspirations by the monarchy (Daoud 2007) [Editor's note].

*Souffles* is a milestone in Morocco's cultural and political history. Founded in Rabat in 1966 by a small group of French-speaking poets, it spearheaded a powerful intellectual movement during its seven years of existence, and raised questions that are still highly relevant today. I started my research on *Souffles* in 2002, first as part of a master's degree and then within my PhD dissertation in comparative literature, which I defended in June 2010 at Paris IV-Sorbonne University. At the same time, I was a journalist in charge of literary criticism at *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, an independent French-language magazine created in 1997. My work was therefore greatly influenced by the debates of that period and made me aware of the political importance of *Souffles*.

Initially, the magazine was a purely poetic project. Abdellatif Laâbi, Mostafa Nissabouri, and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine — all three under the age of thirty and dissatisfied with the cultural scene — had decided to create their own literary and poetic platform. The first issue was a simple collection of poems, accompanied by works by artists who taught at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts (Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohammed Melehi, who designed the magazine).<sup>3</sup> A thunderous prologue by Laâbi set the tone: *Souffles* wanted to be a forum open to all innovative research. It dealt with literature, but also cinema, theatre, and the visual arts, being both a creative and analytical magazine with a rebellious tone: it questioned the absence of cultural policy, the prevailing neocolonialism, and the archaisms of Moroccan society. *Souffles* took strong positions: it rejected the racialisation of culture that its founders perceived in the Negritude movement, it rehabilitated the writer Driss Chraïbi, who had been denigrated since the publication of *Passé simple* in 1954, and it protested against those who accused French-language writers of betraying the country's cause.

*Souffles* soon attracted many talented writers from Morocco, the Maghreb, and the entire Third World. It was the first magazine in Morocco to open up dialogue between French-speaking and Arabic-speaking writers. Between 1968 and 1969, three bilingual issues were produced to showcase new writers such as Mohammed Berrada, Driss El Khoury, and Mohammed Zafzaf. And not only writers. This was a time of great proximity and interaction between creators from all disciplines: the magazine reported on art exhibitions, accompanied the work of filmmakers, and commented on the work of theatre professionals.

Most of these artists and poets came from middle-class backgrounds and were part of the tiny minority who had received higher education. One of the major concerns of the group, loyal readers of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, was the role of the intellectual in a Third World country. They could not conceive culture as anything other than the driving force behind the social transformations to which they aspired. They were very attentive to key issues of their time, be it the repression

<sup>3</sup> The Casablanca School of Fine Arts was a pioneering space for artistic and pedagogical renewal in post-independent Morocco, integrating modernist approaches with traditional Moroccan crafts and visual languages. The school played a key role in rethinking art's role in society through a postcolonial lens (see Lakrissa 2018) [EN].



Fig. 3 *Souffles*, issue 15, 1969.

Image: Internet Archive.

<https://archive.org/details/Souffles/Souffles%2015%20-%201969/mode/2up>

of the left and social movements in Morocco (in particular, the March 1965 riots in Casablanca), the decolonisation movement, the Israeli-Palestinian question, May 1968, or internal rivalries within the Soviet bloc. The importance of these debates led some authors to become increasingly involved in the political arena. Some of them were active in national left-wing parties, like the Union Nationale des Forces Populaires (UNFP) and the Parti de la Libération et du Socialisme (PLS), from which they eventually broke away to form various branches of the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist movement.

*Souffles* underwent a turning point in its history between 1969 (issue 15 was a special edition on the Palestinian Revolution) and 1970. Some members, including Abdellatif Laâbi and Abraham Serfaty, wanted to politicise the magazine, turning it into a forum for the development of a common reflection between the Marxist-Leninist groups Ilal Amam and 23 Mars. This politicisation precipitated repression: in January 1972, the magazine's main contributors were arrested, tortured, and sentenced to long prison terms during the political trials of 1973 and 1977. *Souffles* ceased its publication in Morocco and was relaunched in Paris by activists in exile. These new series in Arabic and French circulated clandestinely in Morocco. Their aim was to denounce human rights violations and raise awareness of the cause of political prisoners. The tone became very virulent. However, by the end of 1973, Ilal Amam and 23 Mars had fallen out, particularly with respect to the issue of Western Sahara, and each movement decided to abandon this united platform and launch its own magazine.

**LVG/JD:** This special issue explores the connections between periodical publications and post-dictatorial or post-authoritarian periods in a way that is both situated and diachronic. In this regard, we find it particularly noteworthy that *Souffles* — and, by extension, its context — is arousing renewed interest from various scholarly, curatorial, and artistic initiatives, several decades after its end.<sup>4</sup> In your opinion, to what extent does this historical episode and phenomenon remain valid and relevant in the present?

**KS:** The recent recovery of *Souffles* must be understood within the context of the repression that fell upon any sign of dissent, and consequently, the veil of silence that shrouded the magazine, which was deemed subversive. Some people got rid of the issues they owned out of fear: at the 1973 trial, the defendants — among them high school students — were presented with a copy of the magazine in French and Arabic as evidence. For a long time, *Souffles* was studied only abroad, and only from the perspective of its contribution to literary and cultural modernity, with no reference to its political dimension. While its legacy remained vivid in the

<sup>4</sup> For example, the journal held a special place in the first 'Invocação' of the 36th São Paulo Biennial, titled 'Souffles: On Deep Listening and Active Reception', which took place in Marrakesh in 2024. It was also featured in the exhibition 'Moroccan Trilogy', held at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid in 2021, as well as in the accompanying public programme [EN].

collective memory of Marxist-Leninist activists, outside academic and activist circles Moroccan youth remain unaware of this history.

As far as conservation and diffusion are concerned, the issues of *Souffles* held at the General Library of Rabat were not properly preserved and were even looted. From 1997 to 2007, Thomas C. Spear of the City University of New York and Anne George of the University of Seattle digitised the journal, paving the way for its rediscovery. In addition, the Moroccan press, which experienced something of a revival in the late 1990s, devoted articles to *Souffles*, seeking a symbolic connection, more or less explicitly. Finally, in 2010, Abdellatif Laâbi authorised the National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco to publish the journal online.<sup>5</sup>

*Souffles* reflected the collective imagination of its time, in its articulation with major political issues. But beyond that, it formulated a project of opposition to the dictatorship of Hassan II, particularly through its reflection on national culture. By creating the Association de recherche culturelle (ARC) in 1968, the magazine intended to 'contribute, through creative work and cultural mobilisation, to the liberation struggle waged by all the progressive forces in the country' (Various Authors 1968). It did not limit its cultural remit to aesthetic issues or entertainment events, but saw it as a melting pot for the development of a project that engaged the whole of society, a deeply political project that embraced cultural, social, economic, and political issues. The aim was to define a long-term project for Morocco.

This purpose, central to the magazine, had two objectives: to complete the decolonisation of Morocco by decolonising culture, freeing it from the distorting visions of colonialism and neocolonialism; and, above all, to oppose the re-traditionalisation of Moroccan society by the monarchy, which, in order to establish its authoritarian project, retained only the archaic and retrograde aspects of tradition, and limited Moroccan identity to Arabness and Islam.

*Souffles*, on the contrary, was interested in the modern and universal aspects of popular tradition and rejected its folklorisation for mainly tourist purposes. It refused to obscure the Amazigh and Jewish heritages and continued to carry the hope of a united Maghreb. In this sense, its resolutely modernist and liberating project proposed a restructuring of culture and values, a veritable cultural revolution in Morocco. The repression that struck the magazine and its authors, and the political measures that followed (the sabotage of education, particularly in the humanities, the marginalisation of culture and intellectuals, etc.) show that the authorities were not mistaken about the subversive nature of *Souffles*.

These debates have come back into the spotlight over the past decades. Civil society, particularly the human rights movement, has played a major role in this. The death of Hassan II in 1999 and the dismissal of Driss Basri, the Minister of

<sup>5</sup> However, access is no longer active, which appears to indicate the fragility of these agreements. The full contents of the issues of *Souffles* were made available by Abdellatif Laâbi: <http://laabi.net/souffles/> [EN].



Fig. 4 *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, special edition, no. 219, July-September 2005.

Internal Affairs who embodied the repressive system, contributed to a relative easing of the political climate. The creation of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, whose mission was to shed light on the crimes committed by the State during the so-called Years of Lead, as well as the publication of numerous testimonies by former political prisoners, made it possible to revisit this period.

This account was necessary, given that this memory had been obscured for many years for obvious political reasons. It is essential today to remember that intellectuals and artists opposed the dictatorship and that, despite the violence of the repression, their progressive ideas were not crushed. Their questions about the recognition of minorities found an echo in the demands of civil society, particularly in the movement that worked for the recognition of Amazigh culture. In other words, the recognition of Morocco's cultural diversity is not a recent development, and older and younger generations, whether in the artistic, intellectual, or activist spheres, have everything to gain by coming together to share their respective experiences. In 2013 I published the book *La revue Souffles, 1966-1973* to help reopen the debate.

**LVG/JD:** While conducting your research on *Souffles*, you were working at *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, which emerged precisely during the period of openness that seemed to follow the death of Hassan II. After its closure, you embarked on a new path, shifting from involvement in journalism to founding a publishing house, *En Toutes Lettres*. What led you to take this direction, and what implications has it had for your longstanding political and activist engagement with critical and independent publishing in Morocco?

**KS:** *En Toutes Lettres* was born from the regression of press freedoms that started in January 2010 when *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, where Hicham Houdaïfa and I worked, was shut down. This francophone weekly magazine was founded in 1997 during the transition between the reign of Hassan II and Mohammed VI and remained the gem of the independent press throughout the 2000s. But the feeling was short-lived: its critical tone against the government, especially on economic policy, led to years of judicial harassment and advertising boycotts. We were also aware of the changes in our profession with the rise of digital media. The race to produce images and 'content' is incompatible with the time it takes to investigate. Moreover, with editorial teams now made up of very small salaried staff and freelancers, journalists do not have the time or other resources to work on long-term projects.

*En Toutes Lettres* was therefore born in refusal of this double constraint: the invasion of the media by filler and self-censorship, and the diktat of speed. The book sector seemed to us, in spite of its difficulties, a possible alternative to make accessible this work of searching for the truth and the general interest, which is

indispensable to inform our citizens and to foster public debate. The book is also a more sustainable advocacy tool than a periodical to address causes that are close to our hearts: human rights, women's rights, social justice, etc. We are close to several civil society associations fighting against customary marriage, such as the Ytto Foundation, and for the recognition of culture as a lever for social and human development, such as Racines.<sup>6</sup>

The desire to continue our work of journalistic investigation has naturally led us to specialise in the essay. Apart from children's publishing, most Moroccan press is generalist, publishing both fiction and nonfiction. Numerous works on Morocco, most of them of high quality, are written and published abroad. That is why it seemed necessary to us, especially given the country's colonial history, to publish essays on Morocco *in* Morocco. We believed this would help make our fellow citizens and the world aware of Moroccan viewpoints of our own realities and work towards establishing Morocco as a central production site of its own analyses. Especially since Morocco is still not the central hub of its own writing.

The continuity between *En Toutes Lettres* and *Le Journal hebdomadaire* is evident in the way the publishing house operates. We initiate and commission most editorial projects through careful reflection on important current affairs that may require several years of research and writing. The most basic point of continuity, however, is the shared commitment to popularising knowledge and to disseminating a culture of debate and critical thinking. We are committed to making challenging texts accessible, both in form and content. Also, just like *Le Journal hebdomadaire*, our approach at *En Toutes Lettres* is grounded in our independence. While we are close to civil society organisations, we are not affiliated with any association or political party. This freedom has allowed us to join the International Alliance of Independent Publishing ([alliance-editeurs.org](http://alliance-editeurs.org)) in 2019, a network for solidarity, self-reflection, and advocacy within the industry for the notion of bibliodiversity.

Since our first publication in 2014, *En Toutes Lettres* has built a catalogue of twenty-six titles under five collections: 'Les Presses de l'Université Citoyenne' [The Citizen University Press], that focuses on the popularisation of research in the humanities and social sciences, and that became last year 'Économies, sociétés et humanités' [Economies, Societies and Humanities]; the 'Droit et Citoyenneté' [Rights and Citizenship] collection, which consists of guides to help people understand the law; 'Traduction' [Translations], which invites readers, through bilingual books, to rethink epistemological frameworks; 'Les Questions qui fâchent' [Controversial Questions], a collection that owes its title to Asma Lamrabet's essay 'Islam et femmes, les questions qui fâchent' [Islam and Women, Controversial Questions] and that aims to deconstruct representations of controversial subjects

<sup>6</sup> The organisation, established in 2010, was sued and then dissolved in 2019 for hosting the shooting of a satirical show, '1 Dîner 2 Cons', which the prosecution considered a threat to state institutions and Islam [EN].



forty years. However, French remains the language of the elites in Morocco, and has even become a language of caste, condemning — though not written into law — those who do not master it to subaltern careers. This is partly the reason why we try to offer our fellow citizens accessible works in French, so they may access the content while continuing to strengthen their knowledge of the language. As we see it, this is a matter of democracy.

Yet such accomplishments are relative. We know the context in which we operate, and we are not unaware of the difficulties. Since 2005, my work as a literary critic and cultural journalist has enabled me to understand the overarching problems in this field, which I have written about in my 2017 book, *Le livre à l'épreuve, les failles de la chaîne au Maroc*. Despite the immensity of these issues, it seemed essential to take them on. So much is at stake. My research on *Souffles*, a magazine that manifested a true humanist vision in Morocco, opened my eyes to the political dimension of cultural work. Moreover, Hicham Houdaïfa, through his work as a reporter since the 1990s, measured the societal consequences of the deprivation of access to school, books, and culture.

If *En Toutes Lettres* aims to situate itself as a hub and refuge for the production of humanist thought from the Global South, the challenges remain numerous. For example, the international circulation of works published in Morocco raises significant questions. On the one hand, the closure of borders hinders the circulation of books and ideas within the Maghreb, and the entire intellectual life of our countries, which are so close, pays the price for this nonintegration. And I don't even consider the possibility of publishing books from further afield in our continent, due to the cost of the transport, taxes, and custom duties, sometimes unduly imposed.

But above all, we still ask: how can you export ideas when you don't come from a society that is considered worthy or capable of such intellect? What happens when we are perceived via prejudices, often racist and islamophobic, that distort and inhibit understanding of our realities? How can we create more balanced and just discourse? This work is ongoing. It is both material and spectral. And it demands our attention. In the meantime, in Morocco, thirty-eight million citizens are waiting to gain access to a basic human right, still not guaranteed: the right to knowledge.

**LVG/JD: Given the demands and protests of the younger generations (so-called Gen Z) that erupted in Morocco in the autumn of 2025 (when we were working on this interview), how do you think these ideas have carried through to the present day? What role should the independent editorial sector play in giving visibility or amplifying these demands?**

**KS:** One of the main demands of the young people who have spoken out in the GenZ 212 movement is the right to quality education. And the right to memory and history are fundamental elements of education, because without them, our fellow citizens can't have the tools they need to participate in public debate in an informed manner. Of course, independent publishing, in conjunction with research but also with all the structures likely to relay this work, such as the press, libraries, etc., is at the heart of this project. But we still have a lot to do to consolidate our ecosystem, in order to lift our society up.

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