

Call for Crime

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Ladies, tonight I would like to encourage you to commit murder. You don't need sophisticated weapons to do it. Grab whatever you can get your hands on. Your purse, a pen with a sharp point, an umbrella or some pebble you have picked up from the ground. A book will also do. They say that women who read are dangerous: it's time to prove it. You know the victim well. She has lived with you for a long time. She has haunted some of your sleepless nights. Do not tremble, gentlemen, you are not the centre of the world and for once it is not you. Stay with us, you are safe and you might even be an accomplice to this murder.

This victim comes to us from the depths of time; she is a ghost that prowls around, a fantasy that devours us, a myth that prevents us. She is beautiful, she is sweet. She has, as in all children's stories, a voice as clear as a stream and lips made for kisses. She is, as Virginia Woolf describes her: "*intensely sympathetic, immensely charming. utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of the family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others.*"

Ladies, tonight I invite you to kill an innocent, to prey on an angel. You will not benefit from extenuating circumstances because the crime I am urging you to commit is unjust and despicable. The angel of the household, as Woolf calls her, is devoid of thoughts and desires of her own. She knows how to be silent, keeps her passions, her dreams of escape and personal fulfilment to herself. She does not denounce those who prevent her, nor does she point the finger at her torturers. As Germaine de Staël wrote, the angel of the house is the one who fulfils the woman's destiny, since "nature intended that the gifts of women should be destined for the happiness of others and of little use to themselves". A real woman, a woman as the patriarchal system has conceived her, carries within her a thousand renunciations. "A real woman," writes Mona Chollet, "is a graveyard of desires, of failed dreams, of illusions". A woman cannot have everything, she cannot desire more than what society has decided for her. And if, married, a mother, enjoying a social status that protects her, she persists in desiring, fate will punish her. She will end up under a train like Anna Karenina, she will drink poison like Madame Bovary, she will have Nathaniel Hawthorne's scarlet letter embroidered on her dress. You will have understood: tonight, I invite you to strangle Snow White, the sleeping beauty, the perfect mother, the conciliatory wife, to silence forever the one who is both the best and the worst part of yourself.

In Spain and England, a very interesting experiment was carried out on a group of children aged between 8 and 10. They were told that they were going to be cast for a brand of yoghurt and that they had to taste it on camera with a delighted look on their faces. The sociologists poured a spoonful of salt into the yoghurt pots and this is what happened. One hundred percent of the boys spat out the salted

yoghurt and expressed their disgust. Only a third of the girls refused to eat. The rest kept smiling at the camera hoping to get the part in the ad.

It seems to me that the path to emancipation, for every woman, consists in part of refusing to correspond to the models offered to us in childhood. Refusing to be silent, refusing to be conciliatory, refusing to carry the full weight of compromise. I am not the mother I would like to be. I am not up to the task as a daughter, as a wife. And while this may have undermined me or made me feel a heavy sense of guilt, I finally understood that one could not be a free woman without accepting to disappoint. To accept to displease when everything in our education, in our common myths, in the way we adorn ourselves, encourages us to satisfy. The need to please is a prison, which alienates us, which prevents us. The fear of displeasing, of being the one to cause scandal or grief, pushes us to remain silent and to give up our dream. Women are taught from childhood to fear transgression. Those who defy the norm, the divine law or the law of men, are transformed into outcasts. They are fed cautionary tales about little girls who stray from the path and get lost in the forest. They are warned against any recklessness, any daring, any initiative that will backfire.

Let's listen to Virginia Woolf again. *"When I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. You cannot write without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the ink pot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. »*

I am not going to lie to you. If you commit the crime I am inviting you to, you will probably be condemned and not understood. You will be called selfish, a bad mother, an inconsistent wife, an adventurer. But if I had to convince you, I would say that in the cell where you'll end up, you will be in good company. I live in this cell. And tonight, I want to tell you the story of the crimes that led me here.

When I was sixteen, I realised I was a girl. What does it mean to be a girl? At the time I said to myself: being a girl means being able to do less, having fewer rights. It was obvious to me because, when I asked why I couldn't do this or that, I was told: "that's not for girls". I have two sisters and often I heard people complaining about my father not having a boy. They made jokes and I didn't laugh. At that time, in Morocco, where I grew up, a woman could be repudiated with a few words. She couldn't travel without her husband's permission. She couldn't pass on her nationality to her children; in the event of divorce, she would lose custody of them. In front of a judge or a notary, a woman who testified was worth half as much as a man. She inherited only half of what her brother inherits. A woman cannot accompany a body to the cemetery. When her son dies, a mother has to wait three days to visit his grave. I asked for an explanation. I was told that women's bodies are impure, unlike men's. This is what being a girl means. To be given irrational explanations. To be sent back to your moods, your periods, your hair, to the vulnerability of this body which, the women warn us, men will only eat up. I was revolted by these

injustices, but my discomfort was even deeper. A dark, unspeakable uneasiness, all the heavier because I couldn't explain it to myself.

The Englishwoman Virginia Woolf, the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and the Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie all made the same observation at different times and on different continents. The world is full of "invisible borders", unspoken laws against which women are constantly stumbling. "You can't go in," the guard at the men's university library tells Virginia. "You can't go out," the harem master tells little Fatima. "You don't belong here," says a guest in a Luanda hotel where Chimamanda has settled, alone.

To a man who wanted to know why she had not saved more slaves, Harriet Tubman, the famous American abolitionist, replied: *"If I had convinced more slaves that they were slaves, I would have saved thousands more."* I owe my realisation to Simone de Beauvoir and her book, *The Second Sex*. I must have been fifteen years old when I came across a photograph of the Beaver. She is sitting at a table in the back room of Le Flore. Her hair is wisely held back in a bun, she is wearing an elegant blouse and her face is down. In front of her is a tall stack of books. This was the first time I had heard of her. My mother told me that she was an intellectual, an independent personality, a woman who, as a teenager, had dared to tell one of her friends that one day she would be "a famous author". After seeing this photograph, I borrowed *The Second Sex* from the library. I must admit, I was expecting a licentious, erotic book, a book that answered the burning questions that run through a sixteen-year-old girl's body. I blushed as I handed my card to the librarian. Reading the first few pages was a disappointment. It was not about love, it was not about sex, it was not a treatise on pleasure. But I continued.

Finally, I found some answers. What was presented to me as natural, set in stone, was nothing more than a historical reality. I did not owe my subjugation to the intrinsic qualities or defects of my sex. But to centuries of patriarchal domination. I was not born a woman but everything around me conspired to make me one. I could be the sole actress of my destiny.

My crime began in a library. As a talkative and lying little girl, I found all the pleasures of the world in books. There I found a new life, bigger and wider than my own and the dreams that were conceived for me. Literature was a territory of emancipation and as a woman, a Moroccan, a little girl from a country that I felt was far from the centre of the world, I discovered the possibility of reinventing myself. Books gave me weapons to understand, to defend myself, to respond and to convince. I was a woman and a reader. I was dangerous.

When I was eighteen, I moved to Paris. I was a naïve, nerdy student and I discovered the most beautiful city in the world. The very day I arrived, I went to the Café de Flore, looking for the ghost of Simone de Beauvoir. It was a hot September afternoon. A woman was sitting on the terrace, reading and drinking a glass of wine, which in Morocco would have been impossible. At that moment, I said to myself, and it's quite strange when I think about it: "if I can spend the afternoon on this terrace, drinking and smoking alone, I will make something of my life. And like Simone de Beauvoir, I made myself a promise: to become a writer.

Not long ago it was pointed out to me that it was not surprising that I had become a novelist, coming from a country where we are taught to lie from childhood. I grew up under the reign of Hassan II, in a

country where fear and arbitrariness reigned. In Morocco, you could say that I lived in a fiction. In this fictional world, we all pretend to be virtuous. We pretend to respect the laws that forbid sex outside marriage, abortion and homosexuality and those around us pretend to believe us. In this world, the social mask you wear, the lies you tell, are not just to make you look good or to get respect, but simply to save your skin. One is a Tartuffe out of survival instinct, out of necessity. Whoever dares to speak the truth, whoever dares to break this kind of spell and hold up a mirror to others, will have his life shattered. "Keep the truth away from me", others seem to say.

So how can you write? How to write when you come from a country where you are taught that to say is to betray? That women must be discreet? That the truth is not good to hear? How can you write when what you want to do in writing is precisely to denounce appearances, to tell our shame, our darkest secrets? In my country, some people reproach me for the crudity of my writings and my commitment to sexual rights. They say: this is not a priority. It is a shame. But what hurts me most is not the attacks on me, the death threats, the messages describing in detail the rape they want to inflict on me. It is not the people who tell me that I am wrong or those who consider that I defend deviant or immoral ideas. It isn't the people who call me a whore, and it isn't the remark of an Islamist MP who said that if I advocated decriminalising sex it was because I was too ugly to have it myself. No, the ones who hurt me the most are the ones who say, "You're right. But you shouldn't say it." Those who, while sharing my values and recognising the legitimacy of this struggle, end up whispering: "Even if it's right, you should shut up". This condemnation to silence is unbearable for me.

My friend Kamel Daoud calls this "the solitude of the Muslim intellectual". In any case, I would say that it is extremely painful to live in a society that rejects those who examine it; a society where critical thinking is not encouraged, where philosophy and the social sciences have been removed from the national education system. This is undoubtedly why I wanted to be a writer: because I couldn't close my eyes or my mouth and because I had the desire to break into pieces this shoddy politeness which is the veil behind which so many tragedies are woven. To prudence, substitute audacity, to politeness, insolence.

The Algerian writer, poet and journalist Tahar Djaout wrote: "Silence is death. And you, if you speak, you die. If you keep quiet, you die. So speak and die." Tahar Djaout was shot twice in the head on 26 May 1993, a victim like so many others of obscurantism and hate. Isn't this finally, in a tragic way, the injunction made to us intellectuals, writers, researchers, journalists or artists? Speak out, whatever the cost. To give voice to the voiceless, the invisible, the marginalized, even if their words disturb, upset, contradict the doxa or the right-thinking. To speak, to bring out a language that has both weight and meaning and that, as a result, breaks the litany of wooden language or rancid ideologies. To continue to believe that a man who reads, who thinks, who questions, is a man who will be a factor of progress, better equipped to face existence and build collective ideals.

A writer always talks about the wrong things. He goes to places where no one has invited him and where he may not even have the right to go. The writer takes no truth for granted and must not be afraid to attack the masters and idols. To write is to take the risk of being excluded, misunderstood, rejected by the group, the neighbourhood, the community. And believe me, these fears have the power to destroy a vocation. I started writing not because I wanted to be liked or understood. But on the contrary, because

I finally felt capable of facing up to dislike and because I was convinced that it was ultimately impossible to understand others and to be totally understood. You can't write without having a thirst for the absolute, a radical demand.

You will say to me: how can we do this in our time, when we are enjoined not to offend anyone, to sweep away hierarchies, when an artist is silenced if the man is not pure and creators are encouraged to go to confession for a bad thought? How to write without a bad thought? Today, the tensions of public debate, the emergence of social networks and movements such as cancel culture, tend to restrict the freedom of the artist and the writer. Perhaps the most depressing thing about what is happening today is the self-censorship that many of us inflict on ourselves. Terrorised by the thought of misunderstanding, artists are content to be smooth, in tune with the zeitgeist, in line with current opinion. Of course, this does not mean that we can say anything and that the writer is irresponsible. A writer is free and therefore has, as Bataille wrote, a "moral hyper-responsibility". And I think it is perfectly normal and healthy for us to revisit, with all our critical spirit, works of the past that may have disseminated sexist or racist ideas.

But to erase, to cancel? As a writer, I cannot support that. We write against erasure, to dig up corpses, to talk with ghosts, we feed off our shame and remorse. In literature, we know that nothing is erased. In books, time and borders do not exist. They are that territory where the living and the dead can coexist forever. Woolf, Duras, Chekhov, Tolstoy have broken down the walls that separate our cities from our cemeteries. We know that we must look human ugliness in the face, its monstrosity, that we must face our past and confront it. Literature cherishes scars. Above all, it is a place of complexity. This is what great books teach us: that we cannot understand everything, that the world is ambiguous, that the meaning of things and events often escape us. And that being satisfied with judging is often insufficient. To the question: can we continue to read Céline, Heidegger or Nabokov, can we still listen to Wagner or admire the works of Gauguin? I would answer that we should stop treating readers or viewers as idiots. We should give people a taste for intelligence, knowledge and complexity. One can read *Journey to the End of the Night* and be dazzled by it, while at the same time judging the man who wrote it as abject.

But let's not give this fashion of cancel culture more importance than it has. In Europe, what happens in American colleges tends to excite our intellectuals a lot. But it prevents us from seeing that this is not where the greatest danger lies. The real cancel culture is the one that consists of blowing up Buddhas with dynamite, the one that consists of burning Timbuktu manuscripts or reducing the heritage of Aleppo to ashes. The real cancel culture is practised every day, with weapons and blood. It erases languages, religions and communities. It suffocates artists who are locked up, it kills the dreams of millions of women who are prevented from becoming what they want. This is what we have to fight against first.

One day, after a conference like this, a young woman came up to me. My mother was with her and the young woman asked her: "Do you still love your daughter? I would like to write too, but I am too afraid that my family will reject me, that people in the neighbourhood will resent me, that no one will understand me." Of course, you can imagine what I told her. I simply pushed her to commit a crime. To read and to write.