

## LIFE AS STRUGGLE: REMEMBERING MOHAMMED SHUKRI AS A MOROCCAN & AFRICAN WRITER

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**Abstract.** This article explores Mohammed Shukri's lasting impact on Moroccan and African literature. It examines his life with a focus on *For Bread Alone* (1973) and its initial censorship. Shukri's provocative autobiographical writings continue to inspire Moroccan authors, offering a model of insight and honesty. The paper analyses the events that shaped his narrative voice, defiance against censorship, and enduring influence. Shukri's example also highlights African literature's transformative power in guiding postcolonial communities toward independence, justice, and prosperity. Beyond paying tribute, this study underscores how Shukri exemplifies the 'life writing' genre's role in African literary development.

**Keywords:** Mohammad Shukri, *For Bread Alone*, Moroccan literature, African literature, post-colonial Africa, writing, censorship

### INTRODUCTION

Writing serves as a powerful instrument for survival, liberation, and self-expression, particularly evident in the "life writing" genre (García 2020, 8). This is vividly illustrated across numerous literary works and epochs. When we write, we reveal something about ourselves and the world we experience. One writer who did this courageously and controversially was Mohammad Shukri, a Moroccan author who, independently, taught himself Arabic at the age of twenty. Throughout his career, Shukri faced censorship and criticism for his autobiographical novel *For Bread Alone* (1982), which recounts his harsh escape and immigration from the famine-stricken Morocco's Rif region (Northern Morocco) to

Tangiers in search of a better life. In this novel, Shukri exposes the social, economic, and ethical dilemmas of contemporary Morocco during late-colonial and post-colonial times. His autobiography is not a narration of an individual's experience only. It is a portrayal of the suffering and struggle of a whole nation, culture, and identity as they undergo historical transformations. This is why his novel, originally written in Arabic, was banned from publication in that language until 1982, while an English translation by Paul Bowles was published as early as 1973. Local Moroccan readers were denied access to Shukri's original voice and vision for almost a decade. Even today, for one ideological reason or another, Shukri's novel continues to be disliked by many, who consider it unworthy, illiterate, and vulgar. Therefore, exploring what makes Shukri's work so significant and provocative—and why you should read or care about it—is essential. Equally important is recognizing his position as both a Moroccan writer and, often overlooked, a member of the first generation of post-colonial African writers.

Shukri's book faces numerous obstacles and prejudices that prevent it from reaching its potential readers, particularly Moroccans, Arabs, Africans, and, eventually, global audiences. The main obstacle in the past was the systematic censorship of the book for a decade before coming out in its original format. Even after its publication, Shukri's work continues to be dismissed and attacked by those who claim to be experts, academics, and educators of literature. Many teachers discourage their students from reading Shukri or his works. However, their criticism of Shukri's book is not based on academic groundings. For instance, when I tried to read Shukri for the first time as a teenager in the same region that Shukri left as a boy and narrated as an adult, I had to hide the book from everyone around me. My high school Arabic teacher knew this and tried to persuade me, as other critics openly say, that Shukri's work has a poor linguistic quality and that I should avoid it. "Shukri is a street dog", she said, "he's not a writer, his texts lack literary value, and you should stay away

from him”. This shows how even the very place that Shukri was born and consistently wrote about rejects his novel and the contributions he must make to the collective memory of his people. How can one expect readers to understand the social and personal challenges being addressed if the writer’s own community rejects both him and his literary work?

Shukri’s book also faces opposition from his friends and family members, who object to his bold portrayal of his life in Morocco during colonial and post-colonial times. For example, his sister Malika Shukri expresses in an interview with the DW media outlet that as a family, they “oppose *For Bread Alone* for what it includes of sexual stories, and for the way Shukri characterised the violent connection our father had with the family. I’ve never read it, but I reject it all” (Derouich 2014). Similarly, Abdallah El Wahabi, the owner of the coffee shop that Shukri used to visit, and a close friend of his, states that all Shukri’s friends in Tangiers’ inner market lane have spoken out against the autobiographical novel because of its obscenity and its aggressiveness in both form and content (Derouich 2014). *For Bread Alone* is a book that challenges everything that limits the creative process. When one reads Shukri’s biography, one can find many interesting aspects that go beyond the explicit sexual stories or the vulgar language that he allegedly uses. Shukri’s case, in my view, is very similar to Henry Miller’s. Both struggled to find their place in life and survive in their times, despite being from a background that was not expected to be creative or expressive through writing. However, even though both Shukri and Miller excelled at writing, the readers who encounter the profanity of their texts refuse to accept the idea that these authors can write. Therefore, instead of engaging with what the text might offer, many simply dismiss the work as “unfit” or “too immoral” to be read.

*For Bread Alone* begins by showing how Shukri’s migration experience traumatised him on many levels, especially the cultural identity shock he faced because he spoke a different language

from the people of Tangiers. Shukri, instead of using the Moroccan Arabic Dialect, only spoke Tarrifit (a Moroccan variant). This is normal considering that the people of the Rif region, as well as other parts of Morocco, have their unique and diverse language variants. However, in Shukri's time, and even today, there is a divisive mentality that hinders constructive collaboration between Moroccans from different regions, languages, and traditions. Shukri often claimed that he learned Arabic and how to write in it only to have a medium through which his voice and message could be heard and read (Mohand 2023). He even said that no other language could make him feel comfortable but his native tongue. And, because he was mocked and bullied as a child for speaking his mother's tongue, Shukri developed a desire to learn his bully's language and infuse it with his distinctiveness (Mohand 2023). In other words, he wanted a medium through which the people who had oppressed him could feel his anger and resentment.

#### MOHAMED SHUKRI: LIFE AS STRUGGLE

Shukri was born in 1935 in the small village of Beni Chiker in northeastern Morocco. The village lies at the heart of the Rif region, in the province of Nador, 4 km. from Melilla (a former Moroccan city that, to this day, continues to be occupied by Spain). Shukri's birthplace allowed him to learn Tarrifit as his mother tongue before he encountered any other languages. Spanish also had an important role in his, as he came across it as a second language in the Rif region during Spanish colonialism and in Tangiers as well. Shukri first encountered Arabic in its Moroccan dialect form when he moved to Tangiers with his family. They left his hometown in the 1940s, a decade marked by severe famine in the Rif region. Shukri learned the Moroccan dialect in Tangiers so that he could communicate with the locals and find quick jobs. He was called "Child of Famine" after being

mocked for speaking Tarrifit when he first arrived in Tangiers (Mohand 2023). Language thus had a significant impact on his awareness as a child, teenager, and adult. This is crucial for understanding how language contributes to Shukri's traumatised. After all, it was the bullying and rejection of other Moroccans that motivated him to learn Classical Arabic at the age of twenty and excel at adopting it to write his literature. Shukri later acquired some basic communication skills in both French and English as demonstrated by an existing half an hour interview available online (Ali 2019). However, Tarrifit remains his mother tongue, followed by Arabic, which he thinks is more suitable for literary expression than any other language. We are not concerned with whether Shukri's linguistic isolation in Tangiers was good or bad, but rather with how it added value to his lived experience and, more importantly, to his unique identity as an artist and African writer. Shukri's experiences with different languages at different stages of his life have clearly influenced his personality and what he wrote about.

By looking at Shukri's struggle to survive as a human before becoming a writer, and beyond being a mere autobiography, one can see that *For Bread Alone* is a courageous cry against the cultural assimilation and subordination of marginalised groups in protectorate Morocco. Through telling Shukri's story, the novel reflects his resistance against the forces that tried to silence his existence and life. And, perhaps more importantly, those that tried to silence the pain of his people. Writing is a powerful tool for fighting such forces. Shukri knew this, which is why he taught himself to write. It is important to leave a written record that depicts your personal experience. After all, it is only through the most subjective experiences that one can truly understand the collective reality of a certain time and place. People who are deprived of their freedom usually have two choices: either remain silent and suffer quietly or rise above all circumstances and fight against assimilation. Shukri's arrival in Tangiers, and his belonging to a different language and region, made him a target

and labelled as illiterate, barbaric, and unfit to contribute artistically to anything. It is here that Shukri emerges as a writer who challenges ideological barriers and overcomes them with great determination, one that embodies the struggle to preserve his own identity and achieve cultural liberation. It thus becomes clear that *For Bread Alone* is a text that shouts, “I am different, but I have a voice. I am different, but I exist. I am different, but I am not going to be forced to be quiet about it”.

#### WRITING, CENSORSHIP AND FREEDOM

To understand the literary censorship of Shukri’s book, it is essential to grasp the historical period which rejected the difference that lies at the core of the freedom issue, namely the freedom to exist as one truly and naturally wishes to be, rather than as someone else imposes existence on them. Many forms of oppression limit human freedom, whether on an individual or collective level. The worst are those that shape us in ways we do not fundamentally agree with. A wise civilisation realises, quite early, that embracing all its aspects contributes to society’s growth. On the contrary, the restrictions imposed on people’s ability to express, depict, and imagine their realities all lead to the creation of a hypocritical and unhealthy society (Spivak 1988, 271). Unfortunately, this is Morocco’s story with Shukri’s book. During the censorship years, the book was widely read by Moroccans across the country, as well as Arabs in the Middle East. When asked about this, people would deny that they had read it privately and had not only enjoyed it, but also related to many of the issues raised by Shukri. If this shows anything, it is that people are too afraid to face their problems in public, preferring to do so privately. Shukri breaks the private silence by narrating his inner feelings and views on how he lived in a colonial and corrupt Morocco, a place where he not only lacked a proper childhood but also miraculously survived several near-

death situations. To challenge an entire system that silences those feelings is to wage war on oneself. Therefore, it becomes relevant to examine the case of Shukri when one wants to understand the struggle for free literary and artistic expression in the post-colonial Moroccan context (Laroui 1977, 45).

Shukri is a writer who is censored not only on a literary level but also, perhaps more profoundly, on a cultural one. He is denied the right to exist as he is, forced to speak and write in another language, ignored because of his social status, and despised because of his origins. What would any man in his situation do? How does one react to such feelings of oppression against one's identity? There are many possible reactions to such situations, but I would agree with what the title of this essay suggests: "Writing as Being". My experience with Shukri has been that his writing, including but not limited to *For Bread Alone*, is often misunderstood and read only on its surface. Many academics would criticise Shukri's stylistic choices. Or, when trying to sound analytical, they would disregard his experience as irrelevant. This is problematic on many levels, the most obvious of which is the intentional silencing and passivity imposed on the "other" human being in question (Said 1978, 28). It is not just about Shukri anymore, but about all other writers who have suffered and continue to suffer the same fate of literary censorship. Human experience cannot be reduced to a single term. Difference exists because of being human. When difference is expressed artistically, one realises how important it is in the fight against injustice. Writing is, in the Heideggerian sense of the word, a mode of Being. Shukri's decision to learn to write stems from a strong need for a tool of expression, a way of responding, and a gateway to finding the self within a literary history that records rather than silences the experience of being human. That's why writing is a way of Being, and Being can only be achieved when one is in touch with true freedom. This, I think, Shukri has shown brilliantly both through his personal life and his artistic works.

When asked about his book, Shukri's own words reveal that the novel "refuses to die. The children in the streets don't call me by my name, they call me *For Bread Alone*. This book tells me daily: here I am, here, alive!" (2019). Indeed, the book's vitality shows that its impact goes beyond exploring literary themes to addressing a human issue, that of an identity in crisis as it faces cultural assimilation and linguistic domination. Despite this, and as the novel constantly proves, the message eventually gets through and survives, overcoming all barriers on its way. Which shows that freedom is a human aspiration and need. There will always be books, words, ideas, and resistance against mainstream systems that normalise the standardisation of individual and collective consciousnesses (Fanon 1961, 43). Simply put, humans cannot stay silent about their situation. Literature plays a significant role in shaping our cultural psyche. Thus, one can see Shukri using literature as a medium to produce a work that focuses on an urgent call for free agency. He rises above the societal thorns that limit free expression to create a literary work that reflects his own rebellious personality.

What matters in Shukri's narrative is, as with great books, its ability to transcend literary form and take on a cultural one, preserving both the individual and collective histories of Morocco while aiding in the fight against the colonial and systemic epistemic violence inflicted on the people (Mbembe 2001, 14). It is also remarkable how it reflects the universally shared human need for freedom, justice, and liberation. Shukri, when talking about his book, has said that lack of bread "humiliates the soul (...). The hungry and naked will not feel the pain in *For Bread Alone*, only the afflicted from the dreary oppression will do" (Mohand 2023). Shukri's aim with his narrative is clear: to express whatever dignity the oppressed in Moroccan society still have, and not, as some think, to provoke much criticism for its artistic choices or obscenity in dealing with sexual and taboo subjects of the period. Or, at the very least, in Gayatri Spivak's words, the novel is an attempt to give the voiceless a voice so that an authentic

representation can emerge from the situation, one that would put an end to the imposed epistemic exploitation and intentional erasure of certain histories and lived experiences (Spivak 1988, 271).

It is also important to mention that communities that read Moroccan literature, mostly Arabs, are often the first to shame and censor their own writers and deny them the ability to express themselves. Another example from the Arab world is Abdel Rahman Mounif, who is attacked not for the issues he raises but for how he does it. However, as this essay shows, we need these writers because they become militant just by existing and writing, reflecting through their works the value of Being human. Clearly, this Being cannot be comfortable if it does not achieve true freedom. Thus, it becomes our main duty to have an open attitude toward literature and, above all, to eliminate all censor outlets that prevent it from leading us to our liberation. This is true not only for Morocco and Shukri but for the whole African continent and its efforts to develop an authentic literary canon that accounts for the different experiences of its societies (Appiah 1992, 56).

#### “FOR BREAD ALONE” (1973) AND “THE CREATIVE PROCESS”

*For Bread Alone* breaks free from anything that hinders the creative process. By delving into Shukri’s biography, one can discover fascinating aspects that go beyond explicit sexual narratives or alleged vulgar language. Shukri’s narrative is unique, marked by his struggle to establish himself and persevere in a challenging era, defying expectations associated with his background. Despite his exceptional writing skills, readers often refuse to acknowledge his literary merit, dismissing his work as “unfit” or “too immoral” to be read due to their reluctance to engage with the content on its own merits.

Shukri's life, as portrayed in *For Bread Alone*, is not intended to encourage others to follow a path of turmoil, despite what critics may argue. Rather, it serves as a realistic depiction of the harsh realities of Moroccan society during a specific and sensitive period. Shukri was well aware of this, as evidenced by the opening pages of his book, where he explains why he began writing. At that moment, Shukri stresses the importance of writers sharing their own experiences as honestly as possible, stating:

Life has imparted upon me the wisdom of patience, urging me to navigate the intricate dance of time while retaining the core of my acquired wisdom. Speak your truth before your final breath, for it will undoubtedly carve its path into the world. Its fate matters not; what holds significance is the spark it kindles—whether an emotion, a sorrow, or a fleeting caprice—that can illuminate even the darkest and most perilous corners. (Shukri 2006, 8) [My translation from Arabic to English.]

Shukri's quandary with his society strongly reminds me of Baldwin's perspective on the artist's role in *The Creative Process*. In this brief piece, Baldwin refers to the artist as "the incorrigible disturber of peace". Shukri, both in life and even after his passing, remains an unwavering disturber, constantly reminding the people of Morocco and Africa as a whole about the prevailing injustices. Moreover, he sheds light on how these injustices persist in post-colonial society, distorting African identities and perpetuating an unjust state that must be addressed through literature. The ultimate goal is for society to take responsibility and strive for redemption by sharing these narratives (Tajjiou 2024, 13).

It is evident in every society that when faced with a bold and honest artist, society tends to reject them and their work. This rejection can be explained by Baldwin's belief that artists have the responsibility to make their societies see the truth once again, especially after they have become accustomed to injustices. Baldwin argues that any genuine artistic creation that challenges the *status quo* will inevitably face resistance and rejection.

Baldwin's description of this matter is reflected in Shukri's work and the works of other post-colonial African writers. He writes:

Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real (Baldwin 1962, 19).

#### MOHAMMED SHUKRI – THE AFRICAN WRITER

Shukri's identity as an African writer often goes unnoticed, despite his unwavering commitment to portraying the realities of Africa and his relentless pursuit of positive change through literary critique. This oversight stems from a common misconception that his work, originally written in Arabic, holds no significance in the broader context of post-colonial African literature. However, what many fail to grasp is that Arabic is not Shukri's mother tongue; rather, it is Tarrifit. Just like South African or Ghanaian writers who employ English to convey their literary narratives, Shukri chooses Arabic as his medium of expression (Chakrabarty 2000, 12).

The artist's intent and the value it carries are the true essence of their work, with language being a malleable tool. Therefore, the authenticity of a piece as genuinely African should not be solely determined by the language used, but rather by its sincere portrayal of African truths. Shukri's contributions to post-colonial African literature have left a lasting impact on generations of writers, tackling profound subjects and emphasizing the importance of critiquing African realities while envisioning innovative solutions. Regardless of an author's stylistic choices or literary preferences, if their work aims to dissect and reconstruct the post-colonial African experience, it inherently embodies the spirit of Africa (Appiah 1992, 56). Shukri's use of Arabic, far from diminishing his African identity, showcases the diverse range of expressions within the continent, and the heart and substance of his work truly reflect its African essence.

In remembering Shukri on the 20th anniversary of his passing, I would like to highlight that, unfortunately, many literary analyses and interpretations of his life come from various backgrounds, but few truly emphasize his significance as a first-generation African writer who made a massive contribution to the appreciation and uniqueness of post-colonial African literature. I believe that a more thorough examination of Shukri's work in conjunction with other African literary efforts is necessary. This exploration could lead to a much-needed shift, breaking the tendency to categorise his contributions solely within an Arabic community. Instead, it would reveal the true nature of Shukri's work as a post-colonial African writer, characterised by his militancy, honesty, Africanness, and boldness.

Certain authors possess an inherent ability to withstand the test of time. Many of them have faced challenges within their societies. In my view, Shukri, though he passed away just two decades ago, demonstrated during his lifetime that he belongs to the category of artists who transcend time. This homage to his legacy not only reflects on the past but also underscores the future possibilities his contributions have unlocked for African readers and writers.

## CONCLUSION

In honouring Shukri's memory, we are reminded of the profound influence African literature wields in its quest to represent its society uniquely and purposefully, transcending style, genre, or narrative techniques. African literary discourse has often been marred by internal conflicts among writers and critics, particularly evident during the 1970s. This era witnessed notable disputes, such as the harsh criticism Ayi Kwei Armah faced for his novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* from peers like Achebe, who dismissed it as a "sick book" due to its candid existentialism (Achebe 1973, 624). However, criticism that seeks to stifle an author's voice under the guise of literary standards or

sociopolitical leverage does a disservice to the field. Such restrictive critiques hinder the breadth of expression that African literature can and is already offering.

Shukri, who passed away from cancer in 2003, epitomised the defiant spirit of a writer unyielding to censorship or silence. His legacy, rooted in integrity and unwavering conviction, challenges future generations to write with honesty and boldness, continuing to enrich and diversify African literary landscapes. His life and work inspire a call to embrace broader narratives and resist the confines of conventional criticism, ensuring that the true essence and potential of African literature are realised.

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