



## CHAPTER 5

---

# Orality/Aurality and Voice of the Voiceless Mother in Abla Farhoud's *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail*

*Eglė Kačkutė*

First-person narratives of mothering written from the perspective of monolingual migrant mothers who almost exclusively speak their own native language to their children are exceptionally few.<sup>1</sup> The novel

---

This publication has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 952366, and from the Centre for Gender Research and the Department of Literature at Uppsala University.

<sup>1</sup>I refer here to Gill Rye's definition of narratives of mothering: "Literary texts where the mother is herself either the first-person narrative subject or, in the first-person narratives, the figure whose point of view is paramount" (2009, 17).

---

E. Kačkutė (✉)

Department of French Philology, Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania  
e-mail: [egle.kackute-hagan@ff.vu.lt](mailto:egle.kackute-hagan@ff.vu.lt)

© The Author(s) 2023

H. Wahlström Henriksson et al. (eds.), *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17211-3\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17211-3_5)

77

*Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* (1998) (*Le bonheur a la queue glissante*)<sup>2</sup> by the Canadian Quebecois author of Lebanese origin, Abla Farhoud, is a remarkable and rare example. The novel is an important part of the Quebecois literature and one of the key texts of migrant writing in Quebec. As such, it has been widely researched and interpreted through the lens of *écriture migrante*,<sup>3</sup> as a rich and valuable reflection on the issues of immigrant identity, belonging, transculturality, and mobility especially from the feminist point of view. This chapter reads the novel in light of critical motherhood studies and feminist philosophy as an exploration of what it means to mother in a language that is perceived as foreign by one's children and the community one lives in; what it means to mother in a country the language of which one does not speak and whose social and cultural norms one does not fully understand. One of the most important objectives of this chapter is to theorise the formal literary narrative representation of the voice of a seemingly voiceless migrant mother who is silent in the language of the host country.

To do this, I will use Marianne Hirsch's classic notion of the mother/daughter plot (1989) together with Adriana Cavarero's concept of the double voice that stems from her feminist rereading of the history of philosophy. Cavarero maintains that metaphysics "insists on *what* is Said and never asks after *who* is Saying" (2005, 29), thus privileging mind over body, *semantike* (meaning) over *phone* (voice or sound), and devocalising the *Logos* (word, thought, or speech). As a critique of metaphysics, she uncovers an alternative philosophical and cultural history that focusses on the embodied oral aspects of the saying, on the musicality and the pleasure of speaking, the specificity of each individual voice, and the relationality of the speaker and the listener. Speaking, Cavarero claims, is a fundamentally relational act. Speech fails if there is no one to listen and to respond: "It takes at least a duet, a calling and a responding—or, better, a reciprocal intention to listen, one that is already active in the vocal emission, and that reveals and communicates everyone to the other" (5). Finally, Cavarero

<sup>2</sup> Having won a very important France-Québec-Philippe Rossillon literary prize at its publication in 1998 and the France-Quebec Literary Prize in 1999, it went on to become an international best seller and enjoys a positive academic reception. Unless indicated otherwise, translations of quotations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> *Écriture migrante* is a literary phenomenon that emerged in Quebec in the 1980s. It is fiction written by authors born abroad that "is defined by themes related to displacement and hybridity as well as to forms, often tinged with autobiography" ("qui se définit par des thèmes liés au déplacement et à l'hybridité et par des formes particulières, souvent teintées d'autobiographie." Chartier 2002, 305).

locates the uniqueness of every human being in their embodied voice and posits the supremacy of *phone* over *semantike* or the vocality of discourse over its content. She traces that tradition back to Homer, the blind poet, who relies on the muses as a source to his poetry and to the entire oral culture of *epos*. I will apply this theory to read a novel written in French by an author whose first language is Arabic and in which the oral aspect of language, the voice of the mother, is important both structurally and symbolically.

### DOUNIA'S STORY

The novel *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* tells the story of an illiterate Lebanese migrant woman, Dounia, who is seventy-five years old at the time of the narrative and mother to six children, five of whom are born in Lebanon and one in Montréal. Dounia is born and grows up in Lebanon, in the village Chaghour. She loses her mother as a young child and as a teenager marries her now husband, Salim, whom she found lovable at the time and who, she believes, must have loved her (Farhoud 1998, 43). Leaving Chaghour at the age of seventeen to get married in another village several kilometres away feels like emigration to her (43), and she spends the twelve years in her new home “perceived and feeling as ‘a stranger’” (Dahab, 110). It is in that village that she first suffers domestic violence at the hands of her husband Salim. Summoned by her husband, who had emigrated two years previously, Dounia first relocates to Montreal as a young wife and mother of five: Abdallah aged twelve; Samira, Farid, Samir, and Myriam aged four. She is reluctant to go as she rather enjoys life in Lebanon, looking after her children and sustaining the family with the money Salim sends her from Montreal. Salim runs a corner shop in Montreal while living with his estranged mother. After a ten-year stint in Montreal during which Dounia survives a post-partum depression and sees most of her children become adults, she follows her husband to Lebanon for a few years, where she suffers from a reverse culture shock before being forced back to Canada by the civil war. Illiterate and subject to the patriarchal family law that makes social interactions difficult, Dounia never learns French or English. Apart from a few words and broken phrases in French she uses to communicate with her grandchildren, she spends her life in social isolation, cooking and looking after her family. “I don’t know how to speak,” says Dounia at the beginning of the novel. “I leave it to

Salim. I know how to feed people” (Dahab 2003, 50).<sup>4</sup> With these words the narrator establishes the premises of Dounia’s subjectivity—the subjectivity of someone who lives her entire life through others, in utter lack of social agency. Lacking the linguistic means herself, Dounia entrusts her life story to her daughter, Myriam, who writes it in the first person but through Dounia’s point of view.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the novel has been read along two conflicting interpretive lines: first, as a story of non-belonging, marginalisation, isolation, lack of subjectivity, and lack of voice (Miraglia 2005; Montandon 2006; Dahab 2009; Maddox 2010; Pruteanu 2012, 2016); second, as a story of subject development and finding or being given a voice. The first interpretive trend is much louder and more pronounced. For example, for Pruteanu, Dounia’s (2016) “principal traits of character are her profound silence and resignation” (3) and the only power Dounia maintains is the power she exerts in the kitchen. Elizabeth F. Dahab (2009) frames the narrative as the tale of the mother’s solitude and abandonment as well as the story of her loss of voice. The second interpretive trend focusses on ways in which the novel resists Dounia’s subjection to silence and social insignificance. Anne Marie Miraglia, for example, claims that although the novel highlights the difficulties of social, cultural, and linguistic integration of migrants in Canada, it also demonstrates that while socially marginalised, Dounia is actually well integrated in the affective family structure. Kate Averis (2017) reads the novel as a story of ongoing self-development, mobility, and transmission. She argues that the home that Dounia reconstructs for herself in Quebec around her children becomes a site of subjective growth for her and her children. Finally, Allison Connolly posits that “[w]hile Dounia was not able to overcome the barriers to integration, her children were” (2017, 41) suggesting that Dounia’s children’s social success is largely, if not exclusively, due to her mothering.

The one thing all scholars agree about is that the mother-daughter relationship in the novel and the problem of the mother’s voice are its central concerns. The dominating view in Farhoud scholarship seems to be that “Myriam desires to give her mother a voice by telling the story of her life” (Connolly 2017, 59). Thus, by the end of the novel Dounia emerges as a “speaking subject” (Pruteanu 2016, 4) whose voice has finally been heard, thanks to her daughter’s writing talent. In short, the consensus seems to be that it is the daughter, Myriam, who gives Dounia a voice, thus endowing her with subjectivity.

<sup>4</sup>Translated from French by Jill McDougall.

In this chapter I take issue with this view, arguing that Dounia's story is written in more than one voice, to use Cavarero's expression. I will pick up the interpretive thread laid out by Pruteanu (2012) and Connolly (2017) who both briefly suggest that the novel is at least to some capacity written in Dounia's own voice.

### THE MOTHER'S BOOK

*Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* has an important autobiographical dimension. Farhoud has gone on record saying that the initial chosen title of the novel was going to be *My Mother's Book* further elaborating that the reason why she took up the pen at all was that her mother couldn't (Farhoud quoted by Dahab 2003, 108). Before delving into the textual analysis of the novel, it is important to sketch the story of Farhoud's life that will establish the background of the mother-daughter relationships the novel explores.

Abla Farhoud was born in Lebanon in 1945. She moved to Quebec with her family when she was six in 1951 and attended school in the outskirts of Montreal where her father kept a family store. She was forced to withdraw from high school to help with the store (without pay) so that the family could save enough money to go back to Lebanon, which Farhoud experienced as a deeply gendered injustice (Wimbush 2021). Nevertheless, alongside the heavy duty to her family, she took courses in dramatic art and worked as an actor and speaker for Radio Québec. In 1965, the Farhoud family returned to live in Beirut where Abla worked as a researcher and actor for Radio Lebanon. Talking of her experience of return migration, she remembered feeling appalled by gender inequality in Lebanon where according to her the relationship between the sexes consisted of a battle in which women were always the losers (Delisle and Tézine 2018). In 1969, at the age of twenty, Farhoud left Lebanon for good, this time for Paris where she studied theatre at the Sorbonne. She met her husband, the Quebecois musician, Vincent Dionne, in Paris and returned to Montreal in 1973. Ten years later, while completing an MA in Theatre Arts, Farhoud began to write plays, a shift that she described as a "need to be heard rather than seen" (MacDougall 1999). Listening and speaking as opposed to looking and/or being looked at thus emerge as important concerns for Farhoud as a person and a writer. Since 1973 Farhoud lived and worked in Montreal where she died in 2021.

Arabic is Farhoud's mother tongue in which she was fluent but not fully literate and she called French, the language of writing, her "langue maîtresse" (Delisle and Tézine 2018), her lover language that she had chosen out of love and in an act of cultural transgression. However, Arabic was the language in which her lifelong relationship with her parents and with her mother in particular happened. It is also the language that nurtured her literary ear. Furthermore, Arab culture is "a culture of orality that has shaped Dounia's world, that oral Arabic wisdom that is a world of strong images, poetry, full of swift ellipses and which is set against the modernity of contemporary America" (Montandon 84).<sup>5</sup> The Arabic oral culture that shaped Dounia's world at least partly shaped Farhoud's literary imaginary and her linguistic sensibilities too. She would have heard her mother use Lebanese expressions and proverbs—traditional ones that are part of the collective culture and probably some that are attributable to her only. Therefore, setting out to write her mother's story, Farhoud likely thought back to and heard her mother's voice in Arabic in her head which she then undertook to translate into literary French or rather Quebecois.

Moreover, the novel *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* was inspired by Farhoud's childhood memory of watching her mother cry while washing dishes in a Montreal kitchen soon after their arrival to Canada (Delisle and Tézine 2018).<sup>6</sup> As Dahab rightly observes, however, the novel "belongs to the realm of fiction despite the transposition of some of the mother's account [...] mirrored in the *mise en abyme* framework of the novel itself" (108). The autobiographical element of *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* featuring Farhoud's mother and the fictional character of the work that gives the mother's narrative the first-person perspective makes this text an interesting iteration of the mother/daughter plot as theorized by Marianne Hirsch (1989).

<sup>5</sup> "Une culture de l'oralité qui a façonné avec toute sa poésie et sa force le monde de Dounia, cette sagesse arabe orale qui est un monde fortement imagé, poétique, plein de raccourcis fulgurants et qui s'oppose [...] à la modernité de l'Amérique contemporaine."

<sup>6</sup> There is a fictionalised account of that episode in the novel told from the mother's point of view.

## THE MOTHER/DAUGHTER PLOT AND MIGRANT WOMEN'S WRITING

In her ground-breaking study *The Mother/Daughter Plot* Hirsch posits that the maternal voice in Western culture has been silenced by both patriarchal and some feminist discourses. Hirsch defines the said plot as a story of the subject development and pays especially close attention to the mothers' roles in the stories of daughters' development and to the roles of daughters in stories of mothers' themselves. According to Hirsch, neither mothers nor daughters can do justice to each other's perspectives. When mothers' stories are told by daughters, the mothers are partially silenced and marginalised because what is voiced, is only the mothers' discourse, her story, rather than her full-blown subjectivity and uniqueness. When mothers speak for both themselves and their daughters, they remain objects in their daughters' process of subject-formation. (12) What Hirsch would ideally like to witness in a mother/daughter plot is "mothers and daughters speaking to each other" (8) as two separate, yet deeply connected subjects.

She identifies the black feminist romance as the literary tradition that comes close to achieving this because it is a tradition in which mothers and daughters speak to each other on the grounds of the "racist and sexist oppression which they share" (178). I suggest that in the context of migrant women's writing, mothers and daughters share similar concerns. Oftentimes, mothers and daughters represented in fictions of migration both suffer marginalisation due to their race, ethnicity, and immigrant status. Similarly, they are often both victims of oppressive patriarchal familial structures (albeit to different degrees). In Farhoud's case, for example, she has expressed dismay at being classed as an immigrant author in Quebec despite only ever writing in French and publishing exclusively in Quebec (Zesseu 2015, 17). As previously mentioned, both her mother and she suffered from sexist oppression from Farhoud's father and the Lebanese gender culture more broadly. Farhoud's novel thus shares many traits with the black feminist romance as defined by Hirsch. Using *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* as a prime example, I suggest that migrant women's writing relies on the "maternal oral tradition of the past" (197), mothers' and daughters' lives are represented as "intertwined with each other" (178), the mothers and daughters do speak to each other, their conversation is anchored in their shared experience of systematic injustice and marginalisation, and mothers speak in two voices, as individual

subjects and as mothers (181). In what follows I will demonstrate that in terms of literary representation of the mother's voice, the orality of the mother's voice shines through in the daughter's narrative, the first-person narrative gives Dounia a strong voice, an independent subjectivity, and makes it possible to articulate her mothering experience, especially mothering across the language barrier.

In *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* Dounia addresses the reader in the first-person singular and “narrates her life to her daughter, Myriam, a prolific writer who realizes that though she has written fifteen books so far, not a single one features her mother. Myriam proceeds to fill this gap in what becomes a project of self-revelation” (Dahab, 108).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the novel stages the subject-formation of the mother. However, the daughter, whom we know to be a fictionalised version of Farhoud, features not only as the enabler in the storytelling but also as a product of Dounia's monolingual mothering. In that sense, the novel stages the mother/daughter plot featuring an imagined conversation between a mother and a daughter who are both fully subjects. The narrative voice in the novel is always that of the mother. However, the narrative perspective is that of the daughter (Farhoud herself) and it is precisely this double dimension that makes the maternal perspective legible to contemporary Western readers. However, Dounia's children, including Myriam, are only represented through Dounia's eyes and with her words putting the mother, the maternal experience, and the voice of the mother centre stage. In this respect, in contrast to Hirsch's suggestion, the daughter functions as an object in the mother's story and maternal subject formation. This narrative device puts the novel *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* into the category of *matrifocal narratives of migrant mothering*, the genre that tells us most intimately about migrant “mothers' own desires, fears and anxieties, fantasies and imaginative concepts of mothering” (Rye 2009, 3).<sup>8</sup>

Structurally and in terms of the plot, the production of the novel—the oral nature of Dounia's storytelling in Arabic and her daughter's writing it in French—constitutes the essence of the novel. Dounia's and Myriam's lives are represented as intertwined and interdependent. Dounia is loved

<sup>7</sup>There is one brief exception to this when at the end of the novel the narrator Dounia refers to herself in the third person in an attempt to represent the complicated self-relations of a person affected by old age-related memory loss.

<sup>8</sup>I coin the term *matrifocal narratives of migrant mothering* based on Rye's concept of “narratives of mothering” (2009, 17) and Podnieks' and O'Reilly's notion of “matrifocal narratives” (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010: 3).



and valued in Myriam's house. Myriam's children call her *sitto*, which is an affectionate term for grandmother in Arabic and make her feel like the queen mother. Dounia has exclusive rights at Myriam's house—nobody else is allowed to enter Myriam's study while she writes. Dounia, on the other hand, knows to not overstep the boundaries, she observes her daughter in silence, occasionally serving her coffee, tidying the house, mending children's clothes—in short—creating a favourable environment for her to work in and facilitating her creative work. There are further parallels between their lives. Neither of their marriages has been successful—Myriam is recently divorced, while Dounia has been a victim of domestic abuse all her life. Besides, both women are taciturn, pensive, and observant.

Through the intertwining of the mother and daughter characters, “the fusion or confusion” (Hirsch, 1989, 185) of generations occurs. When Dounia watches her daughter work, she sometimes observes Myriam cry and thinks back to herself crying while washing dishes all those years ago, while observed by young Myriam. This in turn makes her think of her own mother who, like Dounia, could not read or write. Having established the transgenerational gendered connection, the novel is quick to introduce the separation between them as a mark of their respective subjectivity. The most pronounced difference being that Myriam, of course, is empowered by her ability to read and write. This is the underlying reason behind Dounia's and Myriam's different behaviour in the face of their broken marriages: Dounia endures and suffers in silence, while Myriam ends the marriage and carries on with her life.

### A MIGRANT MOTHER'S STORY IN MORE THAN ONE VOICE

The most important connection and separation of the two women in the novel lies in their linguistic relationship to one another and to language more broadly. They share their mother tongue, Arabic, which is an oral language for them both: in Dounia's case because she is illiterate, and in Myriam's because she emigrated from Lebanon at the age of four and was schooled in French. Dounia reflects on her linguistic relationship with her daughter: “We both have the same mother tongue, but what with the years she spent learning another language. Myriam lived most of her life

here” (24).<sup>9</sup> She recognises that her daughter’s linguistic identity is different to hers in two ways. Dounia can only really speak Arabic, whereas Myriam is fluent in French as well as Arabic, and she has also mastered another aspect of language altogether, the written as well as well-spoken French. Cavarero explains that the oral and the written language abide by different organising principles, that speech belongs to the sphere of the ear, whereas writing to the sphere of the eye. The sphere of the ear also comprises the vocal aspect of language, which is sonorous, musical, dynamic, and physical. In contrast, the written language, according to Cavarero, “translates sound and eliminates it” (82). Based on this reasoning, Dounia’s linguistic life is that of the ear, whereas Myriam’s linguistic self relies more on the sphere of the eye. Her practice as a writer consists of transcribing Dounia’s voice into a written system of signification. Nevertheless, Myriam has been initiated into and has some access to her mother’s vocal linguistic sensibility.

When Myriam announces to Dounia that she wishes to write a book about her, Dounia accepts the invitation to tell her daughter her story, makes herself comfortable in a rocking chair in Myriam’s office, and the difficult process of telling and listening gets underway. The link between Dounia’s telling of the story and remembering the details of her past is in line with her belonging to the oral tradition in which the physical production of speech participates in the production of meaning. This is how Dounia experiences her talking sessions with Myriam:

Every word seems to be important. I can speak as much as I like, without being afraid to make a mistake. With her, my tongue seems to untie itself, my chest breathes better. With others, I can’t wait to get to the end of what I am saying, and they can’t either. They are right, I am not good with words. With Myriam, I seem to be a different person. (24)<sup>10</sup>

Myriam opens up the space for Dounia where she can engage in the physical act of speaking, in the way of using the organs of speech not only to emit sounds but also to think, to make sense of the story of her life that

<sup>9</sup>Nous avons toutes les deux la même langue maternelle, mais que d’années passées à étudier une autre langue. Myriam a vécu presque toute sa vie ici.

<sup>10</sup>Chaque mot a l’air important. Je peux parler autant que je veux, sans peur de me tromper. Avec elle, on dirait que ma langue se délie, que ma poitrine respire mieux. Avec les autres, j’ai toujours hâte d’arriver à la fin et eux aussi. Ils ont raison, je ne sais pas bien parler. Avec Myriam, on dirait que je suis une autre personne.

she is telling. According to Cavarero, “before the advent of metaphysics, it was more natural to believe that thought was a product of the lungs” (62). Similarly, Dounia seems to be using her breathing to comprehend her experience. By engaging in the physicality of her voice, supported with the rhythm and the physicality of a rocking chair, the content of her existence unravels itself. This is also because, rather than listening to the bare linguistic meaning of what she is saying like the others, Myriam listens to Dounia’s voice, to the locus of her uniqueness letting Dounia communicate herself to Myriam. As a result, Dounia becomes a different person, from a one-dimensional, ignorant, submissive, and abused woman, she emerges as a fully rounded, complex individual who went through existence making decisions, processing disappointments, considering options, choosing some things over others, and taking responsibility for who she has become.

Since the Homeric epic tradition explored by Cavarero uses sound and rhythms to remember the stories that are being told, it is only natural that Dounia’s narrative should culminate in the resurfacing of her traumatic memory from Lebanon. When heavily pregnant Dounia asks Salim to not go away on a business trip as planned but to stay with her for the birth. In response, Salim, already on horseback, kicks her in her face in the presence of her father and children. Furthermore, rather than defending her, Dounia’s father takes Salim’s side and looks away in silence. The episode is narratively framed as Dounia’s internal narrative, prefaced by the elocution: “There are some things you can’t say, that should never be spoken to yourself, that should be banished from your thoughts” (Dahab 2003, 61–62). Dounia confesses that her first impulse is to leave Salim, but she then lays out two reasons—one emotional, one practical—as to why she did not. First, leaving Salim would have involved condemning her father to public humiliation due to her violating the patriarchal social order in which they were both steeped. Second, she has nowhere to go, has caring responsibilities, and, considering she is about to give birth, is highly vulnerable. The narrative continues with Dounia expressing painful remorse over not taking action then or later and thus exposing not only herself but her children to continuous domestic violence that has resulted in her eldest son’s, Abdallah’s, mental illness and her other two sons’ delinquency.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>The scope of this chapter does not allow me to interpret this episode in the light of feminist thinking related to gender-based violence.

Feminist criticism to date tends to read this episode as a sign of Dounia's submissiveness and failure as a woman and a mother. Such readings are predicated on the failure of the maternal narrative voice to discursively transgress the patriarchal law by denouncing it (Miraglia 2005; Dahab 2009). However, the perspective of motherhood studies puts a different spin on this. A careful reading of the novel reveals that the remorse and maternal guilt have been brought about by Myriam's response to Dounia's experience, as illustrated by the following quotation in which Dounia says: "When she picks up on what I've just said with: 'yes, but ... you could have ... if you wanted to', I see that she cannot put herself in my shoes" (126).<sup>12</sup> It thus becomes clear that Dounia only starts blaming herself because of her interaction with Myriam who, steeped in Western feminism, brought up in a society in which services for gender violence victims exist, but who is also a victim of her mother's failure to stand up to gender-based violence, finds it hard to justify Dounia's behaviour. Maternal guilt and shame are represented through the narrative technique of rhetorical questions the readers guess the answers to (Montandon 2006, 85): "Where could I run? Where could I escape? Where could I go? If my father scorned me and looked the other way, where could I go? [...] Even today, fifty years later, I ask myself why did I not flee, why did I do nothing?" (Dahab 2003, 63). The reader is thus made to realise the impossibility of the task of leaving Salim. Furthermore, the reader is also aware that the novel in which Dounia has the power of the first-person narrative voice is written by Myriam whose emancipated point of view the Western reader identifies with. Contemporary motherhood theory tells us that the culture of blaming mothers for the shortcomings of their mothering, thus making mothers blame themselves, is itself part of the patriarchal ideology (Rose 2018; Phoenix 2011). This novel breaks away from the dominant paradigm of mother blaming in migrant women's writing of the 1970s and 1980s in which migrant mothers' stories were usually told by their writer daughters and through the daughters' narrative voices (Ho 1999). By framing maternal guilt as a cultural and generational difference between the mother and the daughter from the mother's point of view, the novel achieves a more authentic representation of the silent migrant mother's subjectivity. Therefore, as a narrative, the novel takes a sympathetic view towards the mother.

<sup>12</sup> "Quand elle reprend ce que je viens de dire en y ajoutant: 'Oui, mais ... tu aurais pu ... si tu avais voulu', je vois bien qu'elle ne peut pas se mettre à ma place."

### THE POWER OF THE MUSE

The creative collaboration between Dounia and Myriam can be likened to that of a writer and her Muse. In her analysis of Homer's relationship to the Muse, Cavarero explains that Homer functions as a filter between the goddess and the listeners and attributes Homer's power to enchant the audience with his narrative poetry to the workings of the Muse. She claims that Homer "is the only one who can translate the vocality and the omniscience of the Muse into a narrating song" (114). Similarly, Myriam delves into Dounia's orally transmitted story in Arabic and translates it not only into writing but also into literary, poetic, and enchanting French. Myriam is the only one with a privileged access not only to Dounia's story but also to the complexity of her character contained in her speaking voice. Myriam thus enables the telling of Dounia's story, but Dounia gives Myriam the voice, the style, the sound, and the stylistic literary shape to write it with. The structure of the narrative of *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* is elliptical, non-linear, marked by a particular musicality that is not innately French.

One of the most remarkable features of the novel is the fact that it is sprinkled with Arabic proverbs that appear in the text in French, but that are carefully documented at the end of the novel in both Arabic and French. Dounia often expresses herself with Lebanese proverbs and at more than one point in the narrative, she clarifies that it is easier for her to throw a ready-made phrase in answer to Myriam's difficult questions than trying to formulate a possibly uncomfortable truth about her own life (Farhoud 125). Feminist criticism univocally interprets this as a gendered passivity Dounia has been socialised into. However, Pruteanu accurately remarks that "this linguistic code is only the surface of another language that is the mother's inner language" (2012, 94).<sup>13</sup> The theoretical framework used in this chapter suggests that the proverbs point to the oral tradition Dounia as a storyteller belongs to. Homer "often repeats the same formulas, recombining them," (80) the sonorous modulations of which help him remember the text determining "the very syntax of the verse" (80). In the same way, Dounia repeats the proverbs to remind herself of the story of her life. Repeating the formulaic structures of the proverbs helps her put the events into the wider narrative context of how she might have explained those events to herself at the time of their occurrence. In

<sup>13</sup> "Ce code langagier n'est que la surface d'un autre langage intérieur de la mère qui n'a jamais su dire sa peine et ses révoltes."

terms of the textual quality of the novel, those proverbs in translation often break up the French syntax and have the effect of what Russian formalists called defamiliarisation. In the novel, Myriam is represented noting a proverb she had not heard Dounia pronounce before and writing it down in French (35). The list of proverbs at the end of the novel points to a potential real list that Farhoud herself might have kept. It has been argued that through the proverbs Farhoud inscribes her own linguistic and cultural heritage in Quebec's literary landscape (Zesseu 2015; Montandon 2006). However, the list does more than that; it symbolically bridges the gap between the oral and the written cultures which Dounia and Myriam belong to, capturing a fraction of Dounia's and Farhoud's real mother's vibrant sonorous universe and freezing it in writing for posterity.

### CONCLUSION

In terms of migrant mothering, Dounia claims having not been the same as a mother and as a grandmother. Her mothering is marked by emotional distress, homesickness, and what seems like a clear case of post-partum depression. When her children are young, she longs to speak to their teachers and friends, but is reduced to watching them interact as if separated by an invisible wall eloquently rendered in the novel through multiple scenes in which Dounia watches her children through the window. And yet, her lack of language in French is far from passive or destructive. Rather, it is transformed into a performative act of listening. She creates a space for her children in which they can be themselves and lead lives that they want to lead. Seen from the perspective of Cavarero's concept of the double voice in which speaking is always "a calling and a responding," Myriam's book in French is a response to Dounia's calling in Arabic. Myriam is able to become her unique writer self in French due to Dounia's speaking and listening to her in Arabic. Likewise, Dounia is only able to tell her story and to fully process her life experience due to Myriam's calling.

In short, *Happiness Has a Slippery Tail* is a story in which the mother's and the daughter's voices speak in a duet in which the unique specificity of each voice is communicated and audible. In this way the voice of the silent mother can be heard by the Western readership, and her perspective inscribed in the Western literary tradition. The story is told in two voices: the aural voice of a marginalised mother who is voiceless in French and in

writing and that of a French-educated writer daughter who understands the quality of the mother's voice in Arabic. By this narrative token, the voice of the two women becomes political since for the voices of some of the marginalised groups, including illiterate monolingual migrant mothers' voices to be heard, some women must know how to listen and how to translate them in ways that make room for the unique voices of those silent women. Furthermore, the double voice of the daughter-mother duet defies hierarchy. The daughter's perspective that unavoidably mediates the narrative to a degree and that the reader very likely identifies with serves as the sympathetic dimension of the text that withholds judgement and makes for a more nuanced representation of maternal experiences in contemporary fiction.

## REFERENCES

- Averis, Kate. 2017. Mobility and stasis. Ageing abroad in Abla Farhoud's *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*. *Francosphères* 6 (1): 7–20.
- Cavarero, Adriana. 2005. *For More Than One Voice. Toward Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chartier, Daniel. 2002. Les Origines de l'écriture migrante: l'immigration littéraire au Québec au cours des deux derniers siècles. *Voix et Images* 27 (2): 303–316.
- Connolly, Allison. 2017. *Spaces of Creation: Transculturality and Feminine Expression in Francophone Literature*. Lexington Books.
- Dahab, Elizabeth F. 2003. *Voices in the Desert. An Anthology of Arabic-Canadian Women Writers*. Guernica.
- . 2009. *Voices of Exile in Contemporary Canadian Francophone Literature*. Lexington Books.
- Delisle, Monique and Anne-Marie Tézine. 2018. Montreplit entretien avec Abla Farhoud – 26 Septembre, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMnC5\\_K6\\_wM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMnC5_K6_wM) (consulted 2021-10-10).
- Farhoud, Abla. 1998. *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*. Montréal: L'Hexagone.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 1989. *The Mother/Daughter Plot*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Ho, Wendy. 1999. *In her Mother's House*. Walnut Creek, Oxford: AltaMira.
- MacDougall, Jill. 1999. Growing... growing... growing... grown... growing... growing... growing... grown analysis of a work-in-progress. *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 5 (1): 144–155.
- Maddox, Kelly-Anne. 2010. Écrire au centre de soi-même: Le récit identitaire dans l'œuvre romanesque d'Abla Farhoud. *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 25 (2): 128–141.

- Miraglia, Anne Marie. 2005. La parole, le silence et l'apprentissage de l'exil dans *Le Bonheur à la queue glissante* d'Abla Farhoud. *Studies in Canadian Literature* 30 (2): 89–95.
- Montandon, Alain. 2006. Abla Farhoud: portrait d'une libanaise en exil: à propos du vieillir dans *Le Bonheur à la queue glissante*. *Neohelicon* 33 (1): 81–90.
- Phoenix, Ann. 2011. Transforming 'non-normative' motherhood: retrospective accounts of transnational motherhood in serial migration. *Radical Psychology*. 9 (2): 7–17.
- Podnieks, Elizabeth, and Andrea O'Reilly, eds. 2010. *Textual mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures*, Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Pruteanu, Simona Emilia. 2012. L'écriture migrante comme pratique signifiante: l'exemple de l'hétérolinguisme et de l'écriture fragmentaire chez Abla Farhoud et Ying Chen. *Nouvelles Études Francophones*. 27 (1): 85–98.
- . 2016. Cooking, Language, and Memory in Farhoud's *Le Bonheur à la queue glissante* and *Thúy's Mãn*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18 (4): 2–6.
- Rose, Jacqueline. 2018. *Mothers. An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. London: Faber&Faber.
- Rye, Gill. 2009. *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in contemporary France*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Wimbush, Antonia. 2021. *Autofiction: A Female Francophone Aesthetic of Exile*. Liverpool University Press.
- Zesseu, Claude. 2015. Migration, oralité et altérité dans l'écriture migrante québécoise: le cas d'Abla Farhoud. In *Migrations/Translations*, ed. Ahmed Maroussia, Corinne Alexandre-Garner, Nicholas Serruys, Iulian Toma, and Isabelle Keller-Privat, 241–252. Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

