



## Monarchy and Politics of Detention in Taher Ben Jalloun's "This Blinding Absence of Light"

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**Abstract:** Taher Ben Jelloun's novels are distinguished by their integration of problematic social phenomena into a purely literary form. While this isn't unique to Ben Jelloun's writing style, the author's way of crafting thought-provoking and often revolutionary experimental stories from the material of traditional Moroccan life is, at least in a way extraordinary: his characters experience social difficulties and embarrassments in their lives through the metaphor of a fictional existence of their self-perception. Thus, for example, their search for identity in their social context manifests in their search for self-perception as fictional characters and power struggles in relationships. Their relationship takes the form of a battle for control of the story. Political prisoners associate writing with their quest for freedom. This article therefore focuses on the torture, body and voice representations of Taher Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2002). Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory will be used to approach the psychological disintegration of characters in the text following such a Dark Decade experience and will borrow eclectic concepts from interdisciplinary studies; Erving's concept of Goffman's "holistic institution", Elaine Scarry's comprehensive and detailed theoretical definition and analysis of torture, and Judith Herman's study of trauma.

**Keywords:** North Africa, Maghrebe, Baber, Moroccan, Darija, Fusha.

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### INTRODUCTION TO NORTH AFRICAN LITERATURE

North African literature has undergone significant evolution, shaped by the diverse traditions and experiences of the countries constituting the region. This literary landscape, inclusive of works from the Middle East, reflects a synthesis of cultural, linguistic, and religious elements. Anissa Talahite aptly notes that North African literature offers a perspective that aligns it with Arabic literature, particularly that of the Middle East. Comprising the literary output of countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Sudan, North African literature is characterized by a shared ethnic,

cultural, linguistic, and Islamic identity, setting it apart from other African regions.

Among North African countries, Sudan stands out as particularly unique. As articulated by Mazurui, Sudan is regarded as both an African and Arab country, the latter designation primarily cultural rather than genetic. The colonial legacy, notably French occupation in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, has significantly influenced North African literature, shaping its thematic and stylistic contours.

The ancient Middle East boasts a rich cultural tapestry, with Egypt occupying a prominent position owing to its illustrious history spanning

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millennia. Situated along the Nile River, Egypt's strategic geographic location, buffered by expansive deserts, has shielded it from many external conflicts. The enduring legacy of ancient Egyptian civilization is evident in monumental achievements such as the construction of the pyramids, which serve not only as tombs but also as repositories of ancient literature.

However, interactions among ancient civilizations were often marred by conflict, with wars resulting in the destruction or subjugation of entire populations and their cultural heritage. Despite such upheavals, the Egyptian civilization persevered, owing to its resilience and adaptability. The profound religious worldview of ancient Egyptians, centered on the concept of an afterlife, profoundly influenced their culture and artistic expression, as evidenced by the meticulous preparation for the journey beyond death. The influence of Egyptian culture extended beyond its borders, as evidenced by the challenges faced by poets like Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi in disseminating their works across linguistic and regional boundaries. The intersection of diverse cultures in North Africa, facilitated by advancements such as the printing press, underscores the interconnectedness and complexity of the region's literary landscape.

Yet, despite the geographical proximity of North African countries and their shared cultural heritage, the academic and media portrayal often fails to encapsulate the region in its entirety. Orientalist perspectives, as articulated by Said, have further perpetuated this division, relegating North African states to the "East" and underscoring the enduring legacy of colonialism in shaping perceptions of the region.

### **Evolution of Moroccan Literary Works**

Morocco's complex multilingual scene predated French and Spanish colonialism (1912-1956) as languages such as Darija or spoken Moroccan Arabic, Fusha or standard Arabic and various spoken dialects of Amazigh, as well as Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish, shaped the oral and written cultures of Morocco. The arrival of French and Spanish languages further complicated the picture, particularly as the French pursued a colonial policy of imposing French as the sole language of education and administration. The Moroccan State's ambiguous politics of Arabisation in the aftermath of independence in 1956 did not succeed in removing French from the public sphere as it remains the language of higher education and administration and is spoken widely in Morocco's central cities such as Rabat and Casablanca.

Decades after national independence in 1956 and Arabization, French is still widely spoken.

There is a "daily experience" of how Moroccans live in language 1 through how they transition from Darija to Amazigh and read and write French, Arabic and Spanish. This is not unique to Morocco as several African countries as well as countries in the Arabic-speaking region share this linguistic diversity. What we find in Morocco is what Abdelfattah Kilito (2013) calls a "divisive language" (*lisan maflouq*) and a "divisive literature" (*adab maflouq*). Today there are two literary systems in Morocco, one written in French and the other in Arabic, and both aimed at two different audiences (the French-speaking world and the Arabic-speaking world). The study of Moroccan literature focuses on texts written in French or literature written in Arabic and this is not the case only in the faculties of Arabic studies and the faculties of French studies in Europe and North America but also in Morocco itself, where researchers do not link the two production areas together.

While some Moroccan writers write only in French or Arabic, there are others like Abdallah Laroui who writes philosophical and critical texts in French and novels in Arabic. This was because Laroui realized that his critical and philosophical texts would be overlooked in Arabic-speaking Mashreq or the Middle East but appreciated by Europeans. It was the European interest in Laroui's critical texts that always aroused Mashreq's interest in his ideas (this happened with his book *Contemporary Arab Ideology* (1967)). The Arabic literary and critical works that have been published in the last hundred years throughout the West in the world feel that their works are known to them only through the way they are received in Europe. Europe; for example, if an Arabic critical book was translated into French and English it would be of importance in the Arabic-speaking region and not before. Laroui asserts that: "all contact between us – North African, Arab or Muslim – goes through the West..." (Kilito, 2013, P. 42). There is a kind of implicit need for recognition that permeates the West.

The Moroccan novel in Arabic occupies a very marginal place in the Arabic literary tradition. Most, if not all, literary and historical anthologies of Arabic fiction are Mashreqi-centered (or rather Egyptian-centered), as most of them consider the literary tradition of Modern and pre-modern (and Maghrebi) Moroccan studies to be insignificant. Roger Allen, one of the pioneering critics of Arabic literature, recently acknowledged the limitations of the hegemonic regional literary system, which is monopolistic and does not pay attention to particularities (*khususiyah*) of different genres in different contexts (Allen, 2007, P. 249).

Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla (2006) demonstrates in his excellent book the literary

history of the Moroccan novel in Arabic and its close connection with the pre-modern traditions and genres of Morocco as travel writing, manuscripts and letters. Neither Parrilla nor Allen refers to the Moroccan novel in French and its close connection with its sister novel in Arabic or with pre- and modern Moroccan traditions, again a sign of excluding these analyses and readings based on nationalist and regional languages of Moroccan literary tradition.

The Moroccan novel in French is read with other Francophone texts within the French literary system to which it remains marginal. This novel was largely directed in its early phases to a French readership that was well-versed in colonial French literature like that of Pierre Loti and others whose representation of Moroccans is marked by a set of fixed stereotypes and prejudice (Kilito 2013, 69). This can explain the trap of folklorisation and self-orientalising tendencies of the early Moroccan novel in French that were challenged by later novelists like Abdellatif Laabi who reinvented the Moroccan novel in French the Moroccan novel in Arabic and French as a "roman-itinéraire" heavily influenced by Morocco's pre-modern narrative traditions such as written travel literature (*rihla*) and its oral equivalent *al-maqamat* (Wolf, 1992, P. 36).

Laabi who was the co-founder of the *Souffles/Anfas* bilingual French/Arabic review is one of the Moroccan writers in post-independent Morocco in the 1960s to emphasise the importance of reading together Moroccan literature in Arabic and French. The journal resisted state-imposed monoculturalism on the one hand and French colonial and cultural hegemony on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> *Souffles's* project to heal the divide between intellectuals and writers in French and Arabic and create a debate between them came to an end in 1972 when it was shut down by the regime for political reasons. It seems that Moroccan critics in the post-independence period have become more aware of the dangers of linguistic determinism and discrimination in the analysis of Moroccan fiction in Arabic and French. Khatibi's book, *Le Roman maghrébin* (1968), was one of the first examples of literary history going beyond linguistic determinism by including Moroccan novels in Arabic and French. The Arabic translation of the book by Mohammed Berrada in 1971 demonstrates the belief that the Moroccan novel must be read and analyzed beyond linguistic divisions.

Chraïbi's *Le passé simple* and Choukri's *Al Khubz Al hafi* give us a complex set of aesthetics and politics. Both novels explore Moroccan society and politics on the eve of independence, and both provoked a wave of outcry upon publication:

Chraïbi's novel is about views deemed anti-national at a pivotal time in the anti-colonial movement and Choukri's for allegedly devaluing Moroccan culture and its vulgarity. The joint analysis of the texts gives us a complex picture of the national tensions in 1950s Morocco and highlights the divisions in the anti-colonial movements among the different divisions; it also provides us with a unique comparative context between the two systems of colonial rule, the Spanish system in the North, where Choukri's text is located and is rarely explored in Moroccan novels. The two authors explore the role of the intelligentsia at this particular moment in Moroccan history, its relationship to politics, and the formation of national consciousness.

It seems that Chraïbi and Choukri criticized not only colonial oppression but also the elitism of some members of the anti-colonial nationalist movement. The political complexity of Chraïbi and Choukri as well as their critique of the violence of hegemony, patriarchy, class, and social hierarchy is reflected in their aesthetics: Personal stories and stories were deeply ingrained in national history and broader global anti-colonial movements in the time (Algeria war, Palestinian struggle). Their style desecrated French and Arabic and marked them with a Moroccan cultural identity.

What would an entangled reading of Abdellatif Laabi's *l'oeil et la nuit* (1969) and Mohamed Berrada's *Lu'bat Anisyan* (1986) tell us about the intertwined styles of these two giants of Moroccan literature? Both works reveal moments of aesthetic creativity in the literary history of the Moroccan novel, such as Laabi's novel which sets itself apart from the first self-directed Moroccan novel in French and Berrada's experimental writing style, which left him with his first Arab nationalist novel. Both writers have a firm belief in the multilingualism of Moroccan literature and how they engage in translation from Arabic to French and from French to Arabic to establish meaningful dialogue significance not only among Moroccan literary producers but also with Mashreqi and European traditions. Both writers' novels challenge entrenched traditions (literary and cultural) and offer a synthetic critique of state power using their creative and aesthetic narrative styles.

If Moroccan literature in French is the result of historical and colonial circumstances, then it can be said that Moroccan literature in English is essentially the voice of cultural openness and liberation. English for Moroccan writers is a linguistic vehicle for reaching others thanks to its universality and global power. It should be noted, however, that the impact of the original Moroccan creation written in English is still limited to the Moroccan cultural and literary

context. This can be explained by the fact that on the Moroccan language map, English is only the fourth language spoken in the country after Berber and Arabic.

Finding the entirety of Moroccan literature in English is difficult not because of its quantity but because of its rarity. Add to that the absence of any previous bibliographic work on the subject and the difficulty of finding individual publications in small, unknown local journalists or publications, beyond the reach of the Moroccan diaspora in English-speaking countries. In Jacqueline Jondot's doctoral thesis, titled "English-Speaking Writers of the Arab Middle East," the only North African writers the author can refer to in this massive work (1,400 pages) are Moroccans Anouar Majid and Fatéma Mernissi and Tunisian La Sabiha Khemir in an understandable misunderstanding of some of the Moroccan creative writings in English.

The 1990s saw the first publication of novels in English by Moroccan authors. One of the frequent features of this literature is autobiographical nostalgia for lost Moroccan values and childhoods. This nostalgia permeates the poetry of Abu-Talib and Saber but also permeates the novels of Anouar Majid, Abdellatif Akbib and Jilali El-Koudia differently and more indirectly. In the novel *Si Youssef* (London: Quartet Books, 1992), Anouar Majid creates a vivid picture of life in Tangier. He creates compelling Tanjawi characters that reflect Moroccan social life while inviting "readers to question fixed definitions of identity and to take a journey towards diversity and pluralism." Through Lamin, a student at Fez University, the story conveys a heartfelt sense of youth, reflecting the biographical and social experiences of Tangier, Majid's hometown.

Abdellatif Akbib, also from Tangier, draws material for his literary works from Tangier and Tanjawi societies. Its stories are set in and around Tangier and its protagonists depict a social life completely immersed in the local culture of northern Morocco. In *Graffiti* (1997) and *Between the Lines* (1998), Akbib develops several themes related to individuals struggling to cope with problems complicated by complex social structures, relationships difficult family relationships and the corrupt political situations imposed upon them. For Kiessling, *Hearts of Embers* is Akbib's best work. The writing style is more authoritative than previous short stories. The level of writing is always at a high level from start to finish.

Laila Lalami, who lives in the United States, has published two successful novels that completely deal with her Moroccan education and culture. *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (Chapel Hill, NC:

Algonquin Books, 2005) recounts the illegal journey of four Moroccans across the Strait of Gibraltar on a rubber boat to Spain; the author reveals the lives of the main characters, giving a vivid image of modern post-colonial Morocco, where the dreams and hopes of the young generation are dashed by unemployment, poverty and suppress. Lalami's second novel, *The Secret Son* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Book: 2009) has been hailed as "an insightful story about the intricacies of life in contemporary Morocco".

Jilali El Koudia draws inspiration from Moroccan Islamic traditions and popular stories for her literary work. Winner of the first prize of the Moroccan Writers Council in 2000 in English (novel), El Koudia is a famous short story writer and translator of many works of Moroccan literature. In Moroccan folklore (Fez, 1999, P. 189), he was inspired by popular stories he heard as a child with the women in his family. As stated in the introduction, El Koudia not only transcribed the 31 stories he heard but also rewrote, recreated and retold them, removing verbs and repetitions. His stories *Under the Sun* deal with a variety of themes depicting different aspects of Moroccan culture and portraying rural life in its vibrant but sometimes brutal reality.

For many English-speaking Moroccan writers, however, Marrakech is the setting for Hassan Zrizi's *Jomana* (Marrakesh: Nada-Com, 2006, P.208) and *Return to Bahja* (Marrakesh: Nada-Com, 2010, P. 156). Both novels take place in Jama'a L'Fna, Marrakech's famous public square. The open square allows the author to draw a parallel between the novelist and the public narrator as artists who rely on oral and written texts to communicate with their audiences. Her novels dramatize the plight of Moroccan women and their plight in a conservative society.

The number of poetry anthologies published by Moroccan writers is very limited, and there are only a few volumes with poems scattered in magazines or anthologies. The late Professor Mohammed Abu-Talib (1930-2000) was the first Moroccan to publish a book of poetry in English. *Angry Whisper* (London and New York: Regency Press, 1970) reflects the author's indignation at the overwhelming encroachment of Western culture at the expense of Moroccan and North African values. For example, in "Beverage to the Prophet" (p. 14), he wonders why European Christians order soft drinks at a Moroccan party while Moroccans order alcoholic drinks:

Whisky alone – no ice,' the Muslim ordered.  
The Christian neighbour looked and pondered:  
An Oulmès for me – doctor's orders,

'The rest gives nothing but stomach ulcers.'  
[...]  
Gin-tonic!' another fasting believer.  
Coca-cola!' another rotten Kafer.

It uses plain Standard English, with no attempt to "Morocco" the wording or content.

Following in the footsteps of Abou Talib, his guide and mentor, *Voices from Underground* by Ahmed Saber (Fez: Info-Print, 2004, P. 211) protects the cultural and religious values of the Moroccan tradition. Poems such as "Notre M'kaddem" and "Bassrism" address human rights issues in Morocco in a direct and scathing commentary on human rights abuses under Basri, the former interior minister. of the late King Hassan II. To highlight her Moroccan cultural identity, Saber does not hesitate to include Arabic terms in her poems without offering a glossary to foreign readers.

Ahmed Radi's *Ephemeral Fragments: Poetry in English in a Moroccan Context* (Marrakesh: Imprimerie Al Watania, 1998, P. 134) is a testament to the scepticism and anxiety of Moroccan poets when writing in English. In the dilemma of using one language, Radi went so far as to include poems in Arabic in his English poetry collection. Radi's poetry deals with a variety of themes, including autobiographical flashbacks of loneliness, exile, and loneliness. For example, in the poem *Silence*, the author captures the "mystical" and "pure" silence of the deserted streets of Marrakech at Ramadan breakfast time to convey feelings of loneliness and loneliness.

Khalid Chaouch, poet and literary critic, published *Humble Odysseys, A Play in Five Acts* (Fedala: Mohammedia, 2002, P. 133), to my knowledge, this is the only published play written in English by a Moroccan playwright. The play, which deals with migration, won the author the British Council's Prize for Moroccan Writers in English (Drama). Her poetry anthology *Deaf Rhythm* has been described by Cherki Karkaba as weaving "the thread of a subtle cultural dialogue concerning East and West".

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Kharmach, the beginnings of literary criticism in Morocco were modest attempts to praise literary works. These incitements are *taqrīzāt* or *taḥliyāt*, eulogy in prose and poetry praising a literary work or a writer. In "Taṭawūr al-Naqd al-Adabī al-Ḥadīth bi al-Maghribī" (2009), the critic Akkar describes these celebratory comments as impressions and praises the "virtue" of the "virtue's authors". Serious works inspired by contemporary literary tastes. Kharmach cites *Al-I'lām bi Man Ḥalla*

*Murrākash wa Aghmāt min al-A'lām* (1936) by Abbas ben Brahim el Marrakechi as an excellent work on *taqrīzāt and taḥliyāt*. It is highly valued and appreciated by literary lovers. For example, Taie ben Driss el Kadiri considers *Al-I'lām* a "masterpiece" of what El Marrakech wrote in literature and history with an unusually easy-to-understand writing style up to literary criticism. To him, these are just congratulatory messages to praise literary works. In addition to these compliments, Kharmach considers the conversations that take place among literary enthusiasts as the first "critical" motivators.

Citing Mokhtar Soussi, Kharmach observes that before the protectorate, meetings or "criticism" salons were held in a Soussi literary society. Poetic works were presented to them and they regarded them with approval or disapproval, but with the utmost courtesy. But Soussi's *Al-Ma'sūl* makes no mention of any of the "critical" claims or standards that pubs use to measure literary merit. In this regard, leading Moroccan critic Ahmad El Yabouri discredited *Al-Ma'sūl* by calling it insufficient evidence. In "Al-Naqd al-Adabī fī al-Maghrib" (2009), he considers *Al-Ma'sūl* as an example of historical works that create a "disabled history" of Moroccan literature because they do not relate to literature but only interested in literature about leading statesmen and writers living in several urban centres.

Kharmach explained that the growing impetus for these nascent criticisms was due to the growing press at the time, specifically the Rabat-based *al-Sa'ādah* newspaper. Its 752nd issue, for example, includes a "jury verdict" bringing El Kabbaj's poetry against Nemichi. There is strength and eloquence in El Kabbaj's poetry as well as sweetness and tenderness in Ahmed Nemichi's poetry. Without any support, Kharmach argues that this contrast must be based on "research", which heralds a near-dawn criticism. In the 2056 issue, Mohamed Boujandar recalls literary works of the late 1910s, emphasizing that "there is a lot of theatricality: Many writers tend to embellish the term regardless of its intended meaning and envelop it with various decorations and allusions. For Kharmach, Boujandar was one of the "first letter writers" that attracted Moroccan writers, who indulged in linguistic embellishments, to ensure a balance between word and meaning: Clear style and reader-friendly semantics. Such a call may have been previously unknown or ignored. In a nutshell, Kharmach seeks to deepen the embryonic "critical" activity which began to move away from cliché and vague praise towards the threshold of "emerging" criticism in the 1920s and 1930s. It was a larger context that helped shape the emerging criticisms of the 1920s and 1930s.

Kharmach provides insight into two important events in Moroccan history. The first was the Berber Dahir (edict) of 16 May 1930. It was designed by the French protectorate to establish customary courts for the Amazighs; this was seen by the nationalist movement as an evil attempt to abolish Islamic law among the Amazighs and eventually convert them to Christianity. Second, proceed to non-military resistance. This led to the creation of Kutlat al-'Amal al-Waṭānī (Morocco Action Committee) in 1934. In this anti-colonial context, nationalists sought to use culture and ideology as tools to combat colonialism and awaken people. To this end, they designed a cultural "army" that included nationalist newspapers and magazines, theatre performances, cultural fairs, public debates, and more. explore and study history and literature to highlight the Moroccan identity. Inextricably linked with anti-colonial politics, literature has come to prominence: poetry was absorbed by national fervour; efforts have been made to write novels and plays; socio-historical essays flourished; and works of art and criticism began to take root. In addition, newspapers and magazines created to engage and enlighten the masses, including al-Ḥayāt and al-Ḥuriyah in Tetouan, al-Taqqadum in Salé and al-Atlas in Rabat, do not forget al-Salām and al- Magazine Maghrib al-Jadīd in Tetouan and al-Maghrib, Risālat al-Maghrib and al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah in Rabat. Thus, writers no longer keep their works in cabinets but inform a wider audience. Quoting Gennoun's *Aḥādīth fi al-Adab al-Maghribī al-Ḥadīth* (1964) by Gennoun, Kharmach mentions that writers become very conscious of what they are writing for fear of being discredited by criticism, due to that the number of self-proclaimed writers infiltrating literature is decreasing.

The broad academic consensus indicates that Moroccan literary criticism dates back to the 1920s and 1930s. Akkar argues that the 1920s saw the dawn of literary criticism in the form of *musāmarāt*. He described them as lectures given by educated French and Moroccan men at literary parlours and high schools, which addressed both literary and non-literary issues. As examples of talks that were later turned into books, Akkar cites *Musāmarat al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'arā'* (1928) by Abdellah el Kabbaj and *Tārīkh al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'arā'bi* by Ahmed Nemichi. France (1928). Like Akkar, El Yabouri asserts that literary criticism dates back to the 1930s. Its "modest" beginnings are marked by history and biography, and it merely "releases" from its "historical burden." history" than when he was influenced by literary values with roots in Eastern Arabia. Mohamed Daghmoumi reveals that this cultural contact is very evident between Moroccan writers, who have observed, inspired, disseminated and praised Eastern literature and its authors. In

"*Qaḍāyā wa Nuṣūṣ min al-Naqd al-Maghribī*" (2002), Abdelfattah Lahjomri, like El Yabouri, extended the birth of criticism until the 1930s, when critics attempted to establish a style literary movement whose socio-cultural space is shaped by literary influences. Opinions and values come from both Eastern Arabia and Western Europe. This cultural exposure to the East and the West influenced the literary and critical works of the 1930s, but there is a distinct Moroccan element in the work of these emerging critics. In agreement with El Yabouri and Lahjomri, Daghmoumi traces the "true roots" of literary criticism to the 1930s, a decade marked by the crystallization of nationalist sentiments, especially in Morocco's urban centre. Citing Ziyad and Guennoun, Daghmoumi argues that business is important to have been "organically" integrated into the nationalist movement: it was an integral part of the anti-colonial struggle, and its effectiveness and influence were no less than that of politics.

Indeed, it sought to espouse and express nationalist values and voices that bore the signs of an emergent "cultural identity." It is this nascent criticism that Kharmach attempts to investigate and illustrate through a body of "critical" excerpts entitled "*Al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'rā'*." In it, El Kabbaj remarks that, besides connecting writers and celebrating sovereigns, poetry teaches and cultivates a "sophisticated taste. Not akin to "dry" prose, poetry is lively: it evokes deeper emotions and inspires inner selves; it is an inborn gift which is written in an eloquent and soft language as well as an elegant and smooth style, drawing on imagery, metaphor and simile. For El Kabbaj, poets should be emotionally deeper and imaginatively richer, so they can betray and convey what they experience.<sup>32</sup> "Promising" as this major talk or text may seem, el Kabbaj's look at poetry by his contemporaries did not yet abandon laudatory language or ascend what Kharmach depicts as "the throne of criticism."

Another conventional but influential name is Mohamed ben Abbas El Kabbaj, the eminent writer of *Al-Adab al-'Arabī fī al-Maghrib al-Aqṣá* (1929). For El Yabouri, El Kabbaj's book is a central contribution to writing the history of Moroccan literature, one which reveals the impact of Egyptian literary trends on this generation of Moroccan writers. For Akkar, El Kabbaj's work is the "amplest embodiment" of a growing movement that sought to anthologize writers and writings. In "Breaking the Canon," Fernández Parrilla, a chief Spanish Arabist, considers El Kabbaj's milestone anthology a "pioneer contribution of modern literary criticism" Still, it extends beyond anthologizing Moroccan writers to bringing a burgeoning literary identity to the foreground. For Kharmach, El Kabbaj's *Al-Adab al-'Arabī* highlights the crucial features of Moroccan

literature in Arabic with "clear views" about literature and writers and the "critical views" held by those writers. Aware of literary movements in the Arab world and the evolution of literary works there, El Kabbaj groups writers into leading, inter-generational and budding, cautioning against anachronistic readings of literature and commenting that criticism should address the history and milieu where the works of each group arise. He advises "critics" to advance approaches that ensure objectivity in comprehension and accuracy in judgment, calling upon the most acquainted among them to identify and remedy shortcomings in literary writing and thought.

Kharmach, however, reveals that the 1920s and 1930s literary devotees advanced views about literary writings, not theoretical theories: they thought highly of taste as essential to appreciating and approaching literature; they thought circumstantially of how history and society shape literature; and they thought of critics as having to be culturally competent, intellectually disposed and accurately articulate. Indeed, some like Mokhtar Soussi and Mohamed El Mekki Naciri have gone further by encouraging writers to advance national and human causes beyond literature. For them, writers must engage in living reality and express human beliefs, feelings, and hopes. These calls to participation, inspired by the circumstances, seem to be the "whispers" of the Marxist-realist criticisms of the 1970s.

The 1940s and mid-1950s were marked by a major step forward in the development of important business in Morocco. Indeed, debates, opinions, and studies focused on literary and critical contexts have multiplied. One of the most heated debates concerns the usefulness of literature. According to Kharmach, there are two movements" that offer two different points of view: an artistic value for art and an artistic value for life. In "Al-Insān wa al-Adab" (1949), author and historian Mohammed Zniber observes that literature attracts the human spirit because it reflects beauty whose most sought-after attributes are eternity and truth.<sup>86</sup> For him, to "design" a literary work that reveals beauty, a writer must create a "coherent whole" capable of reconciling opposites: intelligence and emotions, logic and whims, reflection and improvisation. Above all, it is the writer's "genius" and "taste" which "meticulously" mix the seeming opposites to create aesthetic appeal.

Another aesthetic advocate is Mouhamed El Bouanani. Unlike Zniber, El Bouanani highlights freedom as an aesthetic value intrinsic to literature. In "Kayfa Nurīd al-Adīb al-Fanān" (1951), he describes literature as one of the "finest" and "freest" arts whose supremacy stems from its self-sufficiency;

it is an end in itself free from life's entanglements, and once it surrenders its freedom to morally or socially motivated ends, literature loses its "beauty" and "delight."<sup>88</sup> For him, the aesthetic writer, who holds "the most supreme torch," ought to mingle with all walks of life to hone instincts, refine selves and polish feelings, thus serving as a force for good, beauty and virtue.<sup>89</sup> In short, among other "l'art pour l'art" voices whom Kharmach considers, Zniber and El Bouanani argue that literature improves taste, evokes emotion and describes beauty – be it inner or outer, and it is "incidental" or even "abusive" to orient literature elsewhere.

Furthermore, there were attempts at studying drama and fiction which were growing and inviting genres in the 1940s and 1950s. According to Daghmoumi, these efforts are "modest" and do not constitute a substantial undertaking of compelling scale and depth. For example, in *Al-Shi'r al-Tamthīlī wa al-Qaṣaṣī wa al-Ādāb al-'Arabīyah* (1941), Taher Zniber, for example, calls on Arab writers to participate in drama production even though he is not was a native of classical Arabic literature. Zniber attributes the failure of Arab writers to appear in drama to an inability or "impatience" to adhere to playwright standards and create genre-specific characters and themes. He invited Arab writers to embrace this non-native genre by setting three conditions for writing. First, a play, written or performed, must be of "pure" Arab origin because it is designed to appeal to an Arab audience. Then, its theme and theme must be inspired by Arab history, which boasts landmark events that appeal to the understanding, interests and feelings of the audience. Ultimately, the costumes and furniture used in this "localized" film must reflect the era it represents.

In short, Zniber calls for the integration of theatre into Arabic literature in a way rooted in Arab history and culture. Contrary to Zniber's invitation to localize theatre, Abdeslam Alaoui urges writers to embrace and emulate the great play, even as it comes out in the West. In "Corneille" (1941), Alaoui introduces the 17th-century French playwright to Moroccan readers, emphasizing moral values. Corneille's play teaches "the greatness of the self and the solidity of morality"; it emphasizes self-control and strong will, guided by an inquiring mind and independent of whims. Alaoui invites readers and writers to explore Corneille's dramatic teachings as they offer a "strong moral" that deserves to be inculcated.

While the above critics and enthusiasts attempt to approach Moroccan, Arabic and Western literary works, others undertake the exploration of what literary criticism means, its background, its goals and objectives purpose and its implementation.



In "Da'amat al-Naqd: Al-Baḥṭh 'an al-Ḥaq wa al-Jamāl" (1943), the screenwriter Mustapha El Gharbaoui described the criticism as an "extremely useful art with great impact". For him, it was a symbol of the intellectual activity and maturity necessary for a nation's march towards excellence. Zniber notes that "authentic" criticism aims to discover how well the literary work under study achieves the mission and purpose set forth by the writer. To show that, el Gharbaoui believes that critics must display strong potential: extensive knowledge, strong character, genuine expertise, superb craftsmanship and a great taste in history, not to mention local and global languages and literature. Like El Gharbaoui and Bentabet, Zniber considers this hobbyist broader knowledge essential for critical judgment, encouraging critics to embrace creative freedom beyond "error writing methods time", to bring clarity to critical language as well as to clarify and justify before important concepts are advocated or used. Though ephemeral, these statements by Zniber and others are only excerpts cited by Kharmach to explain how the "critics" of the 1940s and early 1950s viewed critical activism.

### **Brief Biography of Tahar Ben Jelloun**

Tahar Ben Jelloun was born in Fez, Morocco. The family - consisting of four children, three boys and a girl - lived in a small apartment in the Medina, the medieval old town of Morocco's most beautiful city. His father, a low-ranking merchant, sold spices in a small market shop and later worked as a seamstress, making djellabas (a long, loose robe worn by Arab men).

At the age of 5, Ben Jelloun enrolled in a Koran school, where he learned to memorize and recite verses from the Koran. Two years later, he entered a Franco-Arabic school, learning French in the morning (this was his first exposure to the language) and Arabic in the afternoon. He is a diligent and serious student. He later studied philosophy at Rabat University. In 1971, at the age of 26, Ben Jelloun immigrated to France to complete his studies at the Sorbonne. He then worked for a time in Paris as a psychotherapist. His first novel, *Harrouda*, was published in 1973. Since then, he has written nine novels, as well as several collections of short stories, poems, and essays. He is perhaps best known for his trilogy of novels about the life of Ahmed/Zahra, a girl whose father, longing for a male heir, raised her as a boy: *L'Enfant des Sables*, a bestseller in France; *Sacred Night*; and the recently released *The Wrong Night*.

Taher Ben Jelloun is the most prolific and controversial contemporary Moroccan writer. Jelloun is one of the most famous French writers: his most recent book, *Explaining Racism to My Daughter*, is a

bestseller; and in 1987 he received the Goncourt Prize for his novel *La Nuit Sacrée*, the first book by an Arab writer to be so honoured. Over the past two years, he has been shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Goncourt Prize winner Ben Jelloun has been accused of "beautifying his Moroccan themes to please the whims of Western readers" (El Guabli, 2016, P. 62). In 2001, he published *This Blinding Absence of Light*, a semi-fictional memoir based on Aziz Binebine's experiences in the secret.

Tazmamart prison after the Skhirat coup; followed by an English translation by Linda Cloverdale titled *The Absence of This Glare*, which, in 2002, won the prestigious IMPAC award in 2004. He was heavily attacked for stealing Binebine's story. He also lacks credibility as a human rights defender in Morocco as he is also accused of failing to use his prominent literary status to pressure King Hassan II to release his victims of Tazmamart, who were detained for another 4 years (El Guabli, 2016, P. 63).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Psychoanalytic theory holds that resistance and defence mechanisms prevent unconscious and unpleasant thoughts and emotions from becoming conscious. Psychoanalytic articles explain how pain prevents the satisfaction of addictions and sexual needs as well as the proper dissipation of aggressive feelings. The blocked expression of these needs leads to inner turmoil. For Freud, therefore, the central premise is that we are driven by unconscious desires of which we are not aware and that this lack of awareness leads to motivated or self-destructive behaviour. self. Freud believed that we deceive ourselves about the reasons for our behaviour and that this self-delusion limits our choices. By becoming aware of our unconscious desires and our defences against them, we increase the choices available to us. Therefore, when we reduce our level of being motivated by unconscious factors, we gain a higher degree of self-control.

However, this paper borrows eclectic concepts from interdisciplinary studies; Erving's concept of Goffman's "holistic institution", Elaine Scarry's comprehensive and detailed theoretical definition and analysis of torture, and Judith Herman's study of trauma.

### **Critical Analysis of *This Blinding Absence of Light***

Tahar Ben Jelloun tells the story of political prisoners who took part in the failed coup against King Hassan II of Morocco in 1971. Jelloun's prose is superb; the book is a tribute to the human spirit capable of surviving in the most inhumane conditions. This story is based on true events and the author's interview with a former prisoner Aziz Binebine.



After the attempt to overthrow the king, sixty people were held for eighteen years in a secret prison called Tazmamart, located in the Sahara Desert. Conditions in this prison were horrible and brutal. The prisoners were buried alive, kept in complete darkness in an underground cell 5 feet high and 9 feet long, where they could neither get up nor sit down; scorpions and other insects occupied the prisoners' cells, with one small hole for air and another in the floor used as a toilet. They only get enough food to last until the next day. The only time they were allowed out was to bury other prisoners.

Salim, the main character, finds strength and meaning in religion, Islam. Although he was not religious before being detained, he also refused to hate those who put him in these conditions. Most people die not from hunger but from hatred. The feeling of hate reduces you; it eats you from the inside and attacks the immune system. When we have hatred within us, it always crushes us.

### **Monarchy and Politics of Detention in *This Blinding Absence of Light***

A Monarch is a form of government in which a person, the monarch, is head of a state for life or until abdication. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most common form of government was monarchy.

Half a century ago, Samuel P. Huntington (1968), when discussing regime transformations from autocracy to democracy, took the view that an absolute monarch who considered reaching a compromise, using which he or she would retain some of his or her powers within the framework of a democratic system, was likely to get disappointed. In the long run, the monarch faced a zero-sum game; either try to retain his or her powers as an absolute monarch or be stripped of all powers and, at best, continue as a ceremonial head of state of a democracy. The basic logic behind this statement is simple: a leader who has not been elected by the people has little or no legitimacy to rule in a democratic polity.

At the same time, monarchies are not on the verge of extinction; currently, there are approximately 30 democracies with a monarch as head of state and among authoritarian regimes, monarchies, in particular, are very stable (e.g. Kailitz, 2013; Magaloni, 2008). Yet, the question of how much power monarchs possess has not aroused a great deal of interest among political scientists. Whereas, the relationship between presidents and prime ministers has been widely discussed in the literature on semi-presidentialism (e.g. Åberg & Sedelius, 2018; Brunlíć & Kubát, 2019; Cheibub et al., 2010; Duverger, 1980; Elgie, 1999; Sartori, 1997; Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2009), the issue of executive power sharing in

democratic monarchies has been more or less completely neglected.

Political writers in prison are "trauma writers whose work is marked by the primary function of witnessing" (Livescu, 2013, P. 221). Inmates have been documenting their incarceration experiences since the prison's existence. Paul Gready argues that being a political prisoner means being "written with diversity" and "being challenged in writing" ((Livescu, 2013, P. 489). In her torture structure, Elaine Scarry admits that the pain caused is objectified, denied as a personal pain, and read as fiction about state power ((Livescu, 2013, P. 28). Memoirs from a political prison help former prisoners rebuild the past and "restore [destroyed] voices" ((Livescu, 2013, P. 50). Moreover, they give meaning to the time of incarceration; a period that creates a gap in the personal history of political prisoners. The article contradicts the view that the incarceration experience destroys the world of prisoners and does not help them form a real world, because it helps them reintegrate as political citizens.

Resistance and survival are the most important themes of political prison stories because, for political prisoners, resistance is survival. Conscientious prisoners of conscience explore inhumane prison conditions and preserve the experiences of their fellow prisoners in collective memory so that their sacrifices are not in vain; Political stories about prisons are "proof of the ultimate victory of truth over power" (Chergui 2014. P. 38).

Political prisoners associate writing with their quest for freedom. This paper therefore aims to compare the representations of torture, body and voice in *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2002) by Taher Ben Jelloun. King Hassan II drafted Morocco's first constitution in 1962, allowing him to manipulate and oversee both the government and parliament. Political parties now encourage strikes and demonstrations to achieve democracy. Morocco was then experiencing a "bloody war between the monarchy and the left-wing political parties" since King Hassan II used violence and "oppression to stifle all dissenting voices" (Elaiissi, 1976, P. 658).

The 1970s began in Morocco with two successive failed coups led by General Mađbūḥ in 1971 and Muḥammad Oufkir in 1972. The coup leaders were publicly executed and used as a scene. Symbols of those who dare to challenge the monarchy; the soldiers involved in coups, whether intentional or not, are taken to Tazmamart, a notorious prison camp in Morocco.

In addition, the early 1970s saw many protests by students and opposition groups, including the 'Ila al-'mām led by Abraham Sirfāty, Linaḥdim al-sh'b and the 23 March movement led by Abraham Sirfāty. Muḥammad Karfāty leader; members of these leftist groups have been arrested, tortured, mutilated, missing, and persecuted for many years. Although they claim an equal and democratic Moroccan society, they are accused of being a threat to national security. Susan Szymovics in her article "Argument from Silence: "The Truth Commission of Morocco and Female Political Prisoners," stated that "the death of King Hassan II on July 23, 1999 was a turning point [...] In 1990, King Hassan II established the Council of Justices. Human Rights issues [ . . . ] were modelled after a similar French institution, to restore the regime's repressive reputation: these efforts intensified after the death of the king" (Elaissi,1976, P. 88).

On January 7, 2004, King Muḥammad VI established Hay'at al-'Inṣāf wa al-Muṣalaḥa (Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC)) to investigate past widespread human rights abuses. Of the 58 people who were secretly held in Tazmamart, only 28 survived and were able to tell their stories. Fifty-eight detainees were divided into two groups of 29 each and divided into two cells; cell A and cell B. Only three prisoners survived in cell B where Ben Jelloun's prisoner was kept. *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2002) takes place before the order to evacuate Tazmamart in 1991, the prisoners lived for 18 years during which they "were given the same daily ration of dry bread and diluted coffee, heard the same stories and share their conflicts and fight for their freedom." Their families and the outside world know where they are" (Sellman, 1990, P. 71).

International attention to the notorious Tazmamart prison and the tombs surrounding it has led to articles about Tazmamart, described as "individually, collectively and nationally", well known in Morocco and around the world.

The first coup took place on 10 July 1971, when King Hassan II celebrated his 42nd birthday at the Skhirat Palace in the presence of Morocco's most prominent men, including entrepreneurs, artists, soldiers and diplomats. General Muḥammed Maḍbūh and Colonel Muḥammed' Ababū planned to overthrow King Hassan II from power; they tricked the cadets of the Ahermoumou military academy into telling them that the king's life was in danger and ordered to shoot anyone who resisted. Over a thousand inexperienced practitioners find themselves caught up in a deadly shootout between practitioners who believe the king's life is in danger and the palace guards who are protecting the king from the attack of the students. Miraculously, the king

escaped certain death and within a few hours everything was under control. The second coup took place on August 16, 1972, when King Hassan II returned from France. Several army jet fighters attacked the king's plane, but the pilot landed safely and the king's life was also miraculously saved. The 1972 coup d'etat was instigated by Morocco's second most important figure, General Oufkir, who was executed the same evening.

Although he was accused of using Aziz Binebine's experience to write *This Blinding Absence of Light*, he continues to deny it as quoted in David Tresilian's review of *This Blinding Absence of Light* by Ben Jelloun in the online weekly Al-Ahram, who said that the memoir "is Taher's, although it was heavily inspired by me and my story." In an open letter, Aziz Binebine wrote that Ben Jelloun "pressured him to speak and reject" the memoir (Lindsey and M. Lynx Qualey). However, Ben Jelloun insists that Binebine begged him to write his story (Lewis, 2000, P. 129).

Taher Ben Jelloun's semi-fictional memoir *The Absence of Glare* was controversial when it was first published. It is based on true events, the testimony of a Tazmamart survivor named Aziz Binebine, who spent eighteen years in the shadows of the notorious Moroccan prison for taking part in the failed Skhirat coup in 1971. The memoir recounts the journey of suffering, resistance and survival of a former prisoner named Salim, which means unharmed in Arabic. It is through the eyes of the narrator/survivor that the author paints a portrait of eighteen years of imprisonment. Salim, throughout the memoir, is not only a witness but also a great storyteller in this dark universe; he helps his teammates through their pain. This paper presents the daily lives of the undead buried in the tombs of Tazmamart, their inhuman sufferings, resistance and survival. Tazmamart's prisoners struggled to survive; some have said, pray, hope and survive. However, most go mad, lose hope, and die. Ben Jelloun's memoir is characterized by smooth, emotional storytelling and vivid imagery of anguish, suffering, hunger, and torture. The structure is neither chronological nor linear. Ben Jelloun constructs a first-person narrator using the "I" of Tazmamart survivor, Salim/Aziz Binebine; to represent the collective experience of Tazmamart victims who have disappeared forever and are not can tell their stories.

In *This Blinding Absence of Light*, Salim had no prior knowledge of the coup planned in Skhirat in 1971. When he first began his detention, he watched the night the coup took place and where he was stopped, was like the night when his life stopped and lost all meaning. On July 10, 1970, Salim was removed from life, with no past or memories. So, to fight behind the prison walls and start over with his life, he

must learn to forget and escape from his past life outside the prison. Salim recalled that night: on the night of July 10, 1970, I became ageless. I have grown neither older nor younger. I have lost my age. You can no longer read it in my face. I am no longer here to give my age a face. I came to a standstill over in nothingness, where time is abolished, tossed back to the wind, handed over to that vast beach of white sheet rippling in a light breeze, given up to the sky drained of its stars, its images, the childhood dreams that found refuge there, emptied of everything, even God. I crossed over there to learn forgetfulness, but I never succeeded in being completely within nothingness, not even in thought (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 5).

In a very elaborate style, *This Blinding Absence of Light* recreates the deeply personal suffering of a man who has moved from a state of humanity to a state of emptiness, deprived of life and death, yet he is still dependent on his mental and spiritual abilities to survive the harsh conditions of Tazmamart and find solace in his spiritual meditation, isolation and ignorance of his painful past. Salim realizes that his survival depends largely on his ability to renounce the sounds, colours and desires of life, avoiding thinking about the injustice of being held captive for a crime he didn't commit. Furthermore, he realized that he shouldn't let emotions like hope, hate, love, and passion enter his cell, and as such emotions would waste his resistance efforts.

Poignantly written, this *Blinding Absence of Light* illustrates that Tazmamart's prisoners are devastated mentally and physically, but their dignity is what remains in the face of persecution. Guards were ordered to beat prisoners by destroying their dignity. However, Salim is aware of the importance of preserving one's dignity to survive, because "keeping one's dignity is essential" (Ben Jelloun 1944, P. 123). Inmates were brought from the Kenitra civilian prison to Tazmamart, blindfolded with black cloth and handcuffed. They were deprived of their property and cursed. Prisoners are now just numbers, the police replace their names with numbers. The prisoners insisted on calling each other by name and this was their first and main mechanism of protest to preserve dignity.

Salim's resentment towards the father who betrayed his son and abandoned his wife runs throughout the story. Salim's father and mother are completely different characters. Gender roles are reversed because "the masculinization of the mother is associated with the feminization of the father" (El Guabli, 2016, P. 75). When Salim's father, King Hassan II's jester, realized that his son was among the rebels seeking to kill his master, he condemned his son as

dead and organized a symbolic funeral for him. This strange reaction from Salim's father shows how willing he was to give up his masculinity to fully submit to the will of the king; His father, described as "the dapper of Marrakech and the charmer of Don Juanesque" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 25), feels no responsibility for his many children and is concerned only with the quality of his perfume and its accessories. On the contrary, her mother put femininity aside, playing the role of a father and shouldering the responsibility of raising children. Everyone's will to resist is different. Salim understood this fact well because he said: "Not all of us have the same need or will to resist" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 61), and see resistance "as a duty, not an obligation" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 23). The subjectivity of prisoners is reflected in their resistance mechanism and tendency to preserve their identity. Yenna Wu found that inmates' survival strategies varied according to their educational and social environments as well as their personalities ("Recovering muted voices" 32). As for Salim, he learned of his mother's resistance: I am only a man, like all others, with the will not to give in. That's all. A will that is firm, ruthless and uncompromising. Where does it come from? From a long way back. From childhood. From my mother, whom I always saw struggling to raise my brothers and sisters and me. Never give up. Never flagging for an instant (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 23).

Silence is the objective correlation of death; Paradoxically, silence is a form of torture and a protest mechanism. When we hear the word Muqāwama (resistance), we immediately think of something full of action and movement or all kinds of violence and protest. In reality, however, silence can turn into an act of protest. Salim describes the types of silence he experiences behind the high walls of Tazmamart: the silence of night. It was necessary for us. The silence of the companion who was slowly leaving us. The silence we observed was a sign of mourning. The silence of blood circulating sluggishly. The silence told us where the scorpions were. The silence of images we ran and reran through our minds. The silence of the guards expressed weariness and routine. The silence of the shadow of memories burned to ashes. The silence of a leaden sky from which almost no sign could reach us. The silence of absence, the blinding absence of life. The hardest, most unbearable silence was that of light. A powerful and manifold silence. There was the silence of the night, always the same, and then there were the silences of light. A long and endless absence (Ben Jelloun 1944, P. 51).

From the outset, Salim, a non-religious Muslim, claimed to have "searched for the black stone that purifies the soul from death" (Ben Jelloun, 1944,

P. 1). The most important survival strategy that revolved around the prisoners' daily lives was their religious faith. Their imprisonment in underground cells like tombs and the breath of death that attacked them daily through the death of one of them led to their religious faith. Every prisoner feels that he is going to die. In other words, throughout Ben Jelloun's semi-fictional memoir, any prisoner could die at any moment, so they must be ready to meet Allah. So in *This Blinding Absence of Light*, there are many references to the black stone found in Ka'aba.

Liscano writes: "In torture, one wants to die, the other begs the executioner to kill. The executioner said, 'You want us to kill you. But we won't do that'" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 48). Taher Ben Jelloun uses photographic techniques to present discrete death scenes. The prisoners were not allowed to see sunlight, except if one of the prisoners died. They were allowed to see sunlight while burying one of their roommates. So death has an opposite meaning as it gives them happiness when they tell one of their companions to leave forever. Hamid, number 12, was the first prisoner whose soul left Tazmamart; he lost his mind, isolated himself and begged for death, which "came to him as he fell into a trance and banged his head against the wall repeatedly. He let out a long cry; then the voice and his breathing ceased forever" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 9). Salim made Driss chew on bread and then gave him small pieces, then took a sip of water but he refused to eat anything that "his withered legs wrapped around and pressed against her chest". and he becomes "a strange little object so disfigured by disease that there is nothing human about him" (Ben Jelloun 1944, P. 11-12).

"Baba, Saharawi, who joined our group one evening, was accused of saying that Sahara is not Moroccan," says Salim, "died of the cold" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 31). Poor Larbi went on a hunger strike before he died and became extremely thin, "bloodshot eyes bulging out of their sockets and foaming at the corners of his mouth. On his bony face you could read it all, "hate and suffering in the world." (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 36). Rushdie, badly wounded, died of an incurable disease of hate. He lost his mind and surrendered; all he wants is "to slaughter everyone": guards, judges, lawyers, royalty, all who were behind his detention" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 39). Mustapha, number 8, was "stung by a scorpion" so the whole scorpion gathered on his rotting body (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 55-56). "Moh went crazy. When it was time to eat, instead of eating, he thought of his mother, talked to her, and imagined he fed her, so "he had no strength, no voice. He was letting himself die" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 60). Abdelkader let himself die and committed suicide by swallowing something sharp after Salim stopped telling stories due to "Salim's physical and mental decline" (Ben Jelloun,

1944, P. 75-77). Majid, number 6, hanged himself. Salim said: "He tied his clothes into a rope, wrapped it around his neck, tightened his grip with all his might, tied the tail of his shirt to the ventilation mesh and lay on the ground pushing his legs leaning against the door until he choked" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 92).

Furthermore, the memoir traces the grotesque images of death overshadowing Tazmamart, to use Ahmed Marzouki's pun. Ironically, Bourras died of constipation and could not "push out" so he was "hard as concrete" so he "perforated the rectum" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 97-98). Sebban, who joined the inmates in the early 1980s, died of gangrene that spread rapidly throughout his body. "I saw worms coming out of the soles of his feet," recalls Salim, "[there were] so many cockroaches that it was difficult to get rid of them" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 119). Unable to see what he was eating, Abdelmalek was "poisoned by a thousand cockroach eggs" because there were too many cockroaches "laying eggs among the breadcrumbs" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P.136). While Abdullah died from constant diarrhoea, Fellah "died after excruciating pain" from being unable to urinate anymore (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 155). Mohammed and Icho died after a long "disease that made them cough until they choked" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 162). The prisoners at Tazmamart understood that death was the only saviour that could end their ordeal.

Unlike the other prisoners, Salim resists nothingness and death by suppressing his memories; he stated: "It took me a while to realize that the enemy is memory. Whoever recalls his past dies immediately" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 17).

Salim is aware of the importance of maintaining his sanity in the face of the absurdity of the prison system. Therefore, he understands that he must develop "personal mental hygiene" (Livescu, 2011, P. 192). Simona Livescu asserts, "Inner discipline and a daily dose of good art," "represents the formula for building mental strength and practising them continuously is the indomitable secret to maintaining mental survival." psychologically and physically" (Livescu, 2011, P. 195). Salim mainly relies on his literary memory to survive and help his fellow prisoners survive their traumatic experiences. During Salim's childhood, his father loved books and often read poetry and stories. Salim thus grew up with a rich literary memory. Salim recited *Camus's L'Étranger* and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. He, also, fabricated tales from *The Arabian Nights* since his fellow inmates had begged him to narrate stories from *'Alf Lilah wa Lilah (The Arabian Nights)* though he had not read it before. Salim uses storytelling as a strategy of survival and relief for himself as well as his fellow prisoners.

Brahim El Guabli asserts that "Ben Jelloun's work is 'deeply imbued with his Moroccan cultural and linguistic heritage' (El Guabli, 2016, P. 79). The story begins with Salim emphasizing the importance of the Black Stone to his spiritual survival journey. Furthermore, "the novel hints at similarities between the story of the king in the novel and King Shahrīyār" (El Guabli, 2016, P. 79). The unfaithfulness of King Shahrīyār's wife caused him to take revenge on all the maidens; the treachery of the rulers and soldiers of King Hassan II resulted in him serving a prison sentence full of hatred towards the soldiers. Sheherazade's stories helped her survive and put an end to King Shahrīyār's murder of young women. Similarly, Salim's father used storytelling to accept the king's mistreatment of his people, and Salim used scripting to survive in the abyss of Tazmamart (El Guabli, 2016, P. 79).

"How do you feel about the army?"  
 "I don't feel anything."  
 "Any resentment, desire for revenge?"  
 "No."  
 "What do you think of your family?"  
 "Family's family"  
 "What do you think of your father?"  
 "He's someone who loves his children, but he isn't a father."  
 "Do you resent him?"  
 "No, not at all."  
 "What will you do when you leave here?"  
 "No idea. Perhaps take care of my health."  
 (Ben Jelloun 182)

In *This Blinding Absence of Light*, Kmandar, the prison director, and his guards are presented in the memoir as tools at the hands of King Hassan II's dictatorship; their ultimate goal is to crush the will and identity of the prisoner. Guards do not have "full authority over" prisoners, but they do have "on their books a list of abuses to inflict upon prisoners whenever they see fit" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 15). The Chinese forms of punishment and torture applied in Mao's *Laogai* (forced labour camp) were also brutally applied in Moroccan prisons (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P.86). Kmandar's personality illustrates how brutal he is and reflects the violence that swept through Morocco during this period:

He was born to serve, to carry out all assignments, from the most ordinary to the most monstrous of tasks and without any doubts. He received orders and implemented them with a metallic firmness. Before being put in charge of us, he had already slit the throats of several wretches, buried others alive, and tortured opponents of the regime with the application of a specialist. He had lost an eye in a car accident. It was God's will, he said. That's all. (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 45).

Additionally, Salim describes the two particularly mean guards: Fantass and Hamidouche. Fantasy was a nasty, bad-tempered man who used to speak using only vulgar, insulting words. Oddly, he returned after a two-month disappearance, wept and asked the prisoners to forgive him: I hated you because I'd been taught to hate. I hoped you'd die slow, painful deaths. I deserve to go to hell for the evil I did to you. God has punished me! He just snatched away my two grown children and killed them instantly in a brand-new car. [. . .] I have nothing more to do here below. [. . .] It's all over for me. Help me to go by forgiving me! (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 45).

Fantass's previous confession, before he died of a hunger strike, directly takes us to Carlos Liscano's three questions about the perpetrators' life outside prison walls, namely "When they go home, what do they tell their wives, their girlfriends, children, parents, and friends? [. . .] Where does he come from? How does an individual become that?" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 70-71). "The torturer is as oneself," argues Liscano, "speaks the same language, and shares the same values and prejudices" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, 70-71).

Therefore, it is difficult to understand how an individual can torture another for no reason, how the executioner, with his bloody hands, can continue his social life with family and friends, and how the executioner can get rid of the guilt and overcome it. Fear of the consequences of his atrocities and how the executioner can live and reconcile his two opposing personalities: wickedness inside the prison and outside the ordinary. It is terrible that if these executioners were human beings like all of us, we could one day become torturers because "human beings are capable of doing absolute evil, ability to hurt others for satisfaction, to be able to let people die in pain" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 72). Therefore, they believe that they are eliminating and exhausting those who are seen as harmful to society and a threat to the stability of society.

Carlos Liscano asserts that there are guards who carry out "order after order, it doesn't matter to them. They are not responsible; it is their superiors who make them villains" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 71). *This Blinding Absence of Light* represents a serious survival strategy that occurs in a variety of cultural and political contexts, namely dark humour, laughter, and lightness of heart. This survival tactic helps Tazmamart's prisoners to become human under duress and exact revenge on their torturers.

In her article, *A Life Without Object(s)*, Liscano argues that irony and dark humour are key tactics for accessing the "free world" and staying strong; prisoners laugh at everything, even at

themselves and their illness (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 12). Tazmamart's prisoners understood the absurd side of their detention and laughed at their attackers. "Laugh. We try to laugh when we tell old jokes," says Salim, "Our cheerfulness is often forced, a kind of nervous stuttering" (Ben Jelloun 61). Mustapha tells them "pun intended, joke and give people nicknames" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 61). Salim recounted a revelation in which a dog "was sentenced to 5 years in prison! [. . .], It seems to have bitten a general who came to inspect the barracks near the prison" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 61). Although this episode is more ridiculous than the comic, it makes them laugh and decide to choose a name for their new companion; some wanted to name the dog after Kmandar, the warden, but ended up calling it Ditto. The poor dog "went crazy, probably from rabies" and died of hunger and exhaustion (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 62). Indeed, this episode reveals the mental incompetence of the prison administrators.

During prolonged confinement and isolation, Salim "was able to develop ecstasy normally found only in extremely susceptible people to hypnosis, including the ability to form positive and negative hallucinations" (Herman, 1967, P. 88). Salim describes his hallucinations as mainly used to combat loneliness; many of his hallucinations are about spirituality. Sometimes in the night, he saw a woman giving him back; he listened to her and followed her "on a pilgrimage around the seven saints of Marrakech, guardian spirits of the survivors, the poor and the dead" (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 100).

Salim experiences ecstasy even in his most desperate moments when he realizes that convincing himself that he is "out of the world" is the first step to surviving the dark abyss of Tazmamart (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 50). He decided to start a new life and replace his memories with new ones because he was "born and died on July 10, 1971"; the date of detention (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 19). Resistance behind prison walls for those held for very long periods, as in the case of Tazmamart, is fueled by inmates' decisions to face the timelessness of their incarceration.

It should be noted that when detainees were transferred from the Kenitra civilian prison to Tazmamart, they were not informed of the length of their sentences. Tazmamart's atmosphere led inmates to conclude that their detention would be long and that it was part of their agony before death. The complete absence of light and darkness where the detainees lived made it difficult for them to distinguish day from night. Karim, prisoner number 15, is obsessed with time. It had the magical ability to tell the time within one minute, so it became the prisoner's calendar and their "link to life" outside the prison walls (Ben Jelloun, 1944, P. 28). The ability to

tell time and know it was Karim's survival strategy and of course, he was involved in the common life of other prisoners like Salim. This does not contradict the view that "time" in the novel is subjective and is not governed by hours and minutes because its concept and definition differ between prisoners. Perceptions of time vary according to the circumstances of the same person.

Helpless prisoners invent a language that their roommates can simply understand to safely express their secret feelings. Offline transcription includes Quran reading, story, dream interpretation, etc. In Tazmamart, Gharbi used to read verses from the Quran. Salim is the storyteller and the stories he tells motivate other prisoners to resist. Like Abdelkader, who pushed Salim to tell the story so as not to die? Salim told his fellow prisoners' stories, poems and movies.

## CONCLUSION

*This Blinding Absent of Light* by Tahar Ben Jelloun highlighted a dozen decades of unhealthy civilization monarch system against the Western popular system of democracy as an institution of governance. The majority of Arab North Africans are Muslims, therefore, they are guided by Islamic teachings and traditions as an institution of seeking any interpretation about their life and afterlife endeavours.

Ben Jelloun attempts to tell a story about King Hassan's brutality as a sign of running away from Islamic thought and its teachings. Contemporary systems of monarchy have been adulterated with much harsh enslavement against their subjects for the sake of religion to continue for life as leaders without any objection from any angle or group of society.

Moroccans never consider themselves Africans in practices but Arab-Franco, therefore, this reason makes Moroccan literature especially not accessible to other regions of Africa. The majority of their themes are locally composed without any ingredients from other traditions of Africa. Moroccans' literary works of art are not known to the majority part of Africa due to medium of communication barriers. To break this deadlock Moroccan literary communities must intensify efforts to get more readerships worldwide by indulging in writing not only for Moroccans but international community.

Some parts of Morocco, especially the Western part of the country are still claiming or declaring political independence for themselves and it was supported by foreign allies like Spain. Morocco's monarch has already withdrawn her



membership from the African Union for over a decade because it failed to comply with many treaties about human rights violations against citizenries. Writers like Ben Jelloun try to rewrite Moroccan African and international reputation but its monarchical system of government will not allow them to accept plain truth though they are living relatively peacefully society lacks freedom of expression.

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