IDENTIFYING THE DISPLACED SELF: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS BY DRISS CHRAIBI AND TAHER BEN JELLOUN.

Laïla Ibnlfassi

University College London

Ph.D

1998
Francophone Maghrebian literature is concerned, in general terms, with cultural and socio-political issues. Because this theme recurs, it seems logical that critical approaches used to the study of this literature are often sociological, political or linguistic (in the sense of dealing with language issues in the Maghreb). The aim of this thesis is to step back from such pre-ordained approaches and adopt a novel perspective that can enhance and enrich the reading of this literature. As such, the objective of this work is to deduce the autobiographical act from what seem purely fictional texts, and to use a psychoanalytical approach which enables the reader to consider how a protagonist's search for selfhood is reflective of its creator, i.e. the author. The psychoanalytical perspective in this thesis helps mainly to detect a self, which for various reasons is fragmented. Freudian, Lacanian and Kleinian tools are used to provide an interpretation of the self in selected work of Driss Chraibi and Tahar Ben Jelloun, which are viewed as exemplars.

The discussion starts with the idea that the self is split and conflictual; but this situation is misrecognised, denied and displaced by the authors in question. This misrecognition operates at the expense of the female characters in the novels studied and the female gender in general. The patriarchal Moroccan society provides men with a freedom which is denied to women. However, men's freedom is merely a mask; so to express their true inner feelings, the male writers studied here appropriate women's voice - that is, the voice of absence. Accordingly, women and their absent voices become rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, which are used as a means of displacement and distanciation whereby it is men's subjectivity which is constructed. Both Chraibi and Ben Jelloun use the female figure in an attempt to resolve their own inner conflicts and inadequacies, in terms of cultural and sexual identities respectively. The detour taken by these writers to achieve their selfhood is here interpreted as a game of postponement on their part of what seems like an underlying knowledge of the impossibility of such achievement.
The help of a number of people enabled me to complete this thesis. I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Annette Lavers, for being a stimulating source of ideas, for her guidance and also for her personal kindness. I would also like to thank my husband, Michael Saward, for his moral and practical support; Nicki Hitchcott for her friendship and encouragement; Mina Taous, and my mother Hajja Fatima Ben Abbess, whose presence at various stages has allowed me time and space for writing; and Sheila Sweet for computing help. My late father, Haj El Khayatti Ibnlfassi, sent me a great deal of material from Morocco. More importantly, without his open-mindedness and encouragement throughout my education, the thesis would not have been written. He would have been very proud to see the project completed. My thanks also go to both Tahar Ben Jelloun and Driss Chraibi; the former for granting me an interview and the latter for agreeing to speak at a research seminar held at London Guildhall University. Finally, to my daughter Nadia, whose arrival and presence has been a source of great happiness.
To the memory of my father and my little brother Tarik
Table of Contents

Abstract 2
Acknowledgements 3
Introduction 6

Part One: Driss Chraïbi

Chapter One: The Chraïbian Hero, the Mother and the Family 25
Chapter Two: The Alienated Subject-Hero and a Theory of Doubles 71

Part Two: Tahar Ben Jelloun

Chapter Three: The Ambiguity of Self-Structure 109
Chapter Four: Ben Jelloun’s Nature of the Self 141
Chapter Five: The Appropriation of the Female Voice 160
Chapter Six: The Absence of the Self 182

Conclusion 214

Appendix One: Seminar Transcription: Driss Chraïbi 218
Appendix Two: Interview with Tahar Ben Jelloun 232

Bibliography 241
The trigger for the writing of this thesis, and my research in the field of francophone Maghrebian literature more generally, can be traced back to my high-school years in Rabat in the early 1970s. My French-subject teacher (Madame Degueret) was teaching us the fundamentals of the French language and introducing us to French literature. We were following the Moroccan national syllabus. Arabisation\footnote{The process of arabisation in Morocco began in 1957 (soon after independence) but the first attempts to arabise the educational system were unsuccessful due to Berber opposition, led by Addi Oubihi, and to the lack of qualified teachers of Arabic. Morocco had to employ a number of teachers from Egypt, Syria and Iraq in the early stages of arabisation. For further reading, see "Annexe 1: Chroniques de l'arabisation" in Gilbert Granguillaume, Arabisation et politique linguistique au Maghreb, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1983, pp.171-193.} had not yet begun. The French literature we were introduced to consisted of shortened versions of Balzac's *Eugénie*
Grandet, Malot’s *Sans famille*, Saint Exupéry’s *Le petit prince* and the like. From time to time, our French teacher would also distribute to us extracts of Feraoun’s *Le Fils du pauvre* to read and comment on. We were told that we would identify more readily with this kind of literature. It was indeed a novelty for us; we did identify with what was familiar to us, starting with the names of the characters and expressions which were of Arabic origin. At the same time, we found the latter amusing because they were written in French. We thought it a deficiency on the part of the author; we believed that he did not master the French language enough to be able to use the exact expressions of that language. Also, being post-independence city school children, we could not have identified with the colonized and poor Kabyle peasants described in Feraoun’s book.

Madame Degueret’s action could easily be interpreted as that of a condescending colonial teacher who patronised her indigenous pupils. But far from being malicious, her intentions were to open up the reading horizons of the Moroccan pupils and make them aware of their own literary patrimony. It was rather an anti-assimilationist attitude in an educational system based firmly on the French heritage which was alienating to the Moroccan pupil.

Years later, with more reading of francophone Maghrebian texts and with the help of a critical competence acquired
through education and through personal experience, I identified more closely with these texts; not in terms of similarities, but rather in terms of dissimilarities. The female gender depicted in male writing does not seem to allow for the passage of time to the extent that women in such literature seem to be literally stuck in the past. New generations of women in the Maghreb have moved away from the confined spaces and life-style of older ones (though, to a certain extent and in a contradictory way, the fundamentals of being a woman in a male-dominated society have changed very little), making it harder to find grounds for identification in this male writing about women.

However, an awareness of one's enunciation is a major aspect of modern critical theory, and it is particularly crucial here, hence the necessity for a few details which will characterize this particular reader, and focus particularly on the (highly ideological) frontier between the public and the private and the forms it takes in different cultures. The reading of the authors studied in this thesis is inevitably subjective. It is a reading stamped by a shared background with both authors, by a reader who is Moroccan, Muslim and living within a culture different from the native one. The gender difference, however, initiates the focus on thematic issues about women and their representation, as well as the discourse used to do so. As in the case of the authors examined here, the contact with Western culture came first through
education, and because of that there was, to a certain extent, not so much an alienation as a resentment towards certain aspects of my culture which were constraining. While it is a fact that social constraints are an extension of family constraints, my own encounter with them was (ironically) located mainly outside the family. The private sphere, far from being opposed to education and knowledge (as provided by the public sphere) taught me that these bring independence and a sense of freedom. However, the private, in this case, was more permissive and more open than the public, for the latter was always more eager to remind me that I belonged to a certain group -my gender- which for them was inferior by definition. This discrimination resulted in anger and resentment. There is thus to a certain degree an identification with the writers studied here. It is not so much an identification with their predicament within the family circle as with their encounter with the public sphere. As a perfect oxymoron, the public seems to be a constraining space. And when the opportunity of meeting a different culture occurs, there is an immediate comparison, naïve as it might be, with the public sphere of that culture. The differences inevitably lead to a dissatisfaction with one's own position.

The focus on these male writers' split selfhood puts into question my own role as a female reader and justifies the choice of the critical approach used in this thesis. The choice of a psychoanalytical approach seems to offer the
appropriate tools to deal with the notion of the self. But while analyzing these authors, my role as a reader becomes more active and my reading more subjective. Reading here becomes synonymous with auto-analysis. Broadly speaking, psychoanalysis offers different approaches to the unity of the self. My attempt to demonstrate how, in the instance of self-division, one can achieve plenitude veers towards a position whereby one can fantasize about oneness but not achieve it. One can achieve a 'rapprochement', which could be seen as a healing procedure, but a perfect harmony and unity of selfhood seems impossible to realize.

The process of researching and writing this thesis led to the organisation of an international conference in 1993, the proceedings of which were jointly edited with Nicki Hitchcott and published under the title of African Francophone Writing: A Critical Introduction. An earlier version of Chapter Two appears in this book. Part of Chapter One and a first version of Chapter Five were published in Bulletin of Francophone Africa.

Before introducing the arguments of this thesis, it is

__________


^ "Chraïbi’s Le Passé simple and a Theory of Doubles", ibid.


important to have a definition and an overview of francophone Maghrebian literature in place and to illustrate the stages of its development.

North African francophone writing is a body of literature in French by authors from the three countries of the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia). All three Maghrebian countries experienced French colonial rule. Morocco and Tunisia -both protectorates- gained their independence in 1956, Algeria in 1962, albeit in different circumstances, as is well known. Because of the French policy of assimilation and the length of time (132 years) it was in contact with the French language, Algeria has produced more francophone writers than Morocco or Tunisia. At first, Maghrebian people refused to acknowledge as legitimate the use of French as it was an imposed language, but later accepted its usage, often appropriating it for their own ends. Thus French became the language of anti-colonial struggle, particularly through writing.

The first short story to appear in French in 1891 was La Vengeance du Cheikh by the Algerian M’hammed Ben Rahhal. However, this early francophone writing was discarded by generations of Maghrébians as assimilationist and praising France.

It was not until the 1950s that the Maghreb witnessed the birth of a literature written in French that was
acknowledged by many as being of quality. The representative writers of this period are Albert Memmi, Driss Chraibi, Kateb Yacine and Mohammed Dib amongst others. The dynamic and powerful style of these writers earned them the title of forefathers of what is today known as "francophone Maghrebian literature".

The early 1950s writers, such as the Algerian Mouloud Feraoun who published Le Fils du pauvre and the Moroccan Ahmed Sefrioui with his novel La Boîte à merveilles, were labelled by their peers as ethnographic writers because they provided the reader with a colourful and exotic picture of everyday life in the French colonies. Their writing was seen as essentially directed to a French audience. It was regarded by Maghrebian critics as being politically disengaged, considering that the 1950s was, above all, a period of political unrest throughout the Maghreb. However, in the case of Feraoun, who was assassinated by the OAS (Organisation de l'Armée Secrète) in 1962, the critics failed to recognize that through the autobiographical narration and the humanist style of Le Fils du pauvre, the writer does not simply portray the poverty-stricken Berber region of Kabylia, but shows implicitly that such poverty was a direct consequence of French colonization.

\(^5\) A terrorist organization dedicated to the cause of Algérie française.
The 1950s was also marked by the revolutionary style of writing of the Tunisian Albert Memmi, the Moroccan Driss Chraibi and the Algerian Kateb Yacine. They respectively published what were to become canonical texts in francophone Maghrebian literature: *La Statue de sel* (1953), *Le Passé simple* (1954) and *Nedjma* (1956). While Yacine wrote about the metaphorical repeated rape of Algeria, Memmi and Chraibi respectively attacked their traditional Jewish and Muslim societies from which they feel alienated and which they describe in angry and violent tones.

While the 1950s novels were highly autobiographical and tended to ignore the political background, the 1960s saw a more politicized kind of writing, especially in Algeria. With the Algerian war of independence, Algerian writers took up arms and this period saw prolific literary production with revolutionary tones and themes. Thus, Mouloud Mammeri’s novel *L’opium et le bâton* (1965), set in a small Kabyle village, became a classical text dealing with the Algerian Revolution and the role of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the resistance fighters. But, before that, *Les Enfants d’un nouveau monde* (1962) was published by a woman writer, Assia Djebar. In her novel, Djebar celebrates the role of women in the war of independence.

From the mid 1960s, a new generation of writers emerged, including Rachid Boudjedra in Algeria and Mohammed Khair-
Eddine in Morocco. They were concerned less with the war than with the situation of the Maghreb countries in the aftermath of independence. They focused on their own societies which they criticized for inhibiting freedom of expression and for abusing human rights. Likewise, under the banner of free speech, the Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi founded the literary review *Souffles* in 1966. He was later jailed as a political prisoner but was released in 1988 after Amnesty International intervened on his behalf.

The publications of the 1970s marked a complete break from the previous styles of francophone Maghrebian literature. The writing of this period subverted the French language and gave it new dimensions with highly philosophical tones. Illustrative writers of this period are Abdelkebir Khatibi with his novel *La Mémoire tatouée* (1971) and Abdelwahab Meddeb's *Talismano* (1979). Language, identity, history and sexuality were the key themes of writing of this period. The production of poetry gained ground on the novel in the 1970s. Thus, besides novelists who are also poets, such as Mohammed Dib and Tahar Ben Jelloun, new names became prominent, in addition to Abdellatif Laâbi (who continued to write from his prison cell), such as Mohammed Loakira and Mostafa Nissaboury, to name but a few.

Maghrebian women began publishing in French as early as

---

See below, Chapter One, p.30, on *Souffles*. 
1947. Religious, social and state censorship which often constrained women's writing, resulted in some women giving up writing altogether or publishing under pseudonyms such as Aïcha Lemsine. While generally women writers share the same socio-political concerns, Assia Djebar stands as the only woman writer whose work experiments with the multiplicity of women's voices in literature and whose use of French is a subversion of what she calls her "stepmother tongue".

Despite the controversies surrounding the use of French®, women writers continue to use it as a medium to make their voice heard. In fact, in spite of the policy of arabisation in the Maghreb since the 1970s, the 1980s and 90s produced more names from both sexes on the francophone literary scene. Representative of these periods are women writers such as Béji Hélè, Nina Bouraoui, and male writers such as Rachid Mimouni, and Edmond Amrane El Maleh. On the other hand, of the old generation, Kateb Yacine ceased to write in French as a result of his opposition to the

Publications are often subject to a close scrutiny by state agencies before marketing.


® It is worth noting here that women's writing tends to be more in the field of non-fiction, such as sociological studies in particular.
institutionalization of Francophonie. However, ironically, in 1986 he was awarded the prestigious ‘Prix National des Lettres’ for his rich contribution to francophone writing.

Though the 1990s represent political and religious threats—especially intense in Algeria— to Maghrebian writers, the majority continue to publish today. Unlike their predecessors, most of whom lived in France, they have opted to remain in their own countries. This is a brave and risky choice; many writers, like Tahar Djaout in 1993, have been murdered by Islamist opposition groups in Algeria (anyone perceived to be an ‘intellectual’ is a target). The very real risk of violent death is a high price to pay to keep alive a literature that some critics previously regarded as being of little real value.

The corpus of this thesis spans two generations and derives meaning from this background. The following chapters aim to examine and explore the theme of the search of selfhood in the writing of two prominent authors from Morocco: Driss Chraibi and Tahar Ben Jelloun. The choice of these authors

---

10 It would be unfair to attribute all the killing that is happening in Algeria to moslem fundamentalists. Though nothing has been proven, it is believed that some of the killings were carried out by the government, which then blames the fundamentalists so as to lessen their attraction to the public. Some of the intellectuals murdered were voicing their opposition to both moslem fundamentalists and to the military-backed regime in Algeria.

11 In his book Le Thème de l’aliénation dans le roman maghrébin d’expression française, Toronto: Editions Naaman, 1972, Isaac Yétiv gave a very negative account of the quality and the future of this literature following the policy of arabisation throughout the Maghreb.
is triggered by the fact that they represent two different eras which map out the literary scene in Morocco. Both writers are male, write in French and live in France. What they also share is their cultural background. Both Chraibi and Ben Jelloun belong to the elite of Fès: they belong to mercantile and artisan families, which thus allows them to be financially at ease. Both writers received a French education and after studies in France, married French women, settled in France and started publishing from there.

Chraibi, as was said earlier, is acknowledged as one of the founders of maghrebian literature written in French. Considering the historical and political environment he evolved in, it is understandable that his acculturized writing would be impregnated with a sense of alienation and near anomie. He has been faced with a system of education and a way of living which by their very antagonism could cause alienating tensions and would split any personality which is yet to be shaped. Chraibi’s books under study here: Le Passé simple, Succession ouverte and La Civilisation, ma Mère!... illustrate this alienation and identity crisis which give way to a violent and disturbed search for the self.

Ben Jelloun, on the other hand, is of a different generation of writers. He entered the literary scene two decades after Chraibi. The generation gap between the two shows that the concerns are inevitably different. While for Chraibi the alienated hero is in search of a true cultural identity, what is at stake for Ben Jelloun's hero is more the sexual than the cultural identity. Chraibi's heroes are generally men while Ben Jelloun's are either androgynous or ambiguous. The latter are at the focal point of the novels studied in this thesis: Harrouda, La Prière de l'absent, L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée.¹³

For both Chraibi and Ben Jelloun the narrative 'I' seems to endure an existential suffering. The subject-hero is in torment, and the more the narrative progresses the deeper the hero sinks into despair about ever achieving a more harmonious existence. The medium through which the frustration of these writers' heroes is depicted is the female character. In a society which blesses—at least on the face of it—men with freedom, it would seem irrational to demand it. However, as women's freedom is absent it is justifiable to request it. Woman becomes thus the vehicle by which Maghrebian male writers, such as the ones studied here, have access to inferior passions such as shame and

passivity, to interiority and oppressed femininity. Woman's absence is, in fact, what these writers desire to possess. It is absence they need to define existence. Though, on the face of it, it seems as if these writers are concerned with the woman question and take up arms and plead her cause, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that far from this being the case, woman is merely a metaphorical device used as a detour and displacement to tackle man's status and masculinity.

The chapters of this thesis will show, amongst other arguments, how literature reflects Moroccan society in the sense that, by its portrayal of the predicament of women and the description of the space in which women evolve, it reflects and reproduces a similar dichotomy whereby the outside world is man's privilege, while the inside is the recognised space for woman. This female space is meant to confine and oppress her. On this subject, Zohra Mezgueldi writes:

Pour la littérature comme pour la culture et la société maghrébine, la maison reste le domaine exclusif des femmes quand elle n'est pas désignation métaphorique du féminin par un phénomène d'association là encore bien connu par la culture maghrébine. Or, s'il constitue leur espace essentiel, la maison est paradoxalement loin d'être une aire de liberté pour les femmes de la plupart des romans maghrébins.¹⁴

In so doing, not only do these male writers perpetrate a

patriarchal perception of woman and her designated space but confine her even further by providing her with a fixed image, which means that in literature she remains impervious to the passage of time.\(^5\)

This carceral situation in which woman is fixed is, as mentioned above, a metaphorical displacement of the writer’s own situation. This thesis will attempt to demonstrate how the writer’s feelings of frustration and entrapment are at the origin of such a metaphorical detour. Through the use of psychoanalytic theory, I shall try to show how the writer’s self is either fragmented or ambiguous and how writing is seen as a solution to reassemble or define the self. Within this argument I will try to show the link between the author and his heroes. The information gathered on the writers under study here leads us to state that there is an autobiographical projection on the part of the authors onto their heroes. The study of the heroes and their predicament in terms of psychic structures shows how these heroes reflect the one who creates them. It is through a language proper to the author that characters are created; therefore, by decoding the words of that language we should be able to determine its subjective nature and its lack of innocence.

\(^5\) Though the mother, in Chraïbi’s La Civilisation, ma Mère!,.... seems to change with time, her emancipation and freedom should, in fact, be understood as a fantasmatic achievement on the part of the author. In Appendix One, p.220, he refers to this novel as "un rêve éveillé".
Part One of this thesis will concentrate on Driss Chraïbi. The first chapter shows the split between a father and his son as illustrated in *Le Passé simple*. The social picture Chraïbi provides the reader with is that of an archaic, hypocritical and patriarchal Muslim society which inhibits children and women alike from developing their individuality. This chapter will argue that this social picture is far from being totally objective. The cultural alienation of both writer and hero provides the clues whereby the reader will be able to determine to what degree such a vision of society defines more precisely the fragmented identity of the author whose writing is an attempt to justify and rectify his own past actions. The study of doubles, in Chapter Two, shows how the author will unconsciously try to achieve a united selfhood. By projecting his own feelings of inadequacy and his failings onto doubles, the author denies that his self is at the centre of his drama. The study of the doubles in terms of psychic structures will determine what is inherently proper to the author and his inability to fulfil selfhood.

Part Two deals with the work of Tahar Ben Jelloun. Chapter Three discusses the tortuous and polyphonic narrative structure of *L’Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*. Through analyzing the ambiguous and multiple narrative voices we shall try to deduce how this method of narration is reflective of the self of the author it embodies. The self emerges as being ambivalent and ambiguous in nature, just...
like the androgynous character Ahmed/Zahra (as argued in Chapter Four). Chapter Five looks at how, before an ambiguous sexual identity, the author has recourse to the voice of absence -that is, woman's voice- in order to express his own needs. In this sense, the author appropriates the female voice so as to express masculinity. *La Prière de l'absent*, a novel that bears more autobiographical elements than other texts by Ben Jelloun and which frames the content of Chapter Six, is an allegorical search for the authentic self. The hindrance and opposition of a society to the achievement of a free individuality are central to this novel. As with the other novels by Ben Jelloun, the study of *La Prière de l'absent* will illuminate the failed attempts in writing and completing subjectivity and Ben Jelloun's nihilist vision of being.

Both appendices attached to this thesis provide certain answers to some arguments raised in this study. The Driss Chraïbi seminar was organised by myself with the generous financial help of the Institut Français in London.

Being unable to secure an interview with Driss Chraïbi, I received his permission to transcribe his seminar. The interview with Tahar Ben Jelloun took place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Tahar Ben Jelloun was invited to take part in a colloquium on the friends of Jean Genet. My own participation involved having a public conversation with Ben Jelloun on the topic. The
interview in this thesis was a separate item. Both the positive and negative aspects concerning self-revelation in these transcripts seem to illustrate the limits of direct autobiography - the very limits which generate fiction, and writing generally.
PART ONE: DRISS CHRAIBI
Driss Chraïbi was born in El Jadida (Morocco) in 1926. He studied at the Lycée Lyautey in Casablanca, one of the famous French-speaking institutions in the country. After his Baccalauréat he left for France where he studied chemistry. He graduated as a chemical engineer, but quickly abandoned this discipline to concentrate wholly on literature. Apart from his writing, Chraïbi held various jobs and for about thirty years he worked for France-Culture where he was in charge of programmes dealing mostly with Maghrebian culture. As a writer, Chraïbi produced about twenty novels.

Le Passé simple was Chraïbi’s first novel and the one that first brought him fame. It made his name reverberate in both French and Moroccan intellectual and political
milieus. More accurately, it made him 'infamous' rather than famous. For the Moroccan intelligentsia Chraïbi's name became synonymous with traitor and 'vendu', while for the French right he became the example par excellence to legitimize the long-standing attitude of contempt towards the Moroccan régime at the time and to justify colonisation.

An article in Rivarol dated 17th February 1955 sums up the colonialist reception of Le Passé simple:

Un jeune Marocain, M. Chraïbi, vient d'écrire un livre, Le Passé simple, où il dit à ses compatriotes et nous dit à nous-mêmes cette vérité qui est souvent dure à dire et que nous cachent si volontiers les pourfendeurs du "colonialisme". Il exécute au passage l'ancien sultan: "Ce n'est pas un aigle et peu m'en chaut... Il n'a rien fait que je sache, rien dit, mal ou bien, qui méritât l'enthousiasme; il s'est contenté de porter sa pancarte." Ce livre d'une extrême virulence est dédié à M. François Mauriac qui, remarque M. Bernard Simiot, n'en a pas encore parlé! Rassurons notre confrère. M. Mauriac n'en parlera pas, parce que, du coup, sa campagne tournerait en eau de boudin.¹

This article, triumphant in tone and complacent in outlook, prompted many others in France and on the part of similarly inclined critics. Some responses went even further in their interpretation of the novel by attributing its contents to what they considered as the backwardness of an Islamic society. A passage from an article in Bulletin de Paris dated 4th March 1955, provides an apt example:

Il apparaît que le véritable conflit n’est pas tant entre le Maroc et la France qu’entre deux générations de Marocains ou plutôt entre une petite minorité, gagnée par la civilisation occidentale, et la masse (la masse et ses chefs) qui gardent les moeurs et les traditions de l’Islam.²

Had it appeared later than 1954 and in other circumstances, Le Passé simple would almost certainly not have provoked anger in his Moroccan audience, or applause from an opportunist colonial media in France. The publication of Le Passé simple coincided with a period of turmoil in Morocco. It was the pre-independence period.³ The struggle against French colonial rule was at its peak in all parts of the country. Moreover, the morale of millions of Moroccans was shattered when King Mohammed V was dethroned by the French and sent into exile with his children, first to Corsica and then to Madagascar. The publication of Le Passé simple was then seen by the Moroccans as propaganda against their struggle.

In an attempt to justify his work and to counter the portrayal in some French newspapers of him and his novel, Chraïbi wrote an article in Demain in November-December 1956 proclaiming:

Je ne suis pas colonialiste. Je ne suis même pas anticolonialiste. Mais je suis persuadé que le colonialisme européen a été nécessaire et salutaire au monde musulman. Les excès mêmes de

² Ibid.
³ Morocco was officially proclaimed independent in 1956.
ce colonialisme joints aux valeurs sûres de l'Europe ont été les ferments, le levain de la renaissance sociale à laquelle nous assistons maintenant.*

As direct and open as they were, it is not surprising that these words were to backfire on Chraïbi in most dramatic ways as illustrated in a passage of an article by a Moroccan journalist A. H. in Démocratie² in January 1957:

A l'abri des difficultés marocaines, Driss Chraïbi vit à Paris. C'est son droit [...] Non content d'avoir d'un trait insulté son père et sa mère, craché sur toutes les traditions nationales, y compris la religion dont il se réclame aujourd'hui, M. Chraïbi s'attaque maintenant au problème marocain. Au nom d'un Islam qu'il a bafoué, au nom d'un intérêt soudain pour une cause qui n'a jamais été la sienne.®

And in a more vociferous attack, A. H. adds that as Chraïbi lacks the courage of nationalist heroes and martyrs like Allal Ben Abdallah and Rachidi, he should have "...au moins la pudeur de se taire [...] Ce Monte-verdi (sic) de la plume, cet assassin de l'espérance."³

Le Passé simple is the expression of revolt of a son, Driss Ferdi, against his father, 'le Seigneur'. In this novel

---

^ Houaria Kadra-Hadjadji, Contestation et révolte, p.57.


⁷ Ibid.
Chraïbi denounces despotism within the family structure, the Islam-alibi and the traditions that justify such repression, and the quiescence of all those living by ancestral taboos. At the time of its publication, the Moroccan reader saw Le Passé simple as a political allegory for the relation between the king and his subjects. The reaction of the Moroccan press and the public, driven by nationalist and Salafist® fervour, was violent. As Lahcen Mouzouni puts it:

La critique de l’Islam en 1954 était l’équivalent d’un attentat prémédité contre non seulement la pensée religieuse ou politique de l’époque mais aussi contre la conviction profonde de tous les Marocains."

Harassed from all sides, Driss Chraïbi wrote a letter to the editor of Démocratie in which he disowned Le Passé simple. An act he later regretted:

Oui, j’ai eu un moment de faiblesses, je l’avoue, quand j’ai renié "Le Passé simple". Je ne pouvais pas supporter l’idée qu’on pût prétendre que je faisais le jeu des colonialistes. J’aurais dû

---

® The Moroccan Salafist movement is amply discussed by Lahcen Mouzouni, Le Roman Marocain de Langue Française, Paris: Publisud, 1987. Salafiya is a Muslim reformist movement. It took shape in 1908 under the leadership of Sheikh Abouchaïb Doukkali. The movement was strongly opposed to obscurantism, charlatanism and the sanctification of shrines. Later on Allal El Fassi -leader of the independence party ‘Al Istiqlal’- organised the ‘Salafiya Al Jadida’ (the New Salafiya). His reformist movement combined religious and political aspects. Its objectives were to inculcate in Muslims an ethic that would make them free. However, the spiritual freedom advocated by the new Salafists could not be attained if the individual was under any form of slavery (in this context it was French colonialism). On this point the Salafist and Nationalist movements converged. The attempt on Chraibi’s life in Paris after the publication of Le Passé simple is to be seen in this perspective.

® Lahcen Mouzouni, Le Roman Marocain, p.62.
It is in 1967 in the literary review Souffles\(^\text{11}\) that Abdellatif Laâbi took up the defense of Chraïbi and re-established his name. In an article entitled "Défense du 'Passé simple'" Laâbi writes:

Livre menaçant, plein de fulgurances et de rage, où éclataient pour la première fois des tares, des inhibitions [...] Le Maroc [...] était cliniquement démonté et exhibé par un jeune écrivain issu de cette classe bourgeoise qui savait allier lutte politique et défense de sordides intérêts et privilèges.\(^\text{12}\)

A member of the Marxist-Leninist movement 'Ila Al Amam', Laâbi uses the terms of his ideological beliefs in his defense of Driss Chraïbi, whom he considers a trail-blazer in the deconstruction and the shaking of a Moroccan social class soundly built on feudal, oppressive foundations:

Chraïbi fut un commenceur. Son premier livre est venu très tôt, trop tôt [...] Driss Chraïbi aura eu l'avantage d'ébranler avant-terme un édifice dont les bases pourries craquaient tous les jours.

---

\(^\text{10}\) Abdellatif Laâbi, "Interview with Driss Chraïbi" in Souffles, No. 5, 1967, p.6.

\(^\text{11}\) The literary review Souffles was created by the poet Abdellatif Laâbi in 1966. Other contributors to this review included Mostafa Nissaboury, Mohammed Khair-Eddine, Abraham Serfaty and others. Souffles and its Arabic parallel Anfass were a direct attack on the national totalitarian press. Their Marxist-Leninist tone and discourse brought their immediate downfall. Laâbi was imprisoned in 1972 then released in 1980 after an international appeal on his behalf. Khair-Eddine’s novel Agadir (1967) is still prohibited in Morocco. Serfaty, who was imprisoned at the same time as Laâbi in 1972 at the Casablanca trial, was released in 1991.

sans tirer une seule inquiétude aux consciences droguées par divers somas. Il n’a pas fait un bilan sociologique de l’ordre colonial, par contre, il a peut-être démontré les causes tangibles qui approfondissaient et nourrissaient la colonisation [et eu] le courage de mettre tout un peuple devant ses lâchetés, [et] étalé son immobilisme, les ressorts de son hypocrisie, de cette auto-colonisation et oppression exercée les uns sur les autres, le féodal sur l’ouvrier agricole, le père sur ses enfants. Le mari sur son épouse-objet, le patron libidineux sur son apprenti.  

Alongside Laâbi, a whole generation of past and present youths sympathised with Chraïbi’s novel. In spite of all the controversy stemming from its publication, *Le Passé simple* remains the most read book on the syllabuses in Moroccan secondary schools and universities.

After twenty-four years in exile, Driss Chraïbi returned to Morocco in 1985. For many Moroccan students it was the return of the victim-hero. The unexpectedly positive reception he received at different universities in Morocco prompted Chraïbi to have a new edition of *Le Passé simple* issued and dedicated, no longer to François Mauriac, but to the Moroccan students. In fact, the sociological aspect of *Le Passé simple* and its semi-autobiographical content helped the Moroccan reader to identify with its characters.

---


14 The author was present as a student at Mohammed V university in Rabat, where Chraïbi was invited as a speaker. Despite the efforts of some lecturers and some whole academic departments -who remain unforgiving- to boycott Chraïbi’s lecture, the organisers had great difficulties in accommodating the large number of students who attended.
and happenings. The novel tackles features of the Moroccan society that are familiar in everyday life. So, for Chraïbi to denigrate his work was to shatter the revolt of many who saw themselves in his protagonist. In an article, in Souffles, Mostafa Dziri captured the mood of many readers when he wrote:

Nous tous qui avions lu et relu ce livre, qui l’avions aimé, parce que nous nous reconnaissions dans ces pages, qui y retrouvions nos colères et nos angoisses, nous ne comprenions pas qu’un écrivain pouvait rejeter du jour au lendemain une oeuvre qu’il a créée. 15

A recurrent theme in the work of Moroccan novelists is the dismantling of the family structure. The sacred unity is the basic feature of the family; however, the depiction of that same family in Maghrebian literature through the device of defamiliarization shows how frail it effectively can be.

In three Chraïbi novels under study here, Le Passé simple, Succession ouverte and La Civilisation, ma Mère!..., the reader encounters the same family. Though the three novels are set in different times and places, the reader retains the same observer’s position. The narrator introduces his family to the reader in Le Passé simple and from then on both narrator and reader go on parallel lines: the first exposing his family and the second observing its evolution.

In the opening pages of *Le Passé simple* Driss Ferdi, the narrator, makes us aware of the severity of 'le Seigneur'. The father, with his symbolic name, is the uncontested and absolute master in the family. The mere mention of his name brings fear in those close to him,

Le Seigneur m'attend. Sa loi est indiscutable. J'en vis [...] A la seule évocation du Seigneur assis en tailleur sur son carré de feutre pieux, je suis redevenu un simple piéton du Chemin Droit, chemin des élus de Dieu et par où ne passent jamais ceux qu'il a maudits (*PS*, p.14).

The powerful picture of 'le Seigneur' seated on his prayer rug resembles that of a Buddha. The portrayal of the father shows the position of power he holds over the family. The only existing bonds between him and the rest of the family are those of master and slave; a relationship based on order and obedience.

While generally speaking in Chraïbi's work the mother is seen as life generator, the father implies the opposite. In the dialectic of life and death, he is the annihilating force that reduces all members of the family to sub-humans. In Kadra-Hadjadji's book *Contestation et révolte dans l'oeuvre de Driss Chraïbi*, we learn a great deal about Chraïbi's real family and background. This information allows us to chart the similarities with the author's fictional family. For example, Chraïbi's father Haj Fatmi Chraïbi seems very similar to his fictional other, Haj Fatmi Ferdi. In both real and fictional life we learn that the father became an orphan from an early age, that he was
illiterate but very able in numeracy, "Il ['le Seigneur'] ne savait ni lire ni écrire, il calculait très bien" (PS, p.28). His prowess with numbers helped him to make his fortune in the tea business. However, for the father's illiteracy, there seems to be an inconsistency on the part of the author. In the face-to-face meeting between father and son at the end of Le Passé simple, 'le Seigneur' addresses the following words to Driss:

Ne me dis pas que tu nous es supérieur en quoi que ce soit, ton instruction. Voltaire, Henri Poincaré, Malet et Isaac, et les livres que tu as lus et les cours de tes programmes ont été traduits maintes fois dans toutes les langues. J’ai tout lu, tout appris, mais en Arabe, mea culpa! (PS, p.260).

The father’s ability to read is confirmed later in Succession Ouverte when Driss finds, amongst the belongings of his late father, a copy of the koran and a book by Ghazali. From this we can deduce that the father was Arabic literate; but because he had no knowledge of the French language he was considered illiterate by the alienated narrator who defines the world around him according to his French schooling and education.

After introducing his father, Driss Ferdi takes the second step by introducing his brothers. Children in Chraïbi’s novels are portrayed bleakly, as mere shadows. When they are in the presence of ‘le Seigneur’ they are reduced to lifelessness:

Mon Dieu! jusqu’ici ils n’ont pas existé. Les chaussures alignées devant la porte leur
appartiennent et les ventres vides. Ils sont cinq, alignés eux aussi, contre le mur. Ils sont assis par ordre d'âge, formant un trapèze presque parfait [...] Ils ne se grattent pas, n'éternuent pas, ne toussent pas, ne rotontent pas, ne pètent pas. Ils sont maigres et craintifs. Ils ont les mains posées bien à plat sur leur cuisses et respirent à une allure modérée, sans bruit. Leurs yeux sont ternes et leur teint terreux. Ce sont mes frères (PS, p.25).

The whole of Le Passé simple is a cry for a lost and un-lived childhood. It is not only his brothers's but also the narrator's own childhood that the latter exposes to us. Children seem to be robbed of their childhood, itself foreshortened- "Ils ont tété un an, pleuré deux ans -le temps strict accordé à la prime enfance et tout de suite après ils ont grandi dans la peur et appris le silence" (PS, p.36). Driss Chraïbi denounces here a society which is unjust towards children and which does not recognise them as having any legal status that would prevent their being abused.16

Through different examples in his narrative, Chraïbi points an accusatory finger at the attitude of the society he grew up in on the issue of child abuse. The power of his accusation lies not so much in his portrayal of the different forms of abuse children can be subjected to, but in the silence and indifference surrounding such crimes

16 Note, however, the different depiction of children in L'Inspecteur Ali. Far from being quiet and withdrawn, they are portrayed as being self-confident to the point of becoming arrogant. They represent the extreme opposite of the children encountered in the novels analyzed here.
which allows them to happen unimpeded. Through the fate of his hero, Chraïbi provides the reader with an example of unjustified and dehumanising abuse of a child by an adult:

Je ressentis une crampe à l'estomac: la peur [...] Il ['le Seigneur'] me saisit brusquement le poignet, tira [...] Il m'attira à lui, me repoussa. Entre les deux gestes, je ne vis que des incisives en or. L'horloge sonna la demie. Sur ma figure coulait le crachat [...] Ce crachat s'ajoutera à tous les crachats antérieurs, aux coups de poing, aux coups de pied, aux gifles, aux piétinements. La liste est déjà longue et la balance penche. Seigneur je ne suis pas né criminel (PS, pp.29-32).

The act of spitting on his son is not only the father’s way of inflicting punishment; it is also an act of humiliation and dehumanisation. This is evident in the recurrent use of the denominator "chien" by the father towards his son.

The physical and moral abuse of children is extended well beyond the family circle. Indeed, as a substitute for the father, the teacher of the Coranic school -the fqih- is fully empowered by 'le Seigneur' to punish the latter’s children if they fail to learn the verses of the Coran: "Camel et Driss sont tes fils. Qu’ils apprennent la sainte religion. Sinon, tue-les et fais-moi signe: je viendrai les enterrer" (PS, p.38). To emphasize the very low age children are subjected to corporal punishment, the narrator states matter of factly: "Camel avait cinq ans et demi, moi quatre" (Ibid). This kind of corporal punishment, widely known as falaqa consists of administering beating on the soles of the feet with a stick in Coranic schools, with a
ruler (modernity obliges) in primary state schools and with a baton for those in police custody. Unfortunately, though on a lesser scale, such punishment is still performed in some establishments nowadays. It is the sort of punishment which ensures that a great pain is inflicted but no visible scarring remains (just mental scarring). With an ironical humour, which in fact disguises a mental scare, Chraïbi writes:

Je suis sincèrement reconnaissant envers mes maîtres d’avoir si bien nivelé et affermi la plante de mes pieds [...] Tous ceux qui sont passés par ces écoles sont de rudes marcheurs. Exemple: les coureurs marocains (PS, p.40).

Fear seems to rule children’s life in Chraïbi’s account of their treatment. It is a fear to which they have to submit and which they come to accept as their natural lot. The narrator’s own experience in the Coranic school is no more and no less than a traumatizing phase in his life which he summarizes by saying: "J’avais eu tellement peur qu’à l’âge de treize ans je pissais encore dans mon lit" (PS, p.38).

Chraïbi’s children are not only physically and mentally abused, but are also subject to the most horrendous of the abuses: the sexual. In a short but powerful and poignant scene, Chraïbi provides an example of a child being sexually assaulted by an adult. The scene is so self-descriptive and self-explanatory that it is worth quoting here in its entirety:

Deux rues plus loin, j’entends pleurer et crier un enfant. Une voix d’homme s’impatiente et
couvre les cris.

- Tu sais ce que c’est maintenant? Voici cent grammes, voici cinquante grammes, voici dix grammes, tu sais? Ici dix grammes, ici cinquante grammes, ici dix grammes, tu comprends?

Les deux voix proviennent d’une boutique close dont on ne voit que de minces filets de lumière.

- C’est un homme qui est en train d’apprendre à un enfant à se servir des poids, me dit un passant.

Qu’un enfant soit battu, c’est chose courante. Il ne se forme pas d’attroupement. Les gens haussent les épaules et poursuivent leur chemin.


The simplicity of style in which this scene has been written conveys a powerful message of helplessness and absurdity. It conveys too the simplicity of what could be a day-to-day routine, a constant occurrence. It describes how simple it is to sexually abuse a child and how simple it is to ignore such crime. Chraïbi points here to a ‘taboo’ that is readily ignored.

Chraïbi’s own experience of a repressed childhood shows in his recurrent description of deprived and effaced children. Every aspect of the Moroccan society we encounter in the novels of Chraïbi—from family to school—is portrayed as preventing children from asserting themselves. In Succession ouverte the reader is once again invited to
witness that the passing of time does not bring any change in children's plight, "...une nuée d'enfants qui ne jouent pas, ne parlent pas, ne sourient même pas ni ne pleurent: ils sont là et vous regardent. On dirait des adultes tristes et inactifs" (SO, p.91). In such a heavily male-dominated society these children are not protected from the two-dimensional destructive power of the father. On the one hand, the father is the castrating agent: he prevents the natural development of his children by quietening them at their early stage of childhood. On the other hand, traditions bestow him with the power of life and death over his offspring. In Le Passé simple 'le Seigneur' kills his youngest son for disobeying him. The possibilities of inflicting fatal injuries to a child while punishing him or her is more likely to be considered as an unfortunate accident than infanticide. Everybody in Le Passé simple is aware of the fact that 'le Seigneur' caused the death of Hamid. However, the unverifiability of his act and the fear he engenders silences them. Even Driss, to whom Hamid was very close, is unable to defy his father except in a final burst of revolt:

...vos deux taloches, savez-vous ce qu'elles signifient? Traumatisme, hémorragie cérébrale, homicide volontaire: vous êtes un assassin. Et malheureusement je ne peux rien. Le médecin légiste est passé: un cadavre de bicot, typhus ou peste, qu'est-ce que ça pouvait lui faire? Je ne

---

Hamid, both as the real and fictional brother of the author-hero, died at the age of nine. While in the novel his death is attributed to the father, in real life Hamid died of meningitis. The same disease is designated by 'le Seigneur' in Le Passé simple as the cause of his son's death. This is an example of how factual events are transposed to fictionalize autobiographical writing.
lui ai rien dit. Je lui aurais dit: Monsieur il s'agit d'un crime, j'aurais aussitôt pris le chemin d'un asile d'aliénés. Votre parole est de poids (PS, p.159).

Hamid's death is the stimulus that prompts the change in the narrator's tormented mind, the event that enables him to express openly his long and latent revolt. To borrow Lahcen Mouzouni's words, the death of Hamid is "l'embryon générateur" through which Driss speaks out his repressed suffering. His awareness of 'le Seigneur' s degrading treatment of others results in his decision to act, "Je ramène cette mort à une vérité simple: elle est l'action" (PS, p.117). However, he is also aware of his own opportunism. He takes advantage of his brother's death to begin to liberate himself from the domineering father, "Ce calcul me rend inhumain. Je le sais. Et je m'en réjouis" (PS, p.117).

Chraïbi's work is not simply about one individual troubled mind. Through the narrator the reader is made aware of the plight of other individuals." His novels show us that women, like children, are likely to be denied the means of

---

18 Lahcen Mouzouni, Le Roman Marocain, p.51.

19 Note that, unlike Ben Jelloun who, I argue later, uses the other's voice for his own needs, Chraïbi makes it clear that he does not speak for the other but of the other as is expressed in the following passage: "Pourquoi un écrivain doit-il toujours parler de lui et de ses aperçus du monde à lui? Pourquoi ne pas parler des autres qui n'ont pas de voix? Donc, à chaque fois que je rencontre quelqu'un, je le sens et je me dis: "Tiens, il est proche de moi, il devient mon frère, il faut que je parle de lui" (see Appendix One, pp.225-226).
self-assertion. The mother figure is thus the focus of analysis. The next chapter will show, however, how the mother is merely a device by which the author reflects upon his own identity. In *Le Passé simple* we see her in a very traditional environment where she is totally subjugated. In *Succession ouverte* she is in a period of transition between tradition and modernity. And finally in *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... she steps into modernity, action and emancipation.

Chraïbi depicts the mother, alongside children, as a victim of social and religious institutions. Her predicament goes hand in hand with his criticism of Islamic laws and traditions. Though the focus of this thesis is an attempt to identify the subject-hero and its relationship to the author, women, namely the mother figure, remain the principal metaphor whereby Chraïbi draws his criticism of the profoundly traditional and closed-minded society of his origins. For example, in *Le Passé simple*, the following simple statement: "Un jour vous fûtes nubiles. Et depuis vous n’avez cessé d’être mortes" (*PS*, p.99) summarizes women’s fate in a society, like the Moroccan one, where women often do not live but subsist. Later, in *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... it is the Arabo-moslem tradition that Chraïbi dismisses as being unfair to women:

A la porte, ouste! à la porte, les poètes arabes à la poésie de cendres! Vous m’avez fait pleurer en chantant le romantisme et parce que je ne savais rien du monde. S’il en est ainsi, si vos vers sont vrais, pourquoi diable notre société est-elle malade? pourquoi a-t-elle cloîtré les femmes comme des bêtes, pourquoi les a-t-elle voilées, pourquoi leur a-t-elle coupé les ailes
In the eyes of Chraïbi, Arab literature is the culprit. His accusation is directed to the embellishment of reality. As a protest writer, his anti-romantic attitude is not surprising. His attack on Arab poets should not be dismissed as a sign of his alienation, though the passage quoted above could be understood that way. It should, in fact, be taken at face value. That is, as a criticism of romantic poetry which chants and celebrates women (though generally speaking, it is often women’s beauty which is the focus) while in reality these same women are oppressed and confined. It is in this perspective that Chraïbi’s attitude to Arab literature ought to be considered, just like his attitude to Orientalists such as Pierre Loti whose writing is an exoticisation of the Moroccan woman.

In Chraïbi’s work the mother is essential to the progression of the novel. The narrator’s rebellion against his despotic father is depicted through the suffering of the mother. The oedipal overtones in the work of Chraïbi are highly reflective of the Moroccan family structure. The mother has a double status. The repressive attitude of the husband towards her finds its counterpart in the reverential attitude of her offspring. The child, even in adulthood, is more inclined to confide in the mother than the father. Moreover, the mother plays the role of the linking agent and carrier of messages between father and
Amongst Moroccan writers, Chraïbi is one whose writing is clearly open to oedipal interpretation. The Chraïbian hero in his relationship with his mother, fluctuates between the revering son and the judgemental one. In so far as the mother shares with Driss the status of the oppressed, the latter seems more inclined to protect her from the destructive power of 'le Seigneur’. This protection could, in fact, be interpreted as Driss’s jealousy of his father. ‘Le Seigneur’ has a power over the mother that he, Driss, does not possess. And Driss’s frustration for not possessing such power turns into insulting sarcasm directed towards the mother herself:

Il vous faut quoi? [...] Mère, il a raison, pas de saints, ils ne sont que cela, saints, mais des vivants, des hommes, un homme pour toi, un adulte...non! ne dis pas: "O mon oreille, tu n'as rien entendu", tu as très bien entendu: un amant. Un amant qui te possède et qui te satisfasse! Vois, j'ai découvert ton cher vieux secret, mais je ne puis te consoler, je ne suis que ton fils... (PS, p.57).

Like Oedipus, Driss’s love for his mother is a displaced desire to surpass the father. The power struggle with the father will be developed further in the following chapter. The focus on the mother at this stage is fundamental in so far as her predicament follows a path symmetrical to that of the hero.

Chraïbi assesses the mother from a perspective that
combines his French school education and family experiences. In an interview with Abdellatif Laâbi he justifies his concern with the mother’s plight:

La révolte qui couvait en moi était dirigée contre tout: contre le protectorat, contre l’injustice sociale, contre notre immobilisme politique, culturel, social. Et puis il y avait autre chose: ma mère [...] Je lisais du Lamartine, du Hugo, du Musset. La femme, dans les livres, dans l’autre monde, celui des Européens, était chantée, admirée, sublimée. Je rentrais chez moi, et j’avais sous les yeux et dans ma sensibilité une autre femme, ma mère, qui pleurait jour et nuit, tant mon père lui faisait la vie dure. Je vous certifie que pendant trente trois ans, elle n’est jamais sortie de chez elle [...] Il y avait la loi, il y avait la tradition, il y avait la religion.  

The mother Chraïbi talks about here bears similar characteristics to the one encountered in his work. In both cases she has a traditional Fassi background, which is deeply infused with moslem values. Members of such background often refer to themselves as Chorfas (or Sharifs, i.e. they claim blood descent from a saint). The narrator of Le Passé simple tells us that his mother is the daughter of a Sharif. She is a Zwitten (the dedication in La Civilisation, ma Mère!... shows that it is also the name

20 Abdellatif Laâbi, "Interview with Driss Chraïbi", p.5.

21 In a wider sense, a Sharif is someone who claims blood descent from the prophet Mohammed or from his daughter Fatima and his son-in-law Ali as is the case with the present ruling Alaoui dynasty in Morocco. In a stricter sense, but more complex, a Sharif is a living scholar in Islam whose performances are sanctified by the community over which he holds a certain power. At his death, a Sharif is entitled to a shrine or "marabout" which becomes a centre of pilgrimage and worship. Morocco, with its complex Islamic structure is rich in "marabouts". The descendents of a Sharif continue to claim the saintly lineage as it provides an affluent privileged position in society.
of Chraïbi’s mother) and her father has a shrine in the spiritual city of Fès.

Chraïbi attributes his literary vocation to his mother. In her book on Chraïbi, Kadra-Hadjadji writes:

Le romancier est fier de son ascendance maternelle qui, dit-il, compte des philosophes, des théologiens et même un saint [...] Sa vocation d’écrivain le rattache à la lignée de sa mère.

One could see here the notion of the ‘semiotic’, a term Julia Kristeva uses to define the realm of pre-linguistic experience. It is a stage where the child has a pre-oedipal relationship to the mother, and such a relationship is ‘feminine’ and is prior to the symbolic order. For Kristeva, both men and women have this ‘femininity’ which remains in the unconscious when later the gender difference is established by the symbolic order. In the conscious state, this pre-oedipal ‘femininity’ manifests itself, amongst other things, through artistic creativity. One could see Chraïbi’s literary gift both on a literal level since he follows the matriarchal lineage, but also as a product of the ‘semiotic’ experience which links him to the pre-oedipal mother. Chraïbi’s following description of the mother is significant in so far as it shows us the mother as subversive of the Law-of-the-Father:

Son rythme était lent, très lent, le rythme même de la terre. Foetal. Toute précipitation de la

---

22 Houaria Kadra-Hadjadji, Contestation et révolte, p.12.
vie ou de l'Histoire la faisait désérer aussitôt. Cela ne la concernait en rien. Elle n'en était pas tributaire. Venant de l'extérieur (évolution de ses enfants, produit de la civilisation, événement inattendu), tout ce qui touchait directement son monde, elle commençait par le désénerver, comme elle désénervait les situations et les êtres.²³ (Civ., p.43).

The mother’s position in her marriage with ‘le Seigneur’ epitomizes that of most women in the traditional moslem world. The traditional society, especially the one depicted in the work of Chraïbi, does not allow woman to choose or to express an opinion about the choice of her husband. Marriage is a male-dominated business. The girl, as early as puberty, is forced into marriage. On the traditional marriage in the Maghreb Anne-Marie Nisbet writes:

Considéré comme la conclusion d’une affaire financière, le mariage traditionnel est avant tout traduit en termes d’incommunicabilité, de cauchemars, de viol légalisé. Il ne laisse place à aucune connaissance de l’autre. L’amour n’existe pas. Le seul contact entre époux est la possession sexuelle.²⁴

To this one could add the total dependency of women on their husbands. Women are denied the basic status of being if they are not related to a male either as daughter to father, wife to husband, mother to son and so on. If a woman is outside these kinship categories, she is automatically and mercilessly marginalised and prejudiced

²³ On another level, this description of the mother could also be seen as an example of binary oppositions whereby women represent nature.

against by her community and society. Among those outside the ‘normal order’ one could cite the divorced woman and the prostitute as examples.

The forced traditional marriage goes hand in hand with the confinement of women. In her book Beyond the Veil, Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist who specialises in the woman question in the Arabo-Muslim world and Morocco in particular, explains that female segregation in Muslim cultures is due to the fear of women’s sexuality rather than to the general belief that Islam allows such segregation:

> In Islam there is no such belief in female inferiority. On the contrary, the whole system is based on the assumption that women are powerful and dangerous beings. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for containing their power.\(^{25}\)

The marginalising Islamic concept is comparable to the Western image of the female. The difference, Mernissi argues, is that while Muslim women are contained for their sexual potency, Western women are marginalised as impotent, be it sexually or spiritually according to Mernissi. This could be understood with regard to the fact that Muslim women are confined in a closed space (harems) as opposed to the open space (streets, mosques, cafés etc.) which is the

---

realm of men. As for Western women, Mernissi believes that though they are free to move in the same public sphere as men, such space psychologically excludes them. Muslim men forcibly forbid women to step into their public sphere. According to a Muslim concept, women are source of *Fitna* (temptation) if men allow themselves to indulge in *Fitna*, they fail to fulfil their religious duties. Women are thus excluded so as not to create chaos which is considered deviating and disorientating to men. It is partly from this perspective that one could understand why in the Maghreb as well as all the Muslim world young girls are secluded and married as early as the age of twelve. Such practice and custom is no longer in use in most parts of the Maghreb; however, the mother of Driss Ferdi is of the generation of 'sacrificed' girls. In fact, the mother is often described in Chraibi's work as if she were a child, emphasizing her naivety and innocence. In *La Civilisation, ma Mère!...*, the narrator sees his mother "comme une enfant heureuse qui n'était jamais sortie de l'adolescence fruste et pure et ne deviendrait jamais adulte" (*Civ.*, p.20); a description which is very true for most women in the Arabo-Muslim world and especially of the generation of the mother studied here.

The mother's early marriage to 'le Seigneur' is a mere transfer of authority. From the hands of the father she is

---

put into those of 'le Seigneur' who is as old as her father. She is taken from Fès to El Jadida enduring thus a total rupture from her own family and a complete dependency on her husband. The latter denies her the basic rights due to a human being. She is nameless: 'le Seigneur' addresses her only by the generic 'femme'. In turn, she calls him 'master'. Facing the tyranny of 'le Seigneur' the mother is effaced, weakened and subjugated. Driss always sees her crying in silence. Her condition does not allow her the power of speech. Even her grief and suffering are repressed, and are expressed only in silence. The narrator concurrently draws the reader's attention to the mother's silent suffering: "Je vis ma mère dans sa cuisine [...] Elle mordait un mouchoir en dentelle et sanglotait sans larmes, sans bruit" (PS, p.26).

The mother is doubly confined. Besides the confinement in the house, she is contained in a smaller space: the kitchen. This Chinese box segregating structure reduces the female space to an even tinier dimension. The writer's use of 'sa' instead of 'la' when referring to the kitchen is suggestive. The kitchen is the traditional space associated with women. In her book Les enfants de Jocaste27, Christiane Olivier argues that when still in the mother's womb the child is full and therefore has no sense of emptiness when it is born. Later on, the desire for

'fullness' will draw the woman to the kitchen. She will find satisfaction in fulfilling the needs of the family. In such a way she indirectly feeds the little girl in her who did not have enough from her mother and who was not as desired by the mother as the boy was.

The kitchen, the hammam (public bath) and the terraces are the spaces where women can communicate. Driss's mother can confide in him and express her grief only when he joins her in the kitchen. Going to the hammam, from which weekly permission is needed from husbands, involves an elaborate ritual. After a general cleaning of the house and preparation of meals for the family, a woman is allowed to go to the hammam where she often spends up to five hours. The hammam provides an opportunity for women to get together and discuss their problems. It has the effect of a therapeutic session where women can express themselves, confide in each other and give or receive advice. Though the hammam is generally an enclosed area in itself, it gives women a sense of liberty because it is their space and no man is allowed in. Similarly, terraces are for women the substitute for going out. It is not a closed space and still allows female neighbours to communicate and exchange news. However, this sphere is not as private as the hammam or the kitchen. From the terraces women have access to what

---

happens in the street even if they are physically separate from it, consequently this is considered by men as stepping into the public sphere.

Nowadays, women are no longer restricted to the three places mentioned above. Education allowed women to step into the public space. The common point with Western women is that men's sphere accepts women's contribution but not fully as equals in so far as power and decision-making are concerned. On the position of the Maghrebian woman, Lahcen Mouzouni points out:

Le devenir de la femme au Maghreb est la responsabilité que doivent assumer les jeunes filles d'aujourd'hui et qui seront les femmes de demain. C'est à elles seules qu'incombe la tâche de définir avec exactitude le sens de l'émancipation afin de concilier leurs exigences sans pour autant tomber dans le plagiat pur et simple de tout ce qui provient de l'Occident.\(^\text{29}\)

Such patronizing advice is rather ironical. There is often a male academic like Mouzouni who thinks that it is necessary to advise women on how to become 'emancipated' within limits. However, as is the case here, no detail is given on the meaning of 'plagiarism of the West'. Women's concern is to have the opportunity to be on an equal level with men. The 'modern' Maghrebian man's acceptance of woman as equal is a pretence. The verbal and written acceptance that is often found in literature never finds its counterpart in real terms; for when it comes to

practicalities, the traditional limits and taboos win and the woman is accused of plagiarising Western ideas. In fact, Mouzouni’s use of the word ‘plagiat’ entails a derogatory attitude when the use of the word ‘imitation’ would have been probably the most appropriate in this kind of thought.

Mimicry and imitation of Western feminism is also an issue which is very much at the heart of feminist debates in the Maghreb (as well as other third-world nations). The question that often emerges is how can, for example, a Moroccan woman be feminist without being accused of merely borrowing her feminist ideas from the West? To which there is no easy answer. Moroccan culture is complex in its structure. It encompasses the whole interaction between the religious, the political and the social. The complexity stems from the fact that all these components are interwoven. Moreover, what is at stake also is how to incorporate the traditional into the modern. The intricate, interwoven character of this puzzle-structure is illustrated by the fact that Morocco is ruled by a king, Hassan II, who is both the religious and the political leader of the state. As a religious leader, he sees that the Muslim tradition is followed and respected; as a political leader, he adopts

\[^{30}\] As a religious leader, the king prevents anyone else pretending to this position. As such there is little room for Morocco to undergo the Iranian or Algerian experience for example. For further reading, see M.E.Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
a modernist attitude which is open and borrows from the West.

When it is question of an issue such as feminism, one could find ready examples which would show that Moroccan women are 'liberated'. Indeed, the Moroccan parliament can boast itself by showing that it has a number (very minimal, though) of women members while about ten years ago it had none. There are more educated women (the percentage of women graduates remains low, however), and the king showed his modernist attitude towards women, when in an act that was supposed to be applauded and also meant to be shocking, he invited a woman to read a poem in front of the whole male congregation during the opening ceremony of the Hassan II mosque in Casablanca in 1992.\(^{31}\) Obviously that was a one-off experience which allowed a woman to be in the same prayer room in a mosque with men (normally women pray in a secluded room which is generally located behind the men's room, and from which they can only hear but not see the Imam leading the prayer or preaching), but generally speaking, the amalgamation of the religious and women's liberation is an incongruous association. These are two aspects that are fundamentally contradictory. One cannot even imagine how a woman could be in full possession of her rights in a system based on the Shari'a Law and on the

\(^{31}\) A similar attitude was adopted by King Mohammed V, the father of the present king, when in 1947 he presented to a bewildered and shocked nation, one of his daughters, Princess Lalla Aïcha, with no veil and wearing western clothes.
"Statut du Code de la Famille". To illustrate this incongruity, we propose the following schematic example: an educated woman, with a degree and a job. She is either married or single, in which case she lives in her father’s home (women who live on their own are widely assumed to be "loose" and frowned upon by the family and ignored by neighbours. It is often the case where a woman gives up a job if it involves living away from the family home). This same woman applies for a passport to enable her to travel abroad. It is believed that every citizen is entitled to one if he or she fulfils certain criteria. This woman has indeed a job, an income and a permanent address. But unlike a man in a similar position, she has to get over an extra hurdle for her application to be processed: she must have either her husband’s consent if she is married or her father’s if she is not. In cases where the father is deceased she has to provide the permission of her tutor; this could be an uncle, or a brother (it is even more ironical if the latter is younger than her). With permission she can have a passport; without it she cannot. The ultimate irony is that if she has no male relatives, this woman’s prospects of ever possessing a passport are gloomy.

This shows that "le Code de la Famille" insists that all women should have a male guardian (we will see later how

---

32 While woman’s civil rights seem to equal man’s, the Shari’a Law and the "Statut du Code de la Famille" deprive her of that equality.
the mother in Chraïbi's novels is entitled to one). There are other matters, such as divorce and inheritance which are flagrant examples of the diminished position of women in the religious. The inequality between men and women is so obvious that one wonders how the religious dimension could be incorporated into the fight for women's rights at all. The official Moroccan feminist group "Al Ittihad Anniswi" (the Feminist Union) is presided over by a princess, one of the king's sisters. Her dress-code is very significant: while as a president of the feminist group she adheres to feminist and modern ideas, her traditional dress (a djellaba and a scarf) illustrate her adherence to the traditional and religious aspect of Moroccan life. This is by no means a criticism except when it transpires that by adopting these two aspects, we could see how Moroccan feminism becomes a replica of the Moroccan leadership as a whole. Women might think that they are achieving their autonomy and realising their ideals, but these ideals are in reality not achieved since the religious is omnipotently present to mark the boundaries and make sure there is no trespassing. In other terms, Moroccan feminism is coopted by the ruling power. In our view such feminism is a sham, it does not provide women with their rights but simply keeps them busy in thinking that they are achieving something. Besides, such feminism is elitist. It is accessible only to certain educated women and to those from

---

Tunisia is the only country in the Maghreb where changes have occurred concerning divorce and inheritance.
an upper social class. The rest of their gender is often oblivious to such movements and/or alienated from it. In fact, when it concerns their status in society, a good deal of women are resigned to their fate for they feel that they have no rights nor the means to alter their plight.

In *Le Passé simple* the mother is subdued by 'le Seigneur'. Resignation and passivity are her characteristics. They anger the narrator who judges her, "Qu'était-elle, sinon une femme dont le Seigneur pouvait cadenasser les cuisses et sur laquelle il avait droit de vie et de mort? [...] Oui, ma mère était ainsi, faible, soumise, passive" (*PS*, pp.43-44). However, as is going to be shown in the following chapter, the mother could be interpreted as the alter-ego of Driss; therefore, his anger and violent judgement towards her could be regarded as self-directed and self-inflicted. The traditional background to which the mother belongs does not allow her the power of speech. Her generation accepts life fatalistically, a concept that is strengthened by Islam. The moslem accepts and believes in destiny. Destiny, especially if it is translated into endurance and hardship, is believed to be God's will and therefore unquestioned. For to question one's destiny is to question God's power. In Islam one accepts hardship as a godly test on earthly life. Resignation is believed to be compensated by a better afterlife. The mother does not rebel against her destiny first, she does not rebel verbally either as the narrator wanted her to. Later, she
jeers at her husband’s authority and at the Islamic laws he embodies by taking her own life and changing thus her destiny. The mother’s suicide in Le Passé simple is to be understood as a phenomenon of revolt. Moslem tradition confers on ‘le Seigneur’ the right of life and death over his wife and children. By committing suicide the mother deprives him of that right and power. ‘Le Seigneur’ himself realises this as he later confesses to his son: "maintenant qu’elle est morte, elle me manque. Non pas pour l’entretien de ma maison [...] mais [...] cette énergie brusquement devenue inutile, inemployée" (PS, p.246). This shows ‘le Seigneur’’s need to have someone of lesser status than him to justify his power and dominance.

The Chraibian mother is at first resigned to her fate. She is aware of her segregation, but the lack of any alternative and her ignorance of life in the outside world only strengthen her resignation to being secluded. Ironically, her confinement means also a sense of security, "Dans cette maison qui, selon la coutume ancienne que la loi islamique réservait aux femmes, a été ma prison pendant trente ans [...] une vieille prisonnière comme moi ne finit-elle pas par aimer sa prison?" (SO, pp.170-171). She is conscious that her capacities to rebel against the

34 It is worth noting here Chraibi’s cross-reference to Christianity on the issue of suicide: "Dieu est en train de lui demander des comptes: 5000 ans de géhenne, elle s’est suicidée" (PS, p.262). There is no godly punishment in Islam for those who commit suicide. Also, unlike christianity, Islam does not inhibit or forbid a religious funeral and wake for those who take their own life.
traditions that deprive her of freedom have been suppressed. Women of her generation never had access to education, let alone paid work which would give them access to financial independence. For these women, rebellion against their husband-master is an inadmissible act in the eyes of society. It is only in the case of repudiation that a woman is expected to return to the parental home. In any other circumstances, she is an outcast for both parents and society. As the mother in Succession ouverte points out: "Je suis restée une enfant" (SO, p.170). Like the rest of her gender, she is regarded as a dependent child who is unable to decide for herself.

In Succession ouverte the father is physically absent from the scene. However, even in death he remains omnipresent through his recorded voice on a tape on which he leaves his legacy. His voice is as feared as when he was alive. On the mother it has the effect of a castrating power. Driss observes her in these terms: "Tassée dans un coin, ma mère pleurait sans bruit et sans larmes [...] redevenue petite et infantile dès qu’avait retenti la voix du Seigneur" (SO, p.125).

In his will ‘le Seigneur’ denies the mother any economic

35 Chraïbi talks here about a testament. However, as in the case of suicide, this is a cross-reference to Christianity. In Islam inheritance is not processed by a will. According to the Shari’a Law whatever a father leaves at his death is divided according to the following calculation: one eighth for the mother, the remainder divided between the children in terms of two shares for a son and one share for a daughter.
independence. She is put under the guardianship of one of her sons: "A ta mère, tu ne serviras pas de pension. Elle ne saurait qu'en faire [...] elle n'a jamais su ce que valait un billet de banque - et c'est tant mieux" (SO, pp. 131-132). This implies the child-status applied to women. In Islam women are not deprived of financial autonomy and from managing their own inheritance; however, the traditional society Chraïbi depicts here does not recognise in women the ability and faculty to be financially autonomous. In fact as such society is based on a particular male interpretation of the Koran and the Hadiths (the Prophet’s sayings and traditions) it is not surprising that female self-determination in financial matters can be regarded as a threat to male supremacy. As man is, by tradition, the main bread-winner in the family (and he remains so even in the case where the woman earns a salary) his situation provides him with the privilege to have the uninterrupted recognition and obedience of those who depend on him. In the case of ‘le Seigneur’ for example, those who depend on him, like the mother and the children, are imprisoned by such dependency. With his death, like a slave the mother is enfranchised. But her tutelage keeps her as a woman-object. Chraïbi ironises this perpetuation of male supremacy when he makes ‘le Seigneur’ state the following: "Ils sont libres à présent dans un monde d’esclavage déguisé en liberté" (SO, p.147) which sustains the view that the weak will always be subject to someone else’s authority and power.
The father’s stout belief in male dominance over women is hinted at in *Succession ouverte* when the narrator finds a book of his father’s written by the eleventh century moslem mystic Imam Al-Ghazali. The book referred to here is most probably *The Revivification of Religious Sciences (Ihya Ulum al-Din)*, which is the most famous book in Arabic literature dealing with a moslem theory of sexuality within marriage. Al-Ghazali’s theory values man’s sexuality and advocates restraints of women’s sexual power and potency.\(^{36}\)

In a similar way to his mother, Driss is left nothing in his father’s will albeit the following message:


This is the final message of ‘le Seigneur’ to Driss which shows his understanding of his son’s quest, i.e. the search for truth. His message is also that of reconciliation between the two conflicting forces that are the father and son. This is reflected in *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... when the father is referred to as such and no longer as ‘le Seigneur’, for he no longer plays the role of a threatening figure.

*La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... sees the mother as in the

\(^{36}\) For further reading see Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil.*
previous novels confined to the house. She spends her days on domestic tasks. Through her description we recognise the same frail and subdued figure. However, in this novel there is no mention of her being repressed by her husband. In a mixture of humour and affection, the narrator portrays her as being archaic and traditional. All her kitchen utensils are archaic and hand-made. She invents her own tools with whatever object she can find. She is opposed to anything western and her conception of the world around her is based on the acceptance of what makes sense to her and the rejection of the unfamiliar:

Sa vie était comme un puzzle. Sa vie intérieure qu’elle essayait de faire correspondre à la vie sociale qu’on attendait d’elle, mère et épouse. Tout ce qu’elle pouvait toucher, sentir, voir, entendre, goûter et aimer, elle l’assimilait aisément, l’adaptait à sa personnalité ce qui était à sa mesure. Le reste, elle le rejetait. Tout ce qui risquait de bouleverser, non pas sa vision du monde, mais sa sensibilité du monde (Civ., p.43).

For the narrator, going back home from school is like stepping into a different world. His mother orders him to change from his western clothes to the traditional ones she herself makes. He also has to brush his teeth with a herbal paste of her own confection; not out of hygiene though but, as he explains: "pour chasser les relents de la langue française que j’avais osé employer dans sa maison" (Civ., p.16).

37 Humour is part of Chraïbi’s writing style. Humour, according to Freud, is a displacement. it is the highest of the defensive processes that prevent unpleasant emotions from forming.
Modern technology, like the French language, is linked to colonisation and is alienating; therefore, it is not surprising that it constitutes an alien concept for the mother. In a humorous account, we learn from the narrator how the mother converted the cooker into a personal cabinet containing her home-made make-up and miscellaneous objects, and prefers the use of the traditional brasero. The introduction of the radio is an important event in the mother's life. She naively believes in her sons's explanation that the radio contains a magic voice: 'Monsieur Kteu'.\(^{38}\) The latter becomes thus the substitute for what was missing in the mother's life: a confidant, a father and a loving husband,

\[
\text{Monsieur Kteu devint pour elle l'homme qu'elle avait toujours attendu: le père qu'elle n'avait jamais connu, le mari qui lui récitait des poèmes d'amour, l'ami qui la conseillait et lui parlait de ce monde extérieur dont elle n'avait nulle connaissance [...] elle restait là, dans cette maison-tombeau, apprenant la vie (Civ., p.39).}
\]

The telephone represents for her the most direct link with the outside world. Through it she is able to reestablish communication with her native town and her cousin Meryem whom she has not seen for fifteen years.

With the help of technical progress the mother has

\(^{38}\) Stemming from the inability of the sons to pronounce the German-made trade-mark 'Blaupunkt', hence 'Kteu'. 
increasing access to a world previously closed to her.\textsuperscript{39}

Her sons, Driss and Nagib, take care of the rest. We witness a reversal of positions through which they bring their mother into a new life. They make her wear western clothes and take her out to the park and the cinema. Education becomes accessible to her and she eagerly learns about history and geography, locating herself thus in time and space. She also learns about her own body. At the age of thirty five she finally understands the biological reasons of her menstruation. She had always thought it to be a personal disease, not to be discussed with her husband or anyone else. In Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel Harrouda, we learn that the mother wears a red scarf as a sign for her period. It is a message for her husband that she is "impure" and not accessible for copulation. In moslem theology, menstruation is one of the major impurities (janaba). Menstruating women are not allowed to touch the Coran, to pray, to fast during the month of Ramadan or to enter the mosque.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} From the point of view of an alienated narrator and considering that technology is a western import, we could understand the idea of the mother being liberated by technology as a metaphor for the acceptance of the civilising and enlightening mission of colonisation. However, the mother’s ability and inventiveness -mental as well as sensitive- within the confines of her home are dismissed as being archaic.

\textsuperscript{40} In her study of Imam Al-Ghazali’s theory of sexuality, Fatima Mernissi writes: "This need to protect the man is probably the reason why, even though menstruation is defined as polluting, a husband is allowed to approach his menstruating wife so long as he avoids penetration. Imam Ghazali explains that the husband can ask his wife to cover her body between the navel and the knee with a cloth and to masturbate him with her hands." Beyond the Veil, p.60.
The mother becomes more aware of her womanhood. Later she becomes active in the politics of the country. The second part of *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... is told by Nagib through a series of letters to Driss who is studying in Paris. We learn that the mother is politically involved in the liberation of Morocco from French colonial rule. Facts and fiction are mingled in these scenes. The meeting of De Gaulle, Churchill and Roosevelt at the Casablanca conference in January 1943 is thus a verifiable fact in the novel. Whether Chraïbi uses the mother figure as a symbol for the nation, or whether it is a dream he could realise in fiction, he presents us with an eager mother who goes personally to meet De Gaulle with other women backing her and brandishing a symbolic flag she herself made,

> Toutes les démocraties sont là, s'écria-t-elle, joyeuse. Certaines nations n'avaient pas de drapeau, sous prétexte qu'elles sont colonisées ou sous tutelle. La belle affaire que voilà! Je leur en ai fabriqué: elles y ont droit (*Civ.*, p.111).

When De Gaulle appeared to her she was unable to formulate her protest. He stood in front of her as a patriarchal and authoritarian figure whom she defines in her own words: "De Gaulle? m'a-t-elle dit, pensive. C'est étrange. J'ai cru voir ton père. Il lui ressemble trait pour trait" (*Civ.*, p.125). The significance we could impute to this is the two-dimensional meaning of the patriarchal power. The father and his power over the family on one hand, and De Gaulle as the protecting figure of the French protectorate on the other hand both stand as castrating agents. The
mother is doubly colonised in this sense by two powerful patriarchs whose seeming protection is a disguise for oppression.

Nourished by her newly-acquired knowledge she leads other women to liberate themselves from oppressive husbands. She incites them to disobedience and rebellion, "En refusant d’accomplir ses devoirs conjugaux, une femme conquerra-t-elle son indépendance? ou bien sera-t-elle la première à en pâtir?" (Civ., p.165) (We shall see in the next chapter how the mother’s questions here are more relevant to the narrator -for whom the mother represents a double- in his quest for freedom). The mother’s own rebellion against her husband is encapsulated in an eloquent speech:

D’accord, d’accord. Tu m’as toujours tout payé. Depuis mes dessous jusqu’à mes cure-dents [...] Non, monsieur, non: mes désirs n’étaient pas exaucés. Ils étaient prévenus. Ils étaient les tiens. Maintenant [...] je suis prête à passer à travers le chas d’une aiguille [...] j’ai grandi moi aussi [...] Quand je suis entrée dans cette maison, je n’avais pas toutes mes dents. J’en ai trente deux maintenant, je les ai comptées, regarde! [...] Dis? mon âme? ou est-elle? qui est-elle? que fait-elle? pourquoi? en ai-je une? pourquoi? qu’est-elle devenue? a-t-elle grandi, elle aussi? pourquoi? à quoi ressemble-t-elle? [...] Elle est à l’abri depuis toujours, alors qu’elle voudrait avoir froid, je le sais. Oui, froid. Et faim et soif et joie et misère et vie de tout ce qui existe au-delà de cette porte en chêne clouté et qui n’existe pas pour moi, jamais, d’aucune façon, et dont je ne sais presque rien, hormis le ravitaillement dont tu me gaves, les ordres et les modes d’emploi que tu n’as cessé de me donner, la morale dont tu me graisses, les rênes dont tu me brides et les oeillères dont tu m’aveugles [...] Tant de peuples relèvent la tête, acquièrent leur liberté, alors pourquoi pas moi? [...] Parce que je suis une femme? parce que je suis ton épouse? À ce compte-là, il fallait te marier avec ton
In so doing, Chraïbi endows the oppressed mother of the previous novels with the power of speech and the ability to express her condition. Thus through fiction he accomplishes a fantasmatic dream which seems impossible to achieve in real life, i.e. the mother’s rebellion. Such accomplishment is closely similar to Marguerite’s Sechehaye’s ‘Symbolic Realisation’, a technique whereby a symbol is provided to replace the analysand’s need in order to facilitate the harsh reality and to overcome the situation of conflict.\(^1\)

The mother’s last statement in the above-quoted speech: "À ce compte-là, il fallait te marier avec ton propre portrait" highlights Chraïbi’s stand about what often lies behind child-marriages. As said earlier in this chapter, the mother represents a generation of women who were married in their early teens. These kinds of adult-child marriages entitle the male adult to ‘educate’ his wife-child according to his own ways and principles. As the father reminds the rebelling mother of his role in ‘educating’ her,

\[\text{Quand je t’ai épousée, tu avais treize ans. Orpheline depuis toujours. Aucune famille. D’aucune sorte. Tu ne savais même pas ce qu’était un œuf, comment le casser, comment le cuire, qui pouvait bien le pondre, chat, vache ou éléphant. Je t’ai élevée, tu n’avais pas de passé (Civ., pp.129-130).}\]

This suggests, in fact, that this relationship resembles that of a father and daughter, hinting towards incestuousness. Further, as the child-wife is moulded, so to speak, according to man's needs and desires she becomes a mere source of auto-eroticism.

So while in *Succession ouverte* the mother is put under the guardianship of her son, in *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... she stands for herself and expresses it in an angry statement:

> Je suis à présent consciente, entièrement responsable de ma vie, entends-tu? Je ne suis pas en train de me libérer de la tutelle de ton père pour venir te demander ta protection, tout grand gaillard que tu es. Je sais ce que j'ai à faire (Civ., p.137).

Later on, after having succeeded in all her examinations, the mother leaves to join her son Driss in France, for she needs to be distant from her native country in order to gain a clearer perspective. As she says, she needs to discover, "J'irai à la découverte de cet Occident, j'ai besoin de faire reculer mon horizon, de constater, de faire un bilan" (Civ., p.179).

*La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... is the antithesis of *Le Passé simple* and *Succession ouverte*. The reversal of positions of the father and mother figures is a direct wish and expression of what Chraïbi would have liked his mother-heroine to be. The same applies to the stubborn and authoritarian father. In *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... the
father undergoes a dramatic change of character. While in the other novels he was portrayed as immutable to the passing of time, in *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... he refuses to adhere to and be influenced by conservative ideas from other men who incite him to restrain his wife in her evolution,

"J’ai refusé de les écouter. Ils ressemblent tant à l’homme que j’étais auparavant... J’ai essayé de la comprendre, elle. Et c’est elle qui m’a montré la voie. Quand elle entre maintenant dans cette maison, je me lève aussitôt et ce n’est pas une femme nouvelle que je vois devant moi, mais à travers elle, un homme nouveau, une société nouvelle, un monde jeune et neuf (*Civ.*, p.174).

To strengthen his vision of the Moroccan society, Chraïbi makes the father ponder his own attitudes and mistakes. The father puts into question the foundation of his education; an education based on intolerance and prohibitions, and more precisely on a patriarchal law which is blind to women’s needs and rights. A law which is based on the sacred:


Thus the father comes to realise the impact of restrictive religious attitudes which hinder the progress of a society and civilisation as a whole. In a confession to Nagib, he makes an evaluation of the slow progress of the moslem
Sais-tu pourquoi notre société islamique, après des temps de gloire, est devenue à la traîne du monde entier? [...] À la base de toute société, il y a la commune. Et le noyau de la commune, c'est bel et bien la famille. Si au sein de cette famille la femme est maintenue prisonnière, voilée qui plus est, séquestrée comme nous l'avons fait depuis des siècles, si elle n'a aucune ouverture sur le monde extérieur, aucun rôle actif, la société dans son ensemble s'en ressent fatalement, se referme sur elle-même et n'a plus rien à apporter ni à elle-même ni au reste du monde\(^2\) (Civ., pp.172-173).

Contrary to the previous novels, *La Civilisation, ma Mère!*... ends with a cheerful note with the mother laughing. Nonetheless, the physical exile of the heroine from the country of her origins is an unspoken pessimistic statement on the part of Chraïbi.\(^3\) He seems to imply that as a liberated woman she has no room there. Anyone who is striving for freedom, be it metaphysical, sociological or political, will almost automatically alienate themselves from their society; they are bound to come into conflict with their society as they no longer accept to follow its code of behaviour. Such is the fate of Driss Ferdi. The following chapter will attempt to expose the alienation Chraïbi has blindly been attacked for criticising Islam. But what his critics failed to understand is that his work is not a criticism of Islam as such but of man-made traditions and the Islam-alibi which is meant to suppress any attempt of an individual to assert him/herself.

\(^42\) Chraïbi has blindly been attacked for criticising Islam. But what his critics failed to understand is that his work is not a criticism of Islam as such but of man-made traditions and the Islam-alibi which is meant to suppress any attempt of an individual to assert him/herself.

\(^43\) When confronted with this argument (see Appendix One, pp.224-225), Chraïbi revealed that he has written a sequel to this novel, but the negative outcome the heroine faced in exile drove him to destroy the manuscript. In the line of the argument in this thesis, one can deduce from such revelation a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to refuse to face up to his own disillusion.
problem the hero is subject to and how character doubling disguises the hero’s conflict and struggle in trying to achieve subjectivity.
According to Charles Mauron, "Au drame, apparemment objectif, qu'un auteur nous raconte, peut correspondre un autre drame intérieur, personnel, dont il ne nous dit rien." In other words, the writer, through different means, reveals to us different aspects of his personality that are not obvious in his explicit story. The silent and implicit drama of the writer appears to us somehow disguised through the use of different rhetorical devices, notably metaphors. These metaphors—which, as the story unfolds, show the split personality of the writer—are to be seen as a means of distancing whereby the author lays claim to his detachment from the events of his stories. In

---

deploying this technique, Driss Chraïbi opts for, to borrow Genette's term, the 'autodiégétique' method of enunciation by which he keeps himself distant from the narrator. By the same token, however, the use of this method implies a certain self-observation.

In the novels under study the narrator bears the same first name as the author: Driss. But to differentiate himself from the narrator, Chraïbi gives him the surname Ferdi. The name is very relevant as well as suggestive, for the word 'ferdi' has a double meaning in Arabic. In classical Arabic it means 'solitary', while in Moroccan Arabic it means 'pistol'. In both cases the allusion is striking. Driss Ferdi is a long-suffering and lonely character as well as unique compared with the rest of his family. On this issue Kadra-Hadjadji writes:

Il [Chraïbi] constate aussi qu'il fit très jeune l'expérience de la solitude et de la souffrance à Fès et à Rabat où il vécut assez longtemps séparé de sa famille. La solitude, il la ressentait aussi auprès des siens, et il devait la retrouver en France.²

The hero also bears a destructive element. Death is constantly present in the circle in which he evolves. In Le Passé simple, those who are too close to him, like his younger brother and his mother, die. His father, 'Le seigneur', whom he repeatedly wishes to kill in Le Passé simple, finally succumbs to death in Succession ouverte.

Though much is known of Chraïbi’s experience and suffering as a protest writer in exile, a psychoanalytical reading of his work enlightens us about his disturbed personality such as we encounter it in the depiction of his characters. This disturbance stems particularly from his sense of alienation, first from his family and culture and secondly from the Western world where he chose to live in exile. In the following we will attempt to demonstrate the Chraïbian hero’s cultural alienation, his complex syndrome as a colonised person and his sense of disillusion with the Western culture he is eager to embrace but which rejects him. This preliminary analysis will enable us later to clarify the split of personality and identity crisis of the subject-hero in terms of a theory of doubles and deduce the impact of the author’s own experiences on his protagonist.

The first chapter of Succession ouverte depicts the hero, Driss Ferdi, living in the north of France. He seems more mature and serene than in Le Passé simple. His poor health compels him to see his doctor, Doctor Kraemer, to whom he exposes his symptoms:

Voici les symptômes: [...] je suis en ébullition nerveuse [...] Anxiété nocturne, insomnie. Je me lève et sors dans les rues noires et désertes, où il n’y a strictement personne, où il n’y a que le froid, le verglas, la solitude, à la recherche de Dieu sait quoi [...] Autres symptômes: anorexie, amaigrissement, bouche sèche, soif intense, palpitations, picotements sous-cutanés, ce que vous, médecins, appelez paresthésie. Et

3 Driss Chraïbi himself lived in Strasbourg with his first wife and five children (see dedication page in Succession ouverte).
dernièrement, des secousses musculaires. J’ai eu des douleurs atroces au cœur, comme des coups de couteau qu’on appréhende [...] J’ai des espèces d’élancements partant du cœur, puis s’irradiant, contournant l’épaule et s’irradiant dans le bras gauche, jusque dans l’auriculaire et l’annulaire (SO, p.15).

The passage shows Chraïbi’s expert knowledge of the symptoms of severe depression accompanied by high blood pressure (the latter he suffers personally). Through his hero, Chraïbi provides his own diagnosis of these ailments: "En termes cliniques, c’est ce qu’on appelle l’aliénation. Celle d’un être sain, congénitalement sain, et qui en est réduit au type qui vous parle" (SO, p.16). Later on, in the chapter entitled "Journal du Docteur Kraemer", he emphasises again that his hero’s physical deterioration is a direct result of his mental turmoil, which in turn is due to his alienation, his inner dissatisfaction with the course of his life, and his lack of sense of belonging:

21 septembre - Ce pauvre homme, j’aurais pu lui prescrire un sédatif classique [...] Freud prétend que l’insatisfaction humaine engendre à la fois les névroses individuelles et les œuvres de la civilisation collective -et je veux bien le croire. Mais ne faut-il pas admettre en retour une explication du refoulement et des névroses par la civilisation? Chez ce pauvre homme, c’est le moral qui est atteint, la faculté de croire et de vivre. Et, dans ce cas, à quoi lui auraient servi mes pilules? (SO, p.25).

The hero’s alienation stems from his belonging to the arabo-moslem culture while living by the values of the Western world. As these two cultures are very different socially as well as spiritually, it is not surprising that
the hero finds himself in a situation where he feels he is
torn apart in trying to integrate and assimilate both. His
dilemma goes back to his French schooling as is shown in Le
Passé simple. Receiving a strictly French school education
while at the same time living by the norms of the Islamic
tradition within the family circle make of the hero, as
well as the author, the 'aliéné' par-excellence. With
humour—a humour that could be seen as revealing
embarrassment and/or awareness of past mistakes—the
narrator of La Civilisation, ma Mère!... recalls how when
he was young at school he wanted to do as his French
friends who were celebrating Christmas festivities. But,
unlike his French friends, Driss's home does not have the
kind of fire-place that is associated with Christmas
presents. As a substitute he leaves his shoes in the cooker
and goes to sleep hopefully singing: "Petit papa Noël,
quand tu descendras du ciel..." (Civ., p.46) only to wake
up in the morning and find them charred after the mother
turned on the cooker. Such events show the absurdity and
the burlesque which arise from the 'acculturation'
phenomenon. Driss is by no means unique in his situation.
In fact, most of the Moroccan society experienced, in one
way or another, the alienation which emerges from the
effects of colonisation. For example, only about twenty
years ago, some Moroccan families were actually swamped by
Christmas festivities, while Moroccan shop windows carried

---

4 We personally witnessed some Moroccan people buying Christmas
trees and decorations during the celebration period. However, we believe that the
the message of Christmas in their displays. Chraïbi ironises this kind of alienation by questioning the colonial educational system of which he is a product: "À propos, quel était celui [prénom] de Vercingétorix, mon ancêtre gaulois?" (Civ., p.47). It is this type of colonial educational void which leads one to be alienated from and inadequate in one’s own society.

The issue of alienation is manipulated subtly in Chraïbi’s narrative. In a scene where the mother meets her son’s French friends and their parents, the author points to the fact that alienation does not affect only those who live outside their country and culture, but also those who live under colonial rule in their own geographical space:

Mes camarades habitaient les beaux quartiers, faisaient du tennis, discutaient de littérature et de philosophie. Ils recevaient ma mère avec hospitalité et joie. Mais elle n’avait rien à leur dire, ni à eux ni à leurs parents.
[...]
- C’est cela, ton monde? me demandait-elle sur le chemin du retour. Pourquoi ont-ils honte de témoigner leur affection et pourquoi tiennent-ils à distance l’affection des autres?
[...]

However, as is going to be shown later, the mother could represent Driss as well as Chraïbi’s alter-ego, in which case the above-quoted words could be interpreted as the author’s own questioning of a culture he desperately tried

Moroccan ‘celebration’ of Christmas does not go beyond this act.
to be part of in the past and with which he was besotted. A culture which triggered his identity crisis, as he acknowledges: "Lentement, douloureusement, pendant des années, j'avais subi une crise d'identité" (SO, p.177).

So, through his character, the author exposes to the reader his alienation and identity crisis. The reader's sympathy is evoked, since the narrative is in the past tense and is told by a narrator who has acquired maturity and implicitly expresses sentiments of remorse. It is, in a sense, an acknowledgement on his part as to where he went wrong in the past.® In a confessional statement, which bears the weight of an unpleasant past, he says:

Je marchais dans la ville. J'allais vadrouillant, réceptif aux déclics. Comme une chienne de vie, je poussais devant moi le poids d'une civilisation. Que je n'avais pas demandée. Dont j'étais fier. Et qui me faisait étranger dans cette ville d'où j'étais issu (PS, p.78).

Colonisation is what causes this identity vacuum. As a French educated colonised, Chraibi's hero is more learned about the people, the culture, the language, the history and so on of the colonial nation than he is about his own. His education implicitly taught him the "good" values of the colonising nation and the "bad" values of the colonised one. The hero finds himself in a kind of Kleinian situation

® One could draw a comparison between Driss and Pip in Charles Dickens, Great Expectations as they both tell their stories as grown up adults and both narratives convey the message of the protagonists's remorse for past ungrateful and opportunist behaviour.
where he is torn between the "good" and "bad" mother. Like the child, who is at the centre of Klein's theory, the Chraïbian hero wants to be associated with the good mother/culture and punishes the bad one by cutting himself off from it. The wish to identify with a culture he sees as fulfilling and to reject the one which does not satisfy his needs is the basis of his split personality. Such a situation gives rise to what one would identify as a complex of inferiority. Chraïbi's hero suffers an inferiority complex identical to the black man's in Frantz Fanon's analysis:

Le Noir veut être comme le Blanc. Pour le Noir, il n'y a qu'un destin. Et il est blanc. Il y a de cela longtemps, le Noir a admis la supériorité indiscutable du Blanc, et tous ses efforts tendent à réaliser une existence blanche.®

Both Chraïbi's hero and Fanon's analysand suffer an alienating process whereby they aspire to assimilate with a culture they internalised as being superior, therefore good. Further, they both live under the impression that they have fulfilled their wish of wholeness, that they have accomplished their wish for plenitude. That is, they do not recognise in themselves a divided self and an inferiority complex.

The recognition of such division and complex will manifest itself only if the subject is made aware of his situation.

His awareness comes as a shock. It is a violent realisation that his education alone and his wish to assimilate do not necessarily allow him to alter his destiny.

After cutting himself off his family and culture at the end of *Le Passé simple*, Driss Ferdi returns home fully aware of his inferiority complex. In the prologue to *Succession ouverte*, Chraïbi summarises the situation of his protagonist as follows:

Driss Ferdi, l’un des fils du Seigneur, s’était jadis révolté contre lui, avait fui sa famille, son pays, brûlant de mordre à même la civilisation occidentale, de s’en nourrir, d’élargir son horizon humain [...] il s’aperçoit que rien de tout cela ne s’est produit, que la transplantation ne lui a apporté qu’angoisse, déséquilibre, solitude... (SO, p.?)

Driss is aware that his attempt to be accepted as equal by his colonisers fails and most importantly, creates a wedge between him and his family. The hero goes to great lengths in trying to be integrated by and assimilated to the Western culture to the point of giving up his right of freedom in the hope of his acceptance: "Je voulais qu’on me protège, qu’on me colonise, me civilise, me donne un brevet d’existence" (SO, p.34). His disillusion later turns to anger, first towards himself and secondly towards the Western world to which he was lured.

The self-directed anger translates effectively into self-hatred. The theatrical scene between the Moroccan immigrant worker Bouchaïb and his father is neither more nor less
than a caricatured recapitulation of Chraibi's own past attitude. In a tragi-comic style, Bouchalb is depicted as returning to Morocco after five years of absence, accompanied by his French wife. His father, an old and poor peasant, is waiting for him at the airport. Not proud of his poor background, the son pretends not to recognise his father who is calling him. Lying to his wife that he was an old domestic, Bouchalb orders his father in Arabic to go back to his village where he will visit him after settling his wife in a hotel. The couple leave and the old man is arrested for breaking, in his anger, the barrier behind which he was waiting for his son's arrival. The scene ends with a total silence interrupted by the loud bray of the old peasant's donkey. This ending is meant to highlight the ridicule of the inferiority complex. Like Bouchalb, Chraibi disowned the origins of which he felt ashamed. However, his disillusion with the West leads him to seek redemption and self-respect. But one cannot do so unless one acknowledges the guilt. But in this instance, the guilt does not seem to be recognised; redemption is accomplished indirectly by afflicting a scapegoat (Bouchalb in this case) with the debilitating effects of cultural alienation.

Later, however, Chraibi points an accusatory finger to the source of this alienation:

J'ai tourné le dos à une famille de bourgeois et de seigneurs et quelle famille, quel monde vais-je trouver ici? J'ai claqué toutes les portes de passé parce que je me dirige vers l'Europe et vers la civilisation occidentale et où est donc est cette civilisation montrer-la moi, montrer
m’en un seule gramme je suis prêt à croire je croirai n’importe quoi. Montrez-vous, vous les civilisateurs en qui vos livres m’ont fait croire. Vous avez colonisé mon pays, et vous dites et je vous crois que vous êtes allés y apporter la lumière, le relèvement du niveau de vie, le progrès, tous missionnaires ou presque. Me voici: je suis venu vous voir dans vos foyers. Sortez. Sortez de vos demeures et de vous-mêmes afin que je vous voie (SO, pp.34-35).

The hero’s disillusion with the West carries a tone of anger and challenge. He refers to his past when he left his family and country to embrace a whole civilisation he had only known through books. He idealised this civilisation because it provided him with the perfect image of a world where justice, open-mindedness and freedom prevail. He yearned to be part of this world. But when he confronted it the reality fell well short of what he had learned in books. The Western civilisation he encountered was far from that idealised.

Most importantly, it was a civilisation which rejected him. The opening lines of Succession ouverte show explicitly this sense of rejection by the Western world: "Noir, froid, sans âme. Moi l’étranger, pendant seize ans étranger" (SO, p.11), and later the hero acknowledges that not only did he remain an outsider in the world he adopted but also a marginal, "je crachais sur toute ma vie de paria" (SO, p.84). This statement translates anger for his rejection, an anger which is not necessarily directed towards the West which rejects him, but towards himself for allowing such rejection to happen. That is, he is angry for having
aspired to assimilate to a world which marginalised him, and for whose sake he had rejected his own origins.

The Chraïbian hero, in this respect, is very much like the colonised model Albert Memmi analyses in *Portrait du colonisé*. In his portrait of the colonised, Memmi shows how the urge for assimilation leads to the loss of selfhood:

La première tentative du colonisé est de changer de condition en changeant de peau. Un modèle tentateur et tout proche s'offre et s'impose à lui: précisément celui du colonisateur. Celui-ci ne souffre d'aucune de ses carences, il a tous les droits, jouit de tous les biens et bénéficie de tous les prestiges [...] L'ambition première du colonisé sera d'égaler ce modèle prestigieux, de lui ressembler jusqu'à disparaître en lui [...] Le refus de soi et l'amour de l'autre sont communs à tout candidat à l'assimilation [...] Le colonisé ne cherche pas seulement à s'enrichir des vertus du colonisateur. Au nom de ce qu'il souhaite devenir, il s'acharne à s'appauvrir, à s'arracher de lui-même [...] Pour se libérer, du moins le croit-il, il accepte de se détruire.

By the process shown above, Chraïbi’s hero not only destroys his self in his attempt to become other -that is, to become like the coloniser- but he does so in a destructive way both to himself and to the members of his family who evolve around him. To extract himself from a

---

7 Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé précédé du portrait du colonisateur*, Paris: Editions Corréa, 1957; Editions Gallimard, 1985. It is worth noting that Memmi’s analysis is also appropriate to his hero of *La Statue de sel* (1966) who goes through the same process as Driss Ferdi: revolt against the father, religion, society. In fact, both writers follow similar paths albeit from different perspectives: the Arabo-moslem (Chraïbi) and the Judeo-berber (Memmi).

position he refuses to acknowledge as his fate, Driss does so by the only act that is necessary for his self-achievement: revolt against father and family. Even in so doing he is unaware that he does not actually achieve selfhood but rather fragments it further. He realises this only later when, as was discussed earlier, he faces rejection by the West and feels shame and self-hatred for having rejected the origins he felt and believed to be backward. However, because such realisation is not fully internalised there is a tendency (from both author and character, as they share similar drama) of extrapolating the whole experience at the expense of others. I shall try to demonstrate how, in terms of a theory of doubles, the writer tries to achieve the unity of self previously fragmented in the hope of reaching plenitude.

To achieve this end, it is necessary first to highlight the autobiographical or quasi-autobiographical writing of Chraïbi. One can detect a number of factual autobiographical elements which form a link between Driss Chraïbi and his character Driss Ferdi: the names of father, mother and brothers, the geographical locations of the narrator such as Casablanca, Fès, Guessous primary school in Rabat, and France. Further, the writer makes allusions to some incidents which happened in real life, though in different circumstances in fiction. For example, the mother in Civilisation, ma Mère!... gives her degree to the father before leaving Morocco (Civ., p.178); an incident which is
transposed from an earlier scene in *Succession ouverte* where Driss recalls:

Un jour, j'ai envoyé mon diplôme à mon père, en lui signalant que je disparaissais de la circulation. Le plus grand service qu'il pourrait me rendre était de me laisser me débrouiller tout seul, sans argent, sans aide d'aucune sorte. Puis j'ai plongé dans la vie. Bougnat, manoeuvre, crieur de journaux, photographe, veilleur de nuit, tous ces métiers qui mènent un individu à la gloire et à la fortune, en Amérique tout au moins (SO, p.37).

This passage provides further information about the path the writer himself followed. After completing his degree in chemistry, Chraïbi did in reality send it to his father as a way of telling him that he has accomplished a task that he, the father, wished. That could be seen as Chraïbi's way of breaking with the father's authority and finding his own way in life, even if it meant losing the father's financial support. One could almost see a romantic Hollywood hero in Chraïbi: refusing the wealth that is easily accessible to him, taking humble jobs, like the ones mentioned in the passage above, and finding his way to fame and prosperity by his own determination and will. However, what transpires from such an attitude is the implicit desire to follow in the father's footsteps. Though he despises the father's authority, he admires and idealises it all the same. It is an authority that the father acquired as he worked his way up from humble beginnings to become the wealthy mercantile patriarch we encounter in the character of 'le Seigneur'. Chraïbi's motif is no more and no less than a violent desire to identify with the father as an equal, and to
measure up to the latter’s power. The antagonism between the father and son stems from this desire; eventually, it leads to the breaking up of their relationship:

Outre la pension qu’il versait à son fils, le père Chraïbi lui acheta un pavillon à villejuif. Par la suite, mécontent de sa conduite, il lui coupa les vivres et rompit avec lui. Mais ce n’était qu’une brouille... Une seconde rupture eut lieu après la publication du Passé simple où le père avait été choqué de retrouver des détails précis, des éléments autobiographiques.*

This tension between father and son and the rupture of their relationship is essential. As we shall demonstrate later, Chraïbi’s depiction of the father figure -whom we shall examine as an inverted double of the hero- is fundamental to the latter’s achievement of selfhood.

Chraïbi’s work exposes to us a central character around whom other characters form a kind of rotating constellation and through whom they communicate.^[10] These constellations form what Roland Barthes, after Freud in Totem and Taboo, defines as the ‘primal horde’ in his book Sur Racine. This ‘primal horde’ is constituted by: (a) the father who, like ‘le Seigneur’ in Le Passé simple, has the power of life and death over his sons; (b) women whom Barthes describes as

---


^[10] This is the kind of hierarchy Seymour Chatman exposes in *Story and Discourse*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978, in which he distinguishes between *Kernels* which he defines as major events and "narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events" (p.35) and *Satellites* which are minor plot events and whose function is that of "filling in, elaborating, completing the kernel; they form the flesh on the skeleton" (p.54).
"toujours convoitées, rarement obtenues" but rather asexual and submissive in Chraïbi's work; and (c) the brothers-enemies, divided over the father's wealth, this same father who haunts them and comes back from the dead to punish them for his murder. The hatred between brothers is more noticeable in *Le Passé simple* than elsewhere in Chraïbi's work, except probably between Driss and Hamid. But, if Hamid is to be viewed as Driss's double (on which more below), then he also falls into this category of brother-enemy. The final element necessary to complete the 'primal horde' is the son. Barthes defines the latter as being split between the terror of the father and the necessity to destroy him, a definition which applies well to Driss Ferdi.

To illustrate best this analogy between the Racinian tragedy, as seen by Barthes, and the work of Chraïbi one has to read the latter's novel in terms of psychic structures. The core element in such a study will be the ego because of its unstable and conflictual situation. If confronted with such a situation, then, as Laplanche and Pontalis explain:

Le moi, comme champ de conscience, placé devant une situation conflictuelle (conflit d’intérêts, de désirs, ou encore de désirs et d’interdits) et incapable de la maîtriser, s’en défend en l’évitant, en n’en voulant rien savoir; en ce sens, le moi serait le champ qui doit être

---

Accordingly, Driss Ferdi could represent the ego, which is the kernel of the story, while the other characters (the father, the mother, the brothers), who gravitate around him like satellites, are nonetheless essential to the whole psychic structure. Their study would enable us to pin down the ego and understand its trajectory. Through the technique of distancing mentioned earlier, the ego is in constant displacement, and its relation to other characters, according to its position, leads us to different understandings of the story. Consequently, the characters can have different significations in the text. Charles Mauron explains that if the ego moves from an inferior position to a superior one then the other characters are images from the past and the future of the narrator. However, if the ego is in a stagnant position, i.e. that of the repressed, the other characters are images of the super-ego or the repressed desire or the id.

In the first instance, one could rightly say that the work of Chraibi is directed towards the past. Many elements of a socio-historical analysis of Morocco are inherent in his works. The authoritarian bourgeois father of Le Passé simple is reflective of the powerful mercantile society Chraibi grew up in until his departure for France after his

---

12 J.Laplanche and J.-B.Pontalis, Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse, p.244.
baccalaureate in 1945. The depiction of this society goes hand in hand with observation of the period of French colonization of Morocco. This is a theme which is explicit in La Civilisation, ma Mère!.... But, in addition to being images of the past, Chraibi's novels are also a vision of the future. For this, one has to look at the metamorphosed mother in La Civilisation, ma Mère!.... From a state of total submission in Le Passé simple, the mother is presented as embodying all the assets of an emancipated woman.

In the second instance, where the ego is inhibited, the other characters appear as figures by which the repressed desire is expressed. This desire is then displaced and projected on to a double. This double, as defined by Otto Rank, is "a predilection of the author to depict traits of himself or desire for another existence."\(^{13}\)

In Chraibi's work one can detect more than just one double. The narrator endures different frustrations which are projected on to different characters, which, in turn, appear to us as different doubles. These doubles are, to borrow Mauron's words, "des métamorphoses d'un personnage - voire de l'auteur."\(^{14}\) As the narrator and the author tend to merge with each other, we recognize in the doubles the

---


variety of inhibitions to which Chraïbi is prone.

The most manifest doubles in Chraïbi’s novel are the father, the mother and the brother. In a strong power relation, ‘le seigneur’ and Driss are inseparable. ‘Le Seigneur’ is a double who is necessary to Driss’s self-awareness. On the contrary, the mother and Hamid as doubles are haunting figures from Driss’s past as an abused child and adult. Unlike ‘le Seigneur’, they are doubles Driss has to get rid of if he is to find his own self. In short, what follows will be an attempt to discuss the father as a positive double and the mother and Hamid as negative ones. The first has a salutary effect while the role of the others is detrimental, in the sense that they could be cautionary examples.

The conflict between father and son in Le Passé simple is that between master and subject or tyrant and captive. Such a conflict is inevitably violent. Violence is present both in the narrator’s account of his childhood and in the language he uses to convey his message. Since the relationship between father and son is based on authority, violence is unavoidable, due to the fact that they are both confined in what Barthes calls the ‘tragic space’. It is from their coexistence in the same space that the crisis stems. In considering ‘le Seigneur’ as the double of Driss, the emphasis should be placed on the fact that he is an inverted double. As in the Lacanian mirror-stage, if the
subject identifies itself with the image reflected in the mirror the self is not completed, but rather becomes object or other. Driss encounters the law of his father and his castrating power. He identifies with him, not in terms of similarities but of opposites. For Barthes, "être, c'est non seulement être divisé, mais c'est être retourné." Accordingly, 'le Seigneur' is an inverted double of Driss, a relation that enables them to complement each other without reaching a total rupture. As Driss says: "Moi, j'ai été façonné pour être tout ce que le Seigneur n'a pas été" (PS, p.36) emphasising the symmetrical relationship between father and son.

The complementarity between Driss and 'le Seigneur' depends on their position vis-à-vis each other. 'le Seigneur', with the religious connotations the generic entails, is an omnipresent godlike figure; his presence, be it physically, as in Le Passé simple, or spiritually, as in Succession ouverte, annihilates all others:

[La] présence du Seigneur assis buste droit et regard droit, si peu statue qu'il est dogme et si peu dogme que, sitôt devant lui, toute autre vie que la sienne, même le brouhaha de la rue vagi par la fenêtre ouverte, tout est annihilé (PS, p.17).

In relation to the godlike father, Driss's position is that of a subdued creature. His own experience depends on 'le Seigneur' and he is conscious of his inferior status before

---

15 R. Barthes, Sur Racine, p.46.
This God-creature relationship is based on authority and power, concepts which lose their meaning if either of the characters is absent from the scene. If one were to consider the mother as the double of Driss, one would realize that her absence parallels the father's loss of power.

This complementarity is also vital for Driss. Though he constantly wishes and plans the death of his father, he never achieves his purpose and keeps bringing him back to life, as in *Succession ouverte*. The father's presence as an other is essential for Driss to be his own self and is also part of this self. The narrator is somehow unable to free himself from his oppressive father for the simple reason that this same father possesses what Driss does not have, i.e. the power to oppress. His admiration for his father's strength is juxtaposed by the hatred he expresses towards him, "d'où le respect et l'admiration que je n'avais cessé de lui vouer - au cours de ma longue haine" (*PS*, pp.47-48).

Due to such mixed feelings and confusion, Driss's hatred is projected onto Si Kettani, the perfect substitute for 'le Seigneur': "Vous [Si Kettani] êtes haj. Comme le Seigneur. Riche. Comme le Seigneur. Et puissant, sûr de vous, honorable. Comme lui. Je vous hais" (*PS*, p.84), and onto
Fès, the embodiment of 'le Seigneur's patriarchal law:

Je n'aime pas cette ville. Elle est mon passé et je n'aime pas mon passé. J'ai grandi, me suis émondé. Fès s'est ratatinée, tout simplement. Pourtant, je sais qu'à mesure que je m'y enfonce elle m'empoigne et me fait entité, quanta, brique d'entre les briques, lézard, poussière -et sans que j'aie besoin d'en être conscient. N'est-elle pas la cité des Seigneurs?\(^\text{16}\) (PS, p.74).

Driss is stuck in his past and in his antagonism with the father. This 'predilection' for the past reveals some masochistic tendencies in the narrator, which can only be justified by his feelings of guilt towards his father. It is his father, whom he paints as a monstrous despot, who after all enabled him to have access to education at a time when very few Moroccans would go beyond the primary school level. It is this same father who paid for him to go and study in France. A sense of guilt in psychoanalytical terms designates:

Un état affectif consécutif à un acte que le sujet tient pour répréhensible, la raison invoquée pouvant d'ailleurs être plus ou moins adéquate [...] ou encore un sentiment diffus d'indignité personnelle sans relation avec un acte précis dont le sujet s'accuserait.\(^\text{17}\)

In this respect, Driss feels guilty for both his acts of revolt against a way of life, a family and a whole culture he deems backward and enslaving and also for vilifying

\(^{16}\) Similarly, Tahar Ben Jelloun, in La Prière de l'absent, attacks the city of Fès for its oppressive ideological power and for its enslavement of the individual by its traditions.

\(^{17}\) J.Laplanche and J.-B.Pontalis, Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse, p.440.
them. His sense of unworthiness vis-à-vis his father leads him to depict the latter with monstrous characteristics, which inevitably produce guilt feelings in him, for (albeit unconsciously) he knows he is guilty of misrepresenting his father. However, being in an oppressed position there is no other way for him to break free than to revolt against his father. To do so, he has to use all available opportunities; even if that means being an opportunist. The end of *Le Passé simple* shows not only Driss’s opportunist behaviour, but also that to achieve his freedom he cheated his father’s generosity and good will. In his endless attempts to measure up to ‘le Seigneur’ he proudly confesses, without remorse, that by tricking his father he won a key point:

> Je l’ai souverainement possédé. Il n’en saura jamais rien.  
> Ses ultimes recommandations ne sont qu’un bourdonnement. Je ne les entends pas parce que je ne veux pas les entendre.  
> [...]  
> Ceinturé sur mon siège, je ne verse pas une larme. Les derniers mots que j’ai entendus sont: "Notre fils bien-aimé."  
> [...]  
> Pas un gramme de mon passé ne m’échappe, il défile, il est simple: j’ai joué, j’ai gagné (*PS*, pp.271-272).

Driss is ungrateful and conscious of his ingratitude. No matter what opportunities his father’s wealth offered him, Driss’s prime preoccupation is to free himself, even if his freedom is translated in terms of ingratitude. This is a
Barthes defines as "la forme obligée de la liberté." However, whether Driss is conscious of his ingratitude or not, we could see that there is a kind of implicit wish for forgiveness on the part of the writer when he makes 'le Seigneur' welcome Driss back to Morocco, even if at that stage of the narrative the father is only present as a voice, "Te souhaitons la bienvenue. Haj Ferdi" (SO, p.59). This wish for forgiveness—which is an unconscious recognition of guilt—is more explicit as the narrative draws more positive images of 'le Seigneur'. From the image of the despotic father of Le Passé simple, Succession ouverte presents the reader with the image of a kind and honourable father whom the narrator recalls in these terms: "Je me suis toujours rappelé les mains du Seigneur, l'odeur de ses vêtements, ses yeux pleins de bonté et d'honneur. Il était mes tenants et mes aboutissants, la base même de ma vie" (SO, p.22). The father becomes the epitome of kindness and generosity: "Mon père n'a jamais lésiné" (Civ., p.45). These traits are illustrated through the father's support of his wife's emancipation, "Mes yeux s'étaient ouverts, je m'étais brusquement rendu compte que ta mère était, à elle seule, la conscience d'un monde inconscient" (Civ., p.172). Further, to remedy his unfair trial of the father, the writer provides the latter with a voice in order to produce his own side of the story. As such, 'le Seigneur' is

---

18 R.Barthes, Sur Racine, P.31.
allowed a speech at the end of Le Passé simple (pp.242-243), reiterated in Succession ouverte. Through his speech, 'le Seigneur' is allowed to show that far from being the evil despot the reader was made to believe, he himself is a victim of society:

...nous étions vengés de l'enfance que nous n'avons pas connue, de la misère démente d'où nous avions émergé à l'âge de sept ans, directement vers l'âge adulte, avec cinq frères et soeurs qu'il fallait nourrir avec zéro instruction, zéro capital et des impératifs catégoriques et féodaux vieux de treize siècles et qui nous ordonnaient de courber la tête, l'échine et le moral au nom de la religion et de l'éthique sociale, et de nous contenter d'être un pauvre, exploitable à tout jamais (SO, pp.142-143).

As a victim, 'le Seigneur' is portrayed as a person for whom social demands -both religious and cultural- become unbearable to the point of driving him to commit suicide. The reader learns at the end of Succession ouverte that 'le Seigneur' brought an end to his life by taking an overdose of pills (SO, p.176).

As mentioned earlier, Driss's guilt towards his father is what keeps him in his oppressed position. His tormented mind prevents him from resting. Like the Racinian hero as studied by Barthes, he never sleeps; a fact mentioned at different stages of his narrative: "Je ne sais pas si j'ai rêvé ou simplement somnolé" (PS, p.42); later again he
refers to himself as "enfant insomnie" (PS, p.63). This pathological sign is obviously preoccupying for the narrator as he repeats three times in the lapse of a short scene the same sentence, "Derrière mes paupières closes désespérément dans ma tension de trouver le sommeil" (PS, pp.64-65). These torments and anxieties could be ended if his mind could break the barrier symbolized by 'la ligne mince'. However, 'la ligne mince', it seems, keeps projecting him back to his past, from which he draws his pleasure by retelling and rewriting it.

In his desperate attempt to break with his father, Driss imagines different methods. The most violent rupture is to murder the father. The idea of killing him painstakingly grows in his mind:

Ce couteau avait tout coupé...- et, un jour parmi les jours créés par Dieu, avec un peu d'adresse, un peu de sang-froid, le lancer vers le Seigneur, quelque part vers le corps du Seigneur, vers sa nuque par exemple, où il se planterait jusqu'au manche, comme une aiguille (PS, p.43).

However, this phallic and oedipal scene diverges from the original myth. Driss is prevented by the mother from carrying out the act. The father does not die but rather outlives the mother, who commits suicide. Consequently, the son does not fulfil his desire by killing the father he hates, but by destroying the mother he loves.

As a double of Driss the mother is also said to suffer sleep disorder, "Si elle dort, je suis sûr que non. Elle s'assoupit (mais elle l'est toute la journée)" (SO, p.94).
Unable to escape the father through death, Driss opts for other alternatives, namely his imagination and writing. The only action the father has no power to master, since it is out of visible reach, is the son's imagination. As a way of disobeying his father and refusing to listen to his account of his tea business, Driss lets his mind go free; as he says, "[Je] vous échappe. Par mon imagination" (PS, p.50). Writing in this case becomes an escape to freedom in the same way the mother, in La Civilisation, ma Mère!, tries to achieve her selfhood through words, "Elle n'avait pas peur non plus des mots. Derrière les mots, elle cherchait la vérité" (Civ., p.177).

To surpass the authority of the pursuer father, Driss projects his pursued ego on to his doubles, namely his brother and mother. As mentioned earlier, the cohabitation of both father and son in the same 'tragic space' is what provokes the tension in their relationship. As a way of annihilating his antagonistic son, 'le Seigneur' locates him outside the 'tragic space' (this being Casablanca) by sending him to Fès as a companion to his mother. According to Barthes, "sortir de la scène, c'est pour le héros, d'une manière ou d'une autre, mourir." Not in the case of Driss, though. His location outside the 'tragic space' is what enables him to free himself from his pursuer by destroying his pursued double, identified with his brother.

---

20 R. Barthes, Sur Racine, p.12.
Hamid. The death of Hamid becomes a necessity and a reason for the protagonist to live. Hamid as a double bears all the weaknesses which Driss needs to eliminate if he is to be equal to 'le Seigneur'. The fragility of Hamid is described by Driss in the following words:

Il est chétif et doux. Il a neuf ans et je lui en donne deux (...) chien écrasé, détresse des ghettos, clochard, rêve d'Icare, si intensément que j'estime que ma mère aurait mieux fait d'exécuter une pression utérine au moment d'accoucher de ce gosse-là (PS, p.25).

This wish for Hamid's death at an early stage of the novel is an ominous preview of his real death two chapters later.

The narrator's execution of this double is almost inevitable for he is a constant reminder of the former's oppressed and frustrated condition. At the news of Hamid's death, it is therefore predictable that the narrator's feelings are not those of grief but of joy:

J'ouvris le télégramme. Le lus. Le relus. Chose étrange, ce n'était ni la stupeur ni la douleur qui me vrillait, mais la joie. Je me rappelle encore comment, la moitié gauche du crâne, la moitié gauche de la face, la moitié gauche du buste, la jambe gauche; de cette derrière montait un faisceau de frissons à propagation ondulatoire. L'action était née (PS, pp.108-109).

The narrator's rejoicing at his double's disappearance implies the possibility of fulfilling himself. His last sentence in the above quotation, "L'action était née", signifies his deliverance from the castrating father. With
the death of the brother as a double, the relationship between 'le Seigneur' and Driss as that of a tyrant and captive ceases to exist and gives way to a new relationship, in which Driss is able to rebel against his oppressor.

However, considering the variety of inhibitions to which the narrator is subject, other doubles on to whom frustrations are projected are to be dealt with if Driss is really to be free from the father's grip. The mother as another negative double is a frustrating image from the narrator's past, a past that haunts him and hinders his capacity to assert himself.

To attain and preserve his self, Driss has to draw a barrier between this image of his self, which he wants to keep and protect, and the image of his double, which is unconsciously conceived as incompatible.

Driss refuses to identify with the weak personality of the mother, and consequently she becomes the recipient of his projected feelings and disturbances. This act of projection, as defined by Laplanche and Pontalis, is:

[Une opération par laquelle le sujet expulse de soi et localise dans l'autre, personne ou chose, des qualités, des sentiments, des désirs, voire des "objets", qu'il méconnaît ou refuse en lui.]

In other words, the mother is, so to speak, the scapegoat who has to bear Driss's own failings. Driss strives to be as strong a person as 'le Seigneur', but what he refuses to recognize is that he is in reality just as vulnerable as the mother on whom he projects his failings. Furthermore, his refusal to recognize his weaknesses turn into a violent judgement of the mother whom he violently assaults both physically and verbally:

Je fus debout, fus sur elle, la relevai, l'agrippai au collet.
- Espèce d'imbécile [...] préfères-tu rester une loque? Parce que, dans ce cas, dis-le moi et, au lieu de simplement te traiter d'espèce d'imbécile, je te traiterai comme une loque. La maintenant toujours au collet, je m'assis.
- Et il ne t'est jamais venu à l'idée que je n'étais pas fier de toi, qui pouvais être une mère et qui n'est qu'une loque? Ou supposes-tu que, du moment où tu m'as foutu dehors avec trois ou quatre cents grammes de placenta, j'allais passer ma vie à te bénir? (PS, p.153).

However, this violent attack on the mother should not be understood literally. The psychic disturbances and the split ego the hero is subject to should be understood as the source of the hero's displaced self-punishment. The mother as a metaphor or a double, allows and permits this self-directed anger and self-punishment to happen. The derogatory terms 'imbécile' and 'loque', and the statement "je n'étais pas fier de toi" are all self-directed. The hero is unable to stand up to his father's authority, and out of sheer frustration and a misrecognised lack of strength, the mother is made to bear all his inadequacies. Besides, assaulting someone weaker than him is the hero's
way of fantasising about possessing the power 'le Seigneur' has and which he, Driss, does not have: "...à moins d'un défaut d'optique, le Seigneur s'était pleinement reproduit en moi" (PS, p.153).

He portrays the mother as submissive, afraid and oppressed by 'le Seigneur', but most importantly as a silent sufferer. The mother's silence is, in fact, rather eloquent. It is to be seen as a shield against the external aggression embodied by 'le Seigneur'. Her sensitive and silent character is somewhat descriptive of the attitude of an artist who, in this case, is nobody else but Driss Chraïbi himself. His sensitivity, seen through the depiction of his double, is translated by his inability to express his rebellion out loud and verbally. On the contrary, he takes refuge in writing as an expression of self-assertion. And it is also in writing that he dismisses his weaknesses by attributing them to his mother. In a similar way to Hamid, the mother is an image the narrator needs to expel from his self. To achieve this, the double has to meet the inescapable fate, i.e. death. Once again, as in the Racinian drama, the tragic death which is most aggressive is suicide. In Le Passé simple, the reader is explicitly told that the mother commits suicide in order to end the suffering inflicted on her by 'le Seigneur'. However, the implicit meaning that we can impute on the basis of the above analysis is that it is the narrator who is behind this death. Though in the novel it is the father
who blames the mother's suicide on Driss —"Ma tâche consistait simplement à te signifier que tu as été cause de sa mort" (PS, p.262)— it is after all the writer's voice which is behind both Driss and 'le Seigneur'. Consequently, this declaration could be understood as an indirect confession on the part of the narrator.

The death of both negative doubles symbolizes the ending of Driss's psychic division. It also enables him to affirm his identity and to approach his father, no longer oppressed by him but as an equal. In fact, in the last chapter of Le Passé simple, entitled 'Les Eléments de synthèse', the narrator assesses the situation as he gains awareness of his own self. As he succeeds in overcoming his inhibitions, he draws closer to his father with whom he begins to identify: "Je le sentais soudain proche de moi, perméable à la souffrance et, dans cette souffrance, plus sincère, plus complet, plus humain" (PS, p.235). He also begins to regard his father as equal: "Nous avions la même taille et, assis dans des fauteuils jumeaux, le buste vertical, nous étions au même niveau" (PS, p.243). The removal of Hamid and the mother from the scene is for the narrator a way of releasing himself from the grip of his haunting past. By asking the following question: "Enterrer le passé? qui a dit cela, un romancier?" (PS, p.239) the narrator and the writer merge to produce one voice, leaving no doubt that Driss Ferdi and Driss Chraïbi are the same person.
However, though the death of the doubles and the death of 'le Seigneur' with whom "L'ère des coutumes et des traditions était morte" (SO, p.101) might seem liberating, there remains the question as to whether Driss has achieved his selfhood and his freedom.

As I have argued, Driss's fragmented self is the result of an inner drama he is unable to recognise as such. However, through a detour, Chraïbi provides another character with a voice which expresses his subject-hero's dilemma. Indeed, as a way of still avoiding acknowledgement of the inner disturbances both writer and hero share, it is Nagib who is made to define the hero's attitude:

- Je vais tâcher de te répondre, dit-il. Notre père est affaibli en deux points: la ruine de ses entreprises commerciales et la mort d’Hamid. Soit! Deuxième stade: à partir de là, tu t’es dépensé durant près de trois heures afin de nous persuader -rappelant à chacun de nous un souvenir propre et particulièrement cuisant- qu’il faut agir, à savoir en quelque sorte tenter un coup d’État. Finissant ton exposé, tu te déclarais stupéfait de n’avoir obtenu de nous que le silence et de ne pas comprendre. Maintenant, frère Driss, si je te disais -et je parle au nom de tous- que, nous non plus, nous ne comprenons pas pourquoi tu voudrais nous persuader? [...]  
  - Je sais. Tu as émergé de notre sphère. Mais pourquoi diable crois-tu que nous, y restant, y souffrons et en souffrons? [...] Mais, dis-moi, si véritablement tu étouffes ici, que ne prends-tu la porte tout simplement? (PS, pp.154-155).

In so doing, Nagib makes Driss aware that the problem lies with him alone. Driss is alone in his need to rebel, but assumes that the rest of the family have the same urge. However, Driss’s answer to Nagib’s suggestion to leave by
a simple "Je suis assez compliqué" (PS, p.155) provides a sense of awareness on his part as to the complexity of his conflictual self. Driss needs to believe that his problem is simple and that it can be solved by a simple revolt against 'le Seigneur'. He misleads himself in thinking that all those around him are unanimous in this need for rebellion. Only later, after weighing the consequences of his revolt does he acknowledge that "Maintenant, je savais que je n'avais cessé d'être le principal acteur de ce drame" (SO, p.178). He is also more aware that "ma révolte d'alors était dirigée contre mon père. Contre l'autorité de mon père. Je souffre encore de cette mort, mais il a fallu qu'il meure pour que je réalise soudain que j'étais un être vivant" (SO, p.182).

Driss's awareness that his rebellion is aimed at his father's authority does not necessarily mean that he has succeeded in freeing himself from such authority. In fact, his psychological unrest deepens even further at the realisation that his struggle has been somehow useless: "Souffrance et amertume d'avoir tant lutté pour presque rien: pour être et pour avoir, faire et parfaire une existence" (Civ., p.13). Driss's raison-d'être is to acquire his freedom which he equates with the termination of 'le Seigneur' 's power. Ominously, the acquisition of freedom is bound to be useless. Indeed, in Le Passé simple, Driss fantasises about a scenario where his father would offer to grant him a wish: "... exprime ton désir, nous te
l'accordons" and he, Driss, would answer: "La liberté" and adds "et je la refuserais" (PS, p.49). The freedom in question here is, so to speak, the wrong freedom. The freedom the hero thinks he aspires to is physical; it is like the freedom of a bird from a cage, for example, or a slave from the chains of servitude. In reality, the freedom Driss yearns for is harder to acquire. It is a freedom within the self. Consequently, it is not surprising why the hero lacks enthusiasm once his revolt is accomplished.

Through 'le Seigneur'\'s voice, Chraïbi ponders upon the question: "Un homme ou un peuple sous le joug se sent misérable. Mais, une fois libre et maître de son destin, pourquoi devient-il plus misérable?\"\(^{22}\) (SO, p.134) questioning thus his own state of mind as well as his subject-hero\'s.

The rupture with the father and the power he embodies does not permit Driss the peace of mind he desires, "...la même voix [...] le même mot: paix, paix, paix..." (CiV, p.14).

His physical freedom only helps in accentuating further his inner turmoil and his loneliness. The mother, as a double figure, expresses precisely what Driss feels in terms of his apparent freedom:

- La liberté est poignante, dit-elle à mi-voix.
  Elle fait parfois souffrir.
  [...]  
- Elle ne résout pas le problème de la solitude.
  Tu vois, je vais te dire: je me demande si vous

\(^{22}\) From the political simile in this quote, one could argue, however, that the problem could not necessarily only be within the self.
In this respect, it is the prison of a divided self which prohibits the achievement of freedom. Through his hero Chraïbi deduces, in a sense, his own inability to assert and free his self. It is his own being he questions when he ironises about Western women's seeming freedom: "...elles vont et viennent en toute liberté, il n'y a personne pour les surveiller...Mais il y a une chose que je ne comprends pas: si elles ont tant de liberté, pourquoi sont-elles si agitées? pourquoi courent-elles dans tous les sens?...Un être libre est un être immobile comme un arbre" (Civ., p.74).

Peace of mind, serenity and wholeness of self are what both writer and hero vehemently pursue and incessantly fail to achieve. With the three novels studied here, we looked at the different manoeuvres the writer, through the medium of his hero, uses to overcome his internal torment and struggle. All his attempts result in a deadlock. He is unable to reach an inner harmony. To this effect there remains to him one possible solution: to block out his past memories and negate them. However, such negation could not be indefinite, for as shown in Chraïbi's later series of novels -where the hero, Inspector Ali, emerges as yet again another subject-hero of the aged Chraïbi- and especially at
the end of *L'Inspecteur Ali*, where the hero-narrator-writer is confronted yet again to his past:

C'était la première fois que j’assistais à un accouchement [...] Je vis l’enfant sortir tête la première, les poings fermés comme s’il étreignait le monde, le possédait, un garçon. Et simultanément, je vis ma mère [...], remonta soudain dans ma mémoire tout mon vieux passé, net, clair, aveuglant dans les moindres détails - ce passé que j’avais enfoui si profondément en moi (*Inspecteur Ali*, pp.218-219).

The resurfacing past which the writer tries to repress is to be understood here as an indicator of the failure to achieve subjectivity, and of the impossibility of uniting a split self.
PART TWO: TAHAR BEN JELLOUN
Phantasy aims at fulfilling instinctual drives, irrespective of external reality, gratification derived from phantasy can be regarded as a defence against the external reality of deprivation.¹

The above quotation provides key terms in defining and understanding Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable* and its sequel *La Nuit sacrée*. These two novels tell the story of the androgynous character Ahmed/Zahra who was brought up as a boy by a father who desired a son to perpetuate the male lineage of the family. Twenty years after her birth, the father, on his death-bed, liberates Zahra from the identity he imposed on her. The two novels reveal the torment,

suffering and anxiety the androgynous character undergoes as he/she tries to overcome his/her ambiguous sexuality and identity. What follows will be an examination of the novels' narrative structure and the ways in which it leads us to underpin the similarities (whether explicit or implicit) between the central character and the one who creates it, and the external reality the writer hides behind in his fantasy-like novels.

The narrative structure of the two novels bears strong similarities to traditional oral story-telling. Both involve a story-teller and an audience who interact at different levels of the narrative. On the face of it, the structure of *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*, at various stages, resembles the morphological structure of a tale as studied by Vladimir Propp. According to Propp, fairy/folk tales tend to provide similar structures which are inherent to narratives. Following a linear structure, the characters are varied, their names different but the function they accomplish is the same and is constant:

> Les fonctions sont extrêmement peu nombreuses, alors que les personnages sont extrêmement nombreux. C'est ce qui explique le double aspect du conte merveilleux: d'une part, son extraordinaire diversité, son pittoresque haut en couleur, et d'une part, son uniformité non moins extraordinaire, sa monotonie.²


As an example of this, one could note that the various *dramatis personae* of *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* have the same function: to tell Ahmed/Zahra's story. Similarly, other characters -Le Consul, the knight, the rapist- all act to the same end, fulfilling the same function: to sexually liberate Zahra.

The uniformity and monotony of the tale according to Propp are basic principles. The functions of the *dramatis personae* are constant, their number is limited and their sequence identical. Propp noted thirty-one functions in his analysis. These functions he organises into spheres of actions and the numerous *dramatis personae* are said to accomplish different actions within their specific spheres. These spheres are classified as follows:

1- L'antagoniste (l'agresseur)
2- Le donateur
3- L'auxil iaire
4- La princesse ou son père
5- Le mandateur
6- Le héros
7- Le faux héros

*L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* provide the reader with various characters/narrators all of whom seem to correspond to these various spheres of actions. However, as Mélétinski says:

Le personnage principal [...] est porteur de la fonction biographique, tandis que "les personnages secondaires" portent des fonctions de complication de l'intrigue (i.e. une fonction d'aide ou d'obstacle au héros) ou bien une
Accordingly, as we shall see, one can interpret Ben Jelloun's texts as bearers of one principal narrative voice; other voices can be regarded as secondary, or indeed as mere "pastiches" to conceal the sought-after object of the main narrative voice - that is, the identity quest.

To borrow Greimas's terminology, the principal narrative voice, Si Abdelmalek (see diagram below, p.116), can be regarded as an "actant" who embodies different "acteurs" - that is, different characters. And this actant, in turn, is a cover for the creator of the text. On this issue, Jameson writes:

> It may turn out that a character or actor in a given narrative in reality serves as a cover for two separate and relatively independent actants; or that two actors, independent personalities and separate characters in the story-line, amount to little more than alternating articulations of an actant structurally identical in both contexts.

As such, Ben Jelloun's different characters or "acteurs" all function as the same "actant". Though Ben Jelloun's narrative structure does indeed reveal itself as a

---

4 Evguéní Méletinski, "L'étude structurale et typologique du conte" in V. Propp, Morphologie du conte, pp.204-205.


classical tale, what makes it distinctive is its lack of plot and intrigue. A focus on the role of the different narrative voices (acteurs) will show the monotony of the text to which Propp refers.

The opening pages of *L’Enfant de sable* set up an atmosphere of mystery and intrigue to prepare for the story of Ahmed, "Un brouillard épais et persistant..., cette couche blanche..." (*ES*, p.9). This setting is in fact misleading; and as the reader progresses through the novel, he/she is made aware that there is no intrigue or mystery and that the narrators who rally each other to tell the story of Ahmed are actually making up the story as they go along (as does the writer, since the narrators are all his creations).

The narrative of *L’Enfant de sable* is more intricate than that of *La Nuit sacrée* due to its polyphonic structure and the interaction between the narrative voices. No one narrative voice is distinctive; each absorbs the others, creating a puzzling game of interaction from which a single voice emerges, which the reader associates with Ahmed. But behind and alongside the voice of Ahmed, the reader can also detect the voice of the principal narrator, who despite various disguises, stands for the writer of the novel.

The setting for the telling of Ahmed’s story is Jamaâ El
Fna, an open public square in Marrakesh noted for its huge diversity of people and activities: fortune-tellers, snake-charmers, dancers, acrobats, story-tellers and so on. The gathering of people is almost endless hence the name of the place as El Fna (infinite, endless). To listen to a story, people gather around the story-teller and form a 'halqa' (meaning circle or ring in Arabic). The 'halqa' is an important structure for the story-telling for it forms a closed space around the story-teller and creates a certain intimacy between the listeners and the story-teller; further the 'halqa' becomes detached from its actual time and space and fosters both the concentration of the story-teller and the readiness of the audience to journey towards the fantastic and the unreal.

The 'halqa' in L'Enfant de sable is formed around the first narrator Si Abdelmalek. Though Si Abdelmalek is seemingly the main narrator, members of the 'halqa' challenge his story and provide their own either because they pretend to have had direct contact with Ahmed's diary or because they identify with the content of the diary. As such the novel provides the reader with different interpretations.

---

A knowledgeable story-teller uses various theatrical devices such as pantomime and singing, or makes a dramatic entrance to attract the audience's attention. He (a public story-teller is almost always a man; women, such as grandmothers, are confined to the private family sphere of story-telling) would normally draw his listeners' concentration by stating that his story is a true-life account and would justify this by providing factual events that the audience is likely to know. Also, he would supply stereotypical daily-life happenings that most listeners are likely to identify with.
emanating from different narrative voices, each pretending to tell the true story. The variations in the story of Ahmed are not necessarily contradictory. Every new narrator takes up the story at a point of disagreement with the previous narrator making thus the new version either complement the previous one or challenge it. As such the story does not seem to have an end, or, more precisely, it seems aimless. Consequently, it moves endlessly in a circular movement just like the shape of the 'halqa' (see diagram on page 116).

To comprehend this intricate and, so to speak, vicious circle of the novel’s narrative structure, it is instructive to look at the different narrators from a psychoanalytical perspective. From that perspective the different narrative voices in L'Enfant de sable can be understood as the overdetermined agencies of the writer.

According to Laplanche and Pontalis, overdetermination is:

[Un] fait qu’une formation de l’inconscient - symptôme, rêve, etc.- renvoie à une pluralité de facteurs déterminants [...]. La formation renvoie à des éléments inconscients multiples, qui peuvent s’organiser en des séquences significatives différentes, dont chacune, à un certain niveau d’interprétation, possède sa cohérence propre.®

As such the different narrators state that they uphold the truth about Ahmed. Or to be more specific, the story of

Ahmed's Diary (Direct Contact) | Ahmed's Diary (Indirect Contact)

Letters | Fatima's Brother

Salem | Amar | Fatouma

Halqa | Halqa

Blindman | Halqa
Ahmed and the multiplicity of voices which want to determine his identity could be summarised as the writer's own quest for identity via his fictional creation, distancing the whole quest from reality. This whole quest could be about truth. It could be regarded as the confused, unspoken and misrecognised search for a true self. The different narrative voices could represent the plural voice of a fragmented self - the writer.

The first narrator, Si Abdelmalek, tells the story of Ahmed from the content of the latter's diary which he claims to possess. Early in his narration he identifies with the writer of the diary he reads to the audience, "Je suis ce livre" (ES. p.13). The book could also stand for the novel *L'Enfant de sable* which is Ben Jelloun's 'diary'; thereby the statement "Je suis ce livre" could be understood as an autobiographical engagement and Si Abdelmalek (from Arabic meaning the one who possesses) as the possessor of the book's content. In this sense, Si Abdelmalek, or the writer for that matter, is the creator and owner of the book.

The book and its content which the narrator identifies with is described as a big mansion with seven doors. Through each door the reader steps into a slice of Ahmed's life, which is spread over twenty years. The diagram above (p.116) shows the different versions of Ahmed's life as told by different tellers; either because they pretend to
be connected directly to the hero or because they claim to
know the content of his diary. Each one of the tellers
represents a metaphorical door which, when opened, provides
a view of the inside of the mansion/novel. Conceiving the
book through the metaphor of the house is significant in
the structure of the novel. Associating literature with an
architectural structure is highly suggestive. If one is to
look at the novel from different angles (or explore it by
entering different doors) one will gain different
perspectives on the story, each providing a different
meaning. The crucial point of such metaphoricity of
literature is to imply the multiplicity and diversity of
meaning drawn from a single given story-line. When the
narrator of *L'Enfant de sable* provides the following
analogy:

Une histoire, c'est comme une maison, une vieille
maison, avec des niveaux, des étages, des
chambres, des couloirs, des portes et fenêtres,
des greniers, des caves ou des grottes, des
espaces inutiles (*ES*, p.206).

he implies that it is a rather complex architecture hence
the existence of some hidden dark corners such as
‘greniers’, ‘caves’ and ‘grottes’. And earlier, using the
same metaphor he says: "Le livre est ainsi: une maison où
echaque fenêtre est un quartier,..., c'est une maison
d'apparence, un décor de théâtre..."(*ES*, p.108).

Accordingly, the reader is told that the novel is not only
intricate but is also a façade, a mask. It is not a
reflection of reality. It is analogous with theatre, which
by implication means that the characters are performers and
do not stand for real people. Interestingly enough one
could regard the characters in Ben Jelloun’s book not only
as his overdetermined agencies, but also as actors whose
role is to act and cover up for the author’s reality.
Further, the role of the reader is reduced to an empirical
level, whereby the reader becomes a mere observer
witnessing the events as they unfold before his/her eyes
through the doors or windows of the book/mansion. As such,
the reader seems to be prevented from deploying his or her
active and interpreting role. This method of structure and
narration can be a deliberate masking device employed by
the author to mislead his readers. The quest for identity
is his own and in fulfilling his task he takes a devious
route suggesting that the novel is mainly metafictional.

The writing of both L’Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée
involves a circular movement. The narrator of L’Enfant de
sable addresses his listeners in the following words:

Amis du Bien, sachez que nous sommes réunis par
le secret du verbe dans une rue circulaire, peut-
être sur un navire et pour une traversée dont je
ne connais pas l’itinéraire (ES, p.15).

which suggests that the speaker/writer does not himself
know the plot of the story. It is a story whose itinerary
he makes up as he speaks/writes. This improvisation proves
that there is initially no factual story. The metaphor of
the circular street is a reminder of the ‘halqa’ and also
suggests the helplessness and confusion in the search for
truth about the self. This metaphor occurs many times in both novels and sometimes alternates with other metaphors such as 'river' and 'boat'. These metaphors are also crucial as they suggest a journey into the self which is so far unknown to the narrator. Through 'water' and 'boat' metaphors, the reader can easily notice the striking similarities between Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The journeys of Si Abdelmalek (and later other narrators) and Marlow are both journeys into the unknown.

The unknown is what surrounds the identity of Ahmed and those who narrate his life. His life becomes like a puzzle and the narrators like players each putting in a piece of information to fill in the gaps and the uncertainties which surround his existence. Si Abdelmalek invites his listeners to contribute to the making of the story:

> Cette histoire a quelque chose de la nuit; elle est obscure et pourtant riche en image; elle devrait déboucher sur une lumière,...Nos pas inventent le chemin au fur et à mesure que nous avançons;...J'ai besoin de vous. Je vous associe à mon entreprise. Je vous emmarche sur le dos et le navire (ES, pp.15-16).

and points to the fact that it should lead them towards the light. The use of the conditional tense in the sentence "elle devrait déboucher sur une lumière" suggests the

---

feeling of probability and uncertainty on the part of the narrator as whether the quest for the true self will be a successful one or not. The narrator and the audience are no longer separate. They act together to fulfil their task. As the author's psychic agencies they unite under the appellation of "complices" (ES, p.18); and later, their role as contributors in the making of the story and in the search for truth is made clear by the following words: "Nous ne sommes plus des spectateurs; nous sommes nous aussi embarqués dans cette histoire qui risque de nous enterrer tous dans le même cimetière" (ES, p.24). The search for truth seems to be predicting a gloomy outcome. At the outset, the narrator makes his audience aware of the potentially fateful consequences of the search: it might end in the downfall of all involved. From Ahmed's diary, the narrator reads out a passage which suggests that the knowledge of one's truth brings fear. It is important to note at this point that as Ahmed stands for a displaced metaphor of the author, the following words should be understood as the author's own writing rather than that of a fictional character:

Il est une vérité qui ne peut être dite, pas même suggérée, mais vécue dans la solitude absolue, entourée d'un secret...qui se dégage parfois en des instants de lassitude où l'on se laisse gagner par la négligence...La souffrance vient d'un fond qui ne peut non plus être révélé...Cette vérité telle une abeille dans un bocal de miel, prisonnière de ses illusions, condamnée à mourir, étranglée, étouffée par la vie. Cette vérité ... me tend un miroir où je peux (sic)me regarder sans être troublé par une profonde tristesse (ES, pp. 43-44).
Such fear and apprehension of truth implies a fear of what the writer is looking for. It is only later in his writing, as his story progresses, that it emerges that the writer is confused about his identity. By presenting to the reader an ambiguous and ambivalent character he puts his own ambiguity and ambivalence into the text. At this stage, as the above quotation shows, there is a fear of what his search might reveal; it seems as if he deliberately turns in a circle so as to avoid any revelation, hence the numerous allusions to circular streets. He compares truth to suffering, it is profound, and one makes great efforts to avoid it. Like a slip of the tongue, it reveals itself during moments of negligence in the form of illusions, i.e. of what might be true. The truth he is looking for is latent and hidden; but what he confronts is nothing but a reflection, an illusion suggested by the word ‘miroir’.

Pursuing further the metaphor of the mirror, Ben Jelloun locates truth in a "grenier de maison hantée"(ES, p.44), in other words in the obscure depth of one’s psyche, and warns that looking too much into it one might step in the "territoire des rats"(Ibid). Sylvia Plath’s poem about introspection, *Mirror*, is a key reference here. Both Ben

---

10 For further reading on the theme of the mirror in *La Nuit sacrée*, see Lucy McNeese, "Discours à la dérive: à travers le miroir ou l’écriture à l’envers" in Yvette Benayoun-Szmidt et al. (eds), *La Traversée du Français dans les signes littéraires Marocains*, Toronto: Editions La Source, 1996, pp.87-96.

Jelloun and Plath reflect on issues of self-exploration and introspection. Both use the metaphor of the mirror to suggest that if one tries to delve into the meaning of one's self, one is bound to come face to face with an unpleasant reality. Both Ben Jelloun and Plath use an animal associated with ugliness as a metaphor for the undesirable discovery which stems from self-introspection: a 'fish' in the case of Plath and 'rats' in Ben Jelloun's.

However, for Ben Jelloun it is always possible to outplay the truth. He makes his characters aware of the dangers of self-introspection and avoids the truth about his self being revealed and recognised. Thus Ahmed writes, "J'évite les miroirs...la vérité qui ne peut être dite" (Ibid) and continues "La vérité s'exile; il suffit que je parle pour que la vérité s'éloigne" (ES, p. 45) suggesting thus that truth is evanescent. Ben Jelloun's narrative seems subject to "un fading brusque, dont la trouée permet à l'énonciation de migrer d'un point de vue à l'autre, sans prévenir." 12 The use of words provides a certain meaning which could be perceived as true, and a meaning is no longer unique if there exists another meaning so that in the end there is a chain of meanings, or a chain of 'could-be-truths'.

The opening sentence of La Nuit sacrée begins with these

words: "Ce qui importe c'est la vérité" (NS, p. 5). As such the writer makes the reader believe that his second novel will reveal what lies behind the ambiguity of his character, but only to make the latter state in a few lines below, "Amis du Bien! ce que je vais vous confier ressemble à la vérité" (NS, p. 6). In other terms, truth is unreachable and what appears as truth is but a resemblance.

The writer's use of different narrative voices to displace his own involvement is a tactical strategy whereby the predicament of the androgynous Ahmed/Zahra remains unacknowledged as his own predicament. Accordingly the narrative moves in a circular fashion, as does the quest for truth. However, to pin down the writer, so to speak, and establish that his fictional creation says more about himself than he lets on, one ought to look at the notion of the voice and see how at different levels of the narration it reveals moments which imply the writer's direct involvement in his text. The voice, be it that of Ahmed/Zahra or that of any other character in both novels (such as Si Abdelmalek or Fatouma) bears attributes that could be recognised as those of the writer. The psychoanalytical notion of overdetermination justifies the writer's need to project onto others a voice he would rather not acknowledge as his, for if he does it will become cumbersome and damaging. In L'Enfant de sable, when Ahmed says:

"Je suis et ne suis pas cette voix qui s'accommode et prend le pli de mon corps, mon visage enroulé"
One can detect the voice of the writer behind this statement. On the face of it, the reader encounters Ahmed’s confusion about his voice as a means of expression of his identity; but behind the voice of Ahmed is the voice of the author. By implication Ahmed’s voice is a displacement of Ben Jelloun’s. The association of the voice with a mask constitutes a double bind here. In the novel Ahmed laments his need to conceal his femininity (by using a male voice being forced upon him by his father); and likewise implicitly, Ben Jelloun is unable to express himself authentically. Instead, his reality is masked by his fictional character, to whom he attributes his own voice without him being accountable for it since it falls in the realm of fiction. Here both writer and character fuse into one person whose identity has been shaped and formed according to the demands and dictates of society, symbolically associated with the father.

The ambiguity of Ahmed’s (and the writer’s) identity is highlighted by another voice, that of Ahmed’s anonymous correspondent, referred to sometimes by the attribute Al Majhoul (an Arabic word meaning ‘the unknown’). The letters between Ahmed and Al Majhoul make up part of the narrative of Ahmed’s diary. In one of his letters to Al Majhoul Ahmed
writes:

N'avez-vous jamais essayé de deviner la voix de l'absent, un philosophe, un poète, un prophète?...Je vous parle de la voix parce que la mienne a subi une telle métamorphose qu'en ce moment j'essaie de retrouver mon grain naturel. C'est difficile. Je reste silencieux et je crains que ma voix ne se perde, n'aille ailleurs. Je refuse de parler à voix haute tout seul. Mais je m'entends crier au fond de moi-même. Chaque cri est une descente en moi-même...Quand je lis un livre, je m'amuse à entendre la voix de l'auteur. Ce qui est étrange c'est que je confonds souvent la voix d'un homme avec celle d'une femme...Votre voix m'arrive parfois enrobée de quelque chose de féminin...Qui êtes-vous? Ne me le dites jamais! À bientôt (ES, pp.99-100).

Here Ahmed assumes the voice of a man and imagines his correspondent's voice as female. In fact, Al Majhoul is so-called because his/her gender is unknown. What lies behind Al Majhoul is Ahmed's hidden femininity. In fact, the epistolary structure of the diary is to be understood as an inner dialogue between a man and his absent other. This other could also be perceived, to borrow Jung's term, as the writer's anima. This female side of a man is unwanted and unrecognised by Ahmed, and by implication the author, hence the statement in the above quotation: "Ne me le dites jamais!". To a certain extent the author is putting his own self into his writing. Like his character Ahmed who says, "Je m'entends crier au fond de moi-même" Ben Jelloun could be said to suffer an inner conflict, for the confusion of distinguishing between a male and female voice when reading a book is relevant to his own novels. The ambiguity of the
The androgyne Ahmed/Zahra could be perceived as a metaphor for the author’s split self. The author is probably aware of his split personality and is weary of it. His writing is his means of expressing his feelings and torments but at the same time he seems to be apprehensive about what might be divulged. Once again it is neither Ahmed nor Zahra but the author who reflects on his state of being in the following words: "Qui suis-je à présent? Je n’ose pas me regarder dans le miroir...Je m’étais entouré de livres et de secret" (ES, p.111).

The split and confusion between masculinity and femininity are voluntarily projected by the author onto his fictional character Ahmed/Zahra, who bears the ambiguity and ambivalence of the androgyne. As a man in a moslem and male-dominated society the author, through the voice of Ahmed, recognises the privileged status he possesses, "Ma condition [as a man], non seulement je l’accepte et je la vis, mais je l’aime. Elle m’intéresse. Elle me permet d’avoir les privilèges que je n’aurais jamais pu connaître" (ES, p.50). In other terms, as a man he has to obey none of the oppressive restrictions confronting women; he is free to move in the public sphere, which is reserved for men, even if he loses on the personal and individual side; as he puts it: "Elle [his male condition] m’ouvre des portes et

---

13 See Chapter Four for further exploration of the gender of the voice in the narrative of L’Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée.
j'aime cela, même si elle m'enferme ensuite dans une cage de vitres." (Ibid) The metaphor of 'cage de vitres' (or sometimes referred to as 'cage de verre') is significant as it implies that the freedom deriving from his maleness is after all limited. The apparent freedom does not in reality allow him to depart from expectations of male behaviour. Therefore, he is part of the male collectivity. His freedom is, so to speak, hedged in by the norms of maleness. His individual needs cannot be expressed, since as a 'free' man he is not supposed to have any. In other words, to be a man "est une illusion et une violence que tout justifie et privilégie" (ES, p.94). Consequently, it is not surprising to see that in order to express his needs he is forced to use a woman's voice, because the latter is absent while his is already present. His voice is under the pressure of social norms which pre-ordain and castrate it. He does not have his own voice, "C'était peut-être ma propre voix qu'on m'avait confisquée" (NS, p.183). So by appropriating a woman's voice he is appropriating what is lacking, i.e. his own authentic voice. It is only through a borrowed voice that he can break certain taboos and express his tormented condition as a man.

While he is free to live his maleness, Ahmed is inhibited from expressing his femininity. Unable to cope with his ambiguity he tries to dismiss his femininity as an abnormality, and therefore as something to extract himself from. This is clear in the example of Ahmed's cousin and
wife Fatima. Her physical disability, and the epileptic seizures she is prone to, are mere metaphorical displacements for Ahmed’s consideration of his femininity as a deformity. What transpires here amounts to a battle in the author’s mind to deal with what seems to be his own ambiguity. Having expressed the existence of his femininity, he now dismisses it as repulsive and abnormal, and attempts to censor and repress it. Fatima, a personification of what he considers an abnormality, is a painful reality he is adamant to discard, "Je ne la [Fatima] supportais pas. Je désirais sa mort. Je lui en voulais d’être infirme, d’être femme, et d’être là, par ma volonté...et la haine de moi-même" (ES, p.80). This dismissal of femininity stems from what could be understood as an unconscious fear of acknowledging one’s homosexuality. When Ahmed marries Fatima, he refers to his marriage as an excuse "pour masquer une infirmité ou une perversité" (ES, p.76).

Homosexuality, like femininity, becomes a taboo that is better kept secret and unspoken. The writer condemns society for its hypocritical stand concerning homosexuality,

Parmi ceux-là qui se moquait (sic) tout à l’heure de l’homosexual anglais, j’en connais qui iraient bien en cachette lui faire l’amour ou simplement faire l’amour ensemble. Il leur est plus facile de le faire que d’en parler ou de l’écrire (ES, p.145).

Such a statement could just as well be about Moroccan
society’s attitude towards the issue of homosexuality in real life. In 1988, the literary and feminist magazine Kalima became subject to the authorities’ censorship and was eventually forced to close down. The reason for this was the publication of an extended article on homosexuals and male prostitution in Marrakesh. The article included interviews and photos. The magazine was on sale for about two days before the censorship came into force; remaining issues in kiosks and bookshops were destroyed. Similarly, Mohammed Choukri’s picaresque novel Le Pain nu, published originally in Arabic, then translated into French by Tahar Ben Jelloun and into English by Paul Bowles (under the title For Bread Alone), met the same fate some years earlier and is still banned in Morocco, simply because of its openness about homosexuality.

Ben Jelloun condemns society for its hypocrisy, and in particular the use of religion as a screen to hide behind, "Moi je les connais bien. J’ai eu affaire à eux avant. Ils invoquent la religion pour écraser et dominer" (NS, p.79). In the same way, the man who raped Zahra in the woods is portrayed as praying, thanking Allah for providing him with a young woman to satisfy his God-given sexual needs. The rape scene in La Nuit sacrée is a near repetition of a previous scene in L’Enfant de sable where, according to the narrator Salem, Zahra has been raped by Abbas. The scene is described in these words:

Un jour il [Abbas] a défoncé la porte, réveillant les filles qui tenaient compagnie à Zahra. Il les
a chassées et est resté seul avec elle. Son séroural était ouvert, d'une main il tenait son sexe, de l'autre un couteau. Il hurlait, demandait à Zahra de se laisser faire: "Par derrière, imbécile, donne-moi ton cul, c'est tout ce que tu possèdes, tu n'as pas de poitrine, et ton vagin ne m'inspire pas..." (ES, pp. 141-142).

Unlike the rape scene in La Nuit sacrée, this one obviously depicts a rape by sodomy. Abbas, along with his mother, is the owner of a circus which is more like a 'cour des miracles', where Zahra is kept against her will to perform the act of an androgynous dancer. The recurrent rape of Zahra by Abbas is sadistic and violent; however, as in La Nuit sacrée, Zahra remains passive.

Homosexuality seems to be a recurrent theme in Ben Jelloun’s writing though his exploration of the theme is highly tentative. In La plus haute des solitudes (1977), a book derived from his thesis on social psychiatry, Ben Jelloun studies the sexually-related problems of North African immigrant workers in France. On the issue of homosexuality, he states that some male impotence is related to the negated homosexual desire since the expression of such a desire is "comme une trahison de l'ordre, car il se met en marge du patriarcat et du pouvoir économique que cet ordre confère à l'homme." This statement is echoed later in the words of his fictional character Ahmed/Zahra: "J'avais fini par ne plus penser au

---

désir. Je n'y avais pas droit. Je me contentais de mes rêves délirants, peuplés de phallus, de corps d'éphèbes et de banquets vulgaires” (NS, p.137). This is a rather perplexing statement, as 'désir' and 'rêves délirants' seem synonymous; both imply the notion of wanting. To elucidate the notion of desire, Lacan founds his reasoning by distinguishing between metaphor and metonymy as the basis of the signifying chain:

(a) la substitution d'un terme à un autre pour produire l'effet de métaphore;


and he proceeds by defining desire as the metonymy of the want-to-be ("le manque à être").\footnote{Ibid, p.623.} If we apply this reasoning, we see that in Ben Jelloun’s terms "désir" slips as "rêves délirants". These "rêves délirants", are presented as a metaphor of a sexual orgy. As to "désir", it has a metonymic effect that is combined with "rêves délirants" or its metaphorical substitute ‘orgy’; a combination that lends itself to an element of perversion.

Through his androgynous character, it is the writer’s own desire which is expressed. However, it is because this desire\footnote{Jacques Lacan, Ecrits, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966, p.622.} homosexual that the writer distances himself from it. It is a desire which is not only negated but méconnu.
If acknowledged, it would lead to separation from society, rendering the person concerned an outcast. Earlier, in *L'Enfant de sable*, the writer warns the reader (and himself) of the dangers of confronting one’s desire:

Nous sommes tous victimes de notre folie enfouie dans les tranchées du désir qu’il ne faut surtout pas nommer. Méfions-nous de convoquer les ombres confuses de l’ange, celui qui porte deux visages et qui habite nos fantaisies (*ES*, p.27).

The warning is not only about the unspoken desire, but also about the hidden self which is ambivalent. It is mainly the sexual ambivalence that is at the core of the writer’s hero’s dilemma. Only defence against his ambivalence is not to recognise it, to keep it absent. Just like his analysands in *La plus haute des solitudes*, who suffer loneliness and feel cut off from the rest of society, the writer of *La Nuit sacrée* considers it better not to admit to, and thereby endorse, an ambivalent sexuality that he equates with perversion. Accordingly it is detrimental since it can lead to isolation and loneliness, "J’ai toujours su que les pervers finissent leur vie dans une solitude atroce" (*NS*, p.148). As said above, the metonymic ‘want-to-be’ of desire denotes an element of polymorphous perversion. Yet, although as Freud pointed out, the pervert permits himself what the neurotic represses, hence his calling neurosis the negative of perversion, here the repressing mechanism of the neurotic manifests itself in the subject negating and refusing to confirm his true sexuality. As a result of this, the subject could be said to indulge in a masochistic
behaviour based on auto-censorship. As Kristeva puts it:

Lorsque le langage ne se mêle pas aux pulsions, mais qu'au contraire le refoulement extrême de la multiplicité pulsionelle est exigé et/ou sa linéarisation dans le devenir du sujet unaire, alors on peut atteindre ce point culminant de l'assujettissement sous la Loi du Signifiant, où le vivant lui-même devient signe et où cesse l'action signifiante. Moment masochiste par excellence, auto-castration, mutilation finale.\[1\]

Through writing and through different methods of distanciation and displacement, the writer is able to express his internal suffering (though of course it is expressed through his character or double). The suffering is due to the internal realisation that his reality is nothing but a mask for another (absent) reality, namely his sexuality. For while assuming a strictly heterosexual attitude, his real sexuality is denied for him and by him. Through Zahra's words one could see a kind of confession from the part of the writer:

Je réalisai combien ma vie d'homme déguisé ressemblait à une prison. J'étais privée de liberté dans la mesure où je n'avais droit qu'à un seul rôle... Mon destin avait été détourné,..., ma sexualité niée (NS, p.143).

In fact, Zahra and the writer fuse into one whose deliverance can only be achieved by what is proper to a writer: writing, "Je demandai du papier et un crayon. Je voulais écrire" (NS, pp.143-144). But he finds out in the end when he says: "Mais la souffrance, celle qui fait des

trous dans la tête et dans le coeur, celle-là, on ne peut la dire, ni la montrer. Elle est intérieure, enfermée, invisible" (NS, p.184). Here, it is as if the writer is reflecting on his problem; he discovers that the act of writing is not a cure or a solution in itself, because it does not attain its goal by discussing the real issue; rather, the latter remains disguised and displaced, to the point that it is effectively pushed to one side, remaining unresolved.

Both *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* bear autobiographical elements which link very closely the writer to his characters. In a similar way to Driss Chraïbi whose mother, father and brother play the role of doubles, Tahar Ben Jelloun distances his own reality by fantasising in his writing.

In many ways the blind narrator in *L'Enfant de sable*, to whom a whole chapter entitled 'Le Troubadour aveugle' is devoted, resembles the writer himself. This chapter is crucial because it provides the reader both with the explanation of the role of the writer and with the source that is at the origin of the writing of the story of Ahmed/Zahra.

At the beginning of the chapter the blind narrator states his origins: "Qu'importe d'où je viens et je ne saurais vous dire si mes premiers pas se sont imprimés sur la boue
de la rive orientale ou de la rive occidentale du fleuve" (ES, p.171). This is in fact Tahar Ben Jelloun’s depiction of himself as someone who lives astride two countries. Ben Jelloun was born in Morocco but has been living in France for over twenty years and has French nationality.

The blindness of the narrator in ‘Le Troubadour aveugle’ is significant since it establishes links with Le Consul and Zahra. The narrator’s blindness could be understood as the writer trying to persuade the reader that he is detached from the events of his novels and therefore neutral, or that by being blind one has more insight, so to speak, into one’s surroundings. In fact, the writer’s use of the metaphorical blindness is his way of expressing the power of imagination. The blind narrator’s statement that "depuis ma cécité, je fais confiance à mes intuitions" (ES, p.172) is echoed by Zahra in La Nuit sacrée. While in prison for the murder of her uncle, Zahra deliberately puts a blindfold over her eyes so as to be close to Le Consul, who is blind. As if repeating the blind narrator’s statement, Zahra says: "La cécité...donne une clairvoyance et une lucidité remarquables sur soi et sur les rapports avec les autres" (NS, p.145). Blindness, because of its equation with darkness, becomes the tool for the inner journey into one’s dark psyche. This shared blindness is one factor which demonstrates that the three characters (the blind narrator, Le Consul and Zahra) are representative of the writer’s (self-)introspection.
A closer inspection of the blind narrator reveals more similarities with the writer. Literature and books are said to be at the centre of the blind narrator’s life. This is obviously the writer’s definition of his main activity: writing. More importantly, the reader is reminded of the fact that writing is not a reflection of the real but rather a distortion of it. This is the case mainly because of the metaphoricity of language whereby the meaning of words is slippery. Accordingly, a writer, as Ben Jelloun puts it, is "un falsificateur...le biographe de l’erreur et du mensonge" (ES, p.173). By creating characters, endowing them with a voice and specific characteristics, the writer’s own persona is put in line. And it is this persona he falsifies.

If one is to look at the relationship between Zahra and Le Consul, one would notice not only their similarities but also the division between them which makes them the unambiguous metaphors for the split self of the author. In Jungian terms, Le Consul could be regarded as the animus of the writer while the anima could be represented by Zahra. Like the blind narrator, what the writer, Zahra and Le Consul have in common is their passion for reading and writing. Zahra, when living under the name of Ahmed, makes many references to her avid reading and writing. Le Consul repeatedly speaks about his passion for poetry; Ben Jelloun is also a poet, having published many poetry collections apart from his novels, short stories and essays. When
reading or writing, Le Consul expresses his need to be with Zahra. The implicit meaning for this is not that it is the physical female presence of Zahra that is needed but rather Le Consul's (and by implication the author's) feminine other. Whether or not the writer wants the reader to understand that his sensitivity, while writing, bears a certain feminine aspect when he says, "Seule votre voix anime mon corps et j'écris" (NS, p.170), it is clear that in his introspective writing, as when he says, "Mon univers est en grande partie intérieur" (NS, p.118), he comes face to face with a reality about his character he would rather not discover: "Moi-même, il m'arrive d'avoir peur de ce que j'en sais" (Ibid), because it is the discovery of his own untamable and hidden desire, "Je suis entouré d'objets. Il y en a que je maîtrise et puis il y a tous ceux qui sont indomptables" (Ibid). To discover that one's desire, one's sexuality, is different from what is expected, leads to the need to suppress this desire; hence the metaphorical end of the relationship between Zahra and Le Consul. Le Consul, as the representative of the male side of the writer, is no longer capable of living his duality, and his ultimate solution is to mark a rupture between himself and his other, i.e. Zahra, "Je suis venu pour l'adieu et le pardon. Notre histoire était devenue impossible" (NS, p.170).

That the union between Zahra and Le Consul turns out to be impossible reflects the writer's inability to unite his divided self. The ambiguity, division and ambivalence of
the self becomes juxtaposed with the complex structure of the novel itself. Just like his novel, which has no specific and clear ending, the writer's quest for identity remains unsolved and unachieved. The novel and the self become synonymous with a labyrinth for, like the latter, their structure is endless and sinuous. For the writer, this is translated into more confusion and feelings of entrapment, "Quand je veux quitter la maison qui est un labyrinthe, je me retrouve dans une vallée, puis dans un marécage, puis dans une plaine entourée de miroirs, ainsi de suite à l'infini" (ES, p.183).

In a way that parallels Orpheus's descent into the underworld of Hades, Tahar Ben Jelloun's journey into the self is compared to hell which he describes in these words: "Cette rue étroite, rue de la honte, menait à l'abîme..., une rumeur disait qu'elle conduisait à l'enfer" (NS, p.77). Later on, the realisation that hell stems from sexual ambiguity is established. The writer’s inner turmoil is thus compared to his androgynous character who is astride two sexualities, "Ni un corps de femme plein et avide, ni un corps d'homme serein et fort; j'étais entre les deux, c'est-à-dire en enfer" (NS, p.178). Further, there seems to be a coming to terms with the recognition that his character’s turmoil could, in effect, be his; as expressed through Zahra, "L'enfer était en moi, avec son désordre, ses hallucinations et sa démence" (NS, p.181).
Writing is a reflection of the person who creates the text, and the writer’s self becomes an integral part of his work. As Ben Jelloun puts it: "Je suis poursuivi par mes propres livres" (ES, p.183), which implies that a writer can never totally detach himself from his text. Fictional writing, in this instance, is the creation of a fantasy which disguises the author’s own reality. In other words, there are elements of factuality in fiction. Who else could make, through the medium of the androgyne Ahmed/Zahra, the following statement but Tahar Ben Jelloun himself?:

Je continue de penser que toute chose est donnée à l’écrivain pour qu’il en use: le plaisir comme la douleur, le souvenir comme l’oubli. Peut-être que je finirai par savoir qui je suis. Mais cela est une autre histoire (ES, p.185).

Putting himself more into his work, he leaves no doubt as to the identity of the speaker when he writes: "Ma vie fut principalement consacrée aux livres. J’en ai écrit, publié, détruit, lu, aimé..., toute ma vie avec des livres" (ES, p.187).
From a psychoanalytical angle, both *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* could be seen as representative of the tension between subjectivity and objectivity. In an early stage, the child confuses its own reflection with others, namely the mother. His desire is also to provide the mother with what she lacks: the phallus. Later the child encounters the Law-of-the-Father, or the Symbolic Order by which the child ceases its identification with the mother by completing its subjectivity and by seeing the mother as an object. The Oedipal crisis is what marks the child’s leaving, in Lacanian terms, the Imaginary and entering the Symbolic. Thus for Lacan, subject-formation takes place by the child’s entrance into the symbolic realm of the father. This Symbolic Order is structured by laws and interdictions. In contrast, the Imaginary is associated
with the mother and it is a pre-oedipal stage. Unlike the Symbolic, the Imaginary is associated with uncontrollable desires. In short, it is regarded as chaotic and as lacking structure.

Ben Jelloun's psychiatric training shows the psychoanalytical dimension of his writing. In L'Enfant de sable, Ahmed is forced to break away from his mother and enter the ordered world of his father. The separation from the mother is traumatic. It is violent and aggressive, marked with the symbolic circumcision (since Ahmed is biologically a girl, it is actually the father's finger that has been cut and Ahmed's trousers stained with blood to show that the circumcision has been performed). The act of circumcision is in effect a castrating act as it violently breaks the links between Ahmed and his mother. Through this traumatic experience, Ahmed encounters the Law-of-the-Father whereby he enters the process of learning how to be a male, "Ahmed grandissait selon la loi du père qui se chargeait personnellement de son éducation" (ES, p.32).

Moroccan Muslims, like all other Muslims "consider circumcision necessary for proper Muslim manhood, and they mark the occasion with a dramatic rite of passage."¹ In fact, there is no mention of circumcision in the Koran. As

¹ M.E.Combs-Schilling, Sacred Performances, p.142.
it is not compulsory, it is regarded as a "sunna", which means that it is recommended and follows the tradition of the prophet. But in practice it goes beyond a mere recommendation and is deemed to be essential. In his book *La sexualité en Islam*, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba describes a Southern Sudan tribe whose members, between the wars, wanted to convert to Islam in their entirety. They contacted the Islamic University Al Azhar in Cairo enquiring about the laws, the practices and the whole procedure that would enable their islamisation. They were provided with a list, at the top of which was circumcision. The elder members of the tribe refused to undergo the mutilation and therefore the islamisation of the tribe was suspended. Whether or not this story is anecdotal, it is true that, as Bouhdiba remarks, "l'importance attribuée [...] par la presque totalité des populations musulmanes à la circoncision [...] passe pour constituer la marque par excellence de l'inclusion dans les sociétés musulmanes."\(^2\)

As such, only circumcised men (that is moslems, and not jews - the latter also practice circumcision) could be integrated in the Umma.\(^3\) Circumcision, in these terms, as Bouhdiba adds:

\[\ldots\text{est davantage une pratique des musulmans qu'une pratique de l'Islam. Entendons par là que l'aspect sociologique et les significations collectives l'emportent de toute évidence sur l'aspect sacral nettement secondaire ici. Il}\]

\(^2\) A.Bouhdiba, *La sexualité en Islam*, p.213.

\(^3\) The community of believers.
In this respect, Ahmed's fake circumcision is meant to allow him the rite of passage to manhood, most especially to be acknowledged and accepted by the male community and be an integral part of it. However, Ahmed's circumcision also means his separation from the female universe. Circumcision goes hand in hand with the consciousness of one's masculinity. In fact, the festivities and the presents circumcised boys in the moslem community are showered with are meant to highlight the privileges masculinity provides. On the contrary, all that links the boy to femininity is suppressed. It is in this context that, after circumcision, Ahmed shuns the female gender. He enjoys the privileges his masculinity offers him and despises his mother and sisters who belong, in his eyes, to the oppressed gender. The act of circumcision, though fake, supplies Ahmed with an (imaginary) phallus, which is valued and over-estimated by the community. Paradoxically, the acquisition of the phallus also means the fear of losing it through circumcision. The cutting of the prepuce is performed by a barber—a substitute of the father—so, in the male child's psyche there is the primal fear of the father who will punish him for desiring his wife by cutting off his penis. This is the basis for the oedipal complex. In Freudian terms, the female child covets what her father

\[ A.\text{Bouhdiba, } \text{La sexualité en Islam, p.222.}\]
has: the phallus; thus the daughter’s ‘penis envy’ makes her desire the father. The androgynous Ahmed/Zahra falls in both categories. The castrating sexual mutilation engenders fear of the jealous and punishing father, who is simultaneously desired for his phallus. Both on the narrative and mythical levels Ahmed/Zahra is the undesired daughter who spends her adult life searching for the reparative love of a man.

The process of growing as a man inevitably leads to the split with the mother. The mother becomes for Ahmed a negative reference. He expresses dislike of the surroundings, such as the hammam, with which he associates her. The many references to the hammam as an associative metaphor with the mother is crucial here. In many ways, it is representative of the womb. It is not the protecting and shielding womb as one might expect, but a womb that the writer describes as suffocating and oppressive, "J’étouffais dans cette vapeur épaisse et moite qui m’enveloppait" (ES, p.33).

For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language, which implies that the Imaginary is the field of ‘pré-langue’. The lack of structure of the Imaginary is somehow echoed by Ben Jelloun when he writes about the intelligibility of language in the hammam:

Les mots et phrases fusaien de partout et, comme la pièce était fermée et sombre, ce qu’elles [women] disaient était comme retenu par la vapeur et restait suspendu au-dessus de leurs têtes. Je
voyais des mots monter lentement et cogner contre le plafond humide. Là, comme des poignées de nuage, ils fondraient au contact de la pierre et retombaient en gouttelettes sur mon visage (ES, pp.33-34).

This is the description of women’s language which is made to be believed as lacking consistency hence its easy disintegration. Not only does the writer ascribe women’s language with fragility, but also expresses his content for not possessing the same discourse, "J’étais secrètement content de ne pas faire partie de cet univers si limité" (ES, p.34). But such a statement is rather contradictory. It is not so much the reader, but himself that the writer wants and needs to convince that he would rather not be associated with women’s realm; for when his protagonist Ahmed accompanies his father to the men’s hammam, he feels oppressed by the lingering silence and the lack of words. It is the male universe where order, rules and interdictions are silently imposed. In fact, as Pierre Macherey puts it, "On finit toujours par retrouver, momentanément occulté, mais éloquent par cette absence même, le langage de l'idéologie."5

So, as a way of taking revenge on the patriarchal order which imposes rules upon him, Ahmed uses patriarchy’s own means, namely silence, to transgress the taboos. The irony here is that, as a man, Ahmed is allowed the power of

speech and expression; nevertheless, he opts for silence instead. As religion is the fundamental precept of patriarchy, it becomes for Ahmed the prime target in expressing his silent transgression of the sacred and taboo. In the mosque, he retains his individuality by refusing to comply with the collective spirit,


This pattern continues in La Nuit sacrée in the episode when Ahmed's father dies, and Ahmed/Zahra has to lead the ceremonial prayer for the dead. Again, it is in silence that violation of the established rule takes place,

A la grande mosquée, je fus, bien sûr, désignée pour diriger la prière sur le mort. Je le fis avec une joie intérieure et un plaisir à peine dissimulés. Une femme prenait peu à peu sa revanche sur une société d'hommes sans grande consistance...En me prosternant, je ne pouvais m'empêcher de penser au désir bestial que mon corps -mis en valeur par cette position- susciterait en ces hommes s'ils savaient qu'ils priaient derrière une femme (NS, p.36).

As the narrative voice here is Zahra's, we note that, as if speaking to the reader, Zahra has no hesitation in revealing her gender. In S/Z, Roland Barthes states that "le récit dramatique est un jeu à deux partenaires: le leurre et la vérité" (p.194), which is relevant to Ben Jelloun's discourse. His narrative seems to include the deceit which is meant to keep Zahra's real gender hidden from those who evolve around her. The reader, however, is allowed to know the truth. Zahra's true gender is revealed through a written discourse which is aimed at the reader, allowing the latter to recognise the feminine identity of the narrator through grammatical agreements of the auxiliary "être" and past participles, as in the example: "je fus...désignée" in this passage. As such, the reader is made an accomplice to the imposture.
It is thus through the unspoken, and the imaginative, that Ben Jelloun's character, and subsequently Ben Jelloun himself, breaks religious and social norms.

The split with the mother and the identification with a male figure leads to the hero's total rejection of the mother as a good mother. Hence women's association with deformities in both novels under study. They are either referred to as absences (which is a close reminder of Lacan's notion of lack) or as monstrous creatures (the mother, L'Assise, and Oum-Abbas all bear characteristics in common with the devilish Harrouda). Kristeva's notion of the 'abject' is the mechanism enabling the child to split from the pre-oedipal mother. Viewing the pre-oedipal mother as an 'abject' implies that she becomes an object of fear from which the child needs to dissociate itself if it is to create its own self. In L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée, the patterning of women as monsters and pre-oedipal mothers creates fear in the protagonist, who is torn

---

7 It is crucial to point out here that, in his concern to express his protagonist's revenge against her male-ruled society, Ben Jelloun commits a crucial mistake by describing Zahra prostrating as she was leading the prayer for the dead. Unlike the other five prayers in Islam, the prayer for the dead does not include prostration - it is performed entirely in a standing posture.

8 For Kristeva, the rupture of the relationship mother/child occurs when the child enters Lacan's patriarchal Symbolic. The child's identification with the father, who enters the oedipal triangle, results in the child's rejection of the mother as unworthy (even repulsive). This is the process of the mother's abjectification; in language, the mother as 'abject' is something that is repressed in order to allow the child's normal progression. Once the child's entrance into the Symbolic Order is completed, the mother is represented as an object allowing the love-hate relationship to be established.
between the chaotic and fragmented pre-oedipal mother and the structured and organised Law-of-the-Father. Ahmed has to establish his masculine self; to achieve this, he must repudiate the bond with his mother. As Anthony Elliott puts it, "Boys must deny their primary bond to female eroticism, repressing their own femininity permanently into the unconscious". To achieve this, it is the mother who helps the boy to assert himself, and to realise that he is different from her. In L'Enfant de sable, Ahmed is prevented by his mother from relating to her. He is told not to regard his sisters as his equals, and it is forbidden for him to imitate his mother by putting henna on his hair, since "c'est réservé aux filles!" (ES, p.33).

However, denigrating the pre-oedipal mother results in the child feeling guilt and sorrow. As a remedy for this outcome the 'abject' mother is split, in Kleinian terms, into the 'good' and the 'bad' mother. Thus, the mother's body becomes the receptacle of good and bad part-objects over which the child fantasises. In Freudian terms, the child's investment in the mother's part-objects stems from the concept of life and death instincts. The mother's breasts, as part-objects, illustrate the child's process of projection and introjection. As explained by Elizabeth Wright:

Projection is a process whereby states of feeling

---

and unconscious wishes are expelled from the self and attributed to another person or thing. Introjection is a process whereby qualities that belong to an external object are absorbed and unconsciously regarded as belonging to the self. The infant thus creates an ideal object for itself by getting rid of all bad impulses from itself and taking in all it perceives as good from the object.  

L'Assise and Oum-Abbas are both substitutes for the 'bad' mother. They are presented as threatening figures and castrating agents. The mother, along with her attributes, can be understood here to epitomise the notion of the 'combined parent', as discussed by Melanie Klein in her essay "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict" (1928):

This dread of the mother is so overwhelming because there is combined with it an intense dread of castration by the father. The destructive tendencies whose object is the womb are also directed with their full oral- and anal-sadistic intensity against the father's penis, which is supposed to be located there. It is upon this penis that the dread of castration by the father is focused in this phase. Thus the femininity-phase is characterized by anxiety relating to the womb and the father's penis, and this anxiety subjects the boy to the tyranny of a super-ego which devours, dismembers and castrates and is formed from the image of father and mother alike.

Klein's conception of the 'combined parent' expresses the child's fantasised representation of the parents as inseparable, in the sense that the mother contains the


father's penis and the father contains the mother's breasts. Such representation is a source of anxiety in the child who sees the mother as castrator since she contains the bad part-objects he fears. In this respect, the mother's substitutes possess phallic powers which, for the protagonist Ahmed/Zahra, act as a reminder of the patriarchal society of which he/she is a victim. Ahmed/Zahra's encounter with L'Assise is summed up in these words: "Ce fut le ton sec de L'Assise qui me rappela mon père" (NS, p.69). In fact, the similarities between L'Assise and Oum-Abbas are so striking that they could easily represent the same character. Both possess an imposing stature, often display a bad temper, and are unkind in their treatment of Ahmed/Zahra. Further both are labelled 'witch', an appellation which associates them closely with another character, Harrouda, from an earlier novel of Ben Jelloun.

The breasts, as phallic bad part-objects, strike fear in the heart of the protagonist of La Nuit sacrée. When describing L'Assise, he stresses that "Elle a de gros seins qui font peur aux enfants" (NS, pp.69-70).Significantly enough, one can regard the writer as unconsciously attributing the bad part-objects, not to the mother, but by a detour to her substitute or double. In so doing he lessens his sense of guilt towards the mother by not targeting her directly, thus keeping the image of the good mother undivided and intact. Beside the breasts, other
female parts, such as genitalia, are regarded as monstrous. Woman's vagina is thus referred to as "un vagin avec des dents" (NS, pp. 76-77). This classic 'vagina dentata' imago implies that its function is to inflict pain by cutting, destroying and (obviously) by castrating. To emphasise the monstrous connotation of the vagina as a 'man-eater' organ, the writer enumerates and provides the reader with a comprehensive list of metaphorical appellations attributed to the female sexual parts:

L'huis, la bénéédiction, la fissure, la miséricorde, le mendiant, le logis, la tempête, la source, le four, le difficile, la tente, le chaud, la coupole, la folie, l'exquis, la joie, la vallée, le rebelle...(NS, p. 77).

These various appellations deprive the word vagina of its original meaning. As such the first meaning is lost to the variations which unveil man's definition of the female sex: it is regarded either as a source of man's sexual pleasure as is understood in the choice of words such as 'la bénéédiction', 'la miséricorde', 'la joie' etc., or as an object of desire whose destructive and aggressive nature is aimed at man as it is implied in metaphors such as 'la tempête', 'la folie', 'le rebelle' etc.

For Ahmed/Zahra (and implicitly for the writer), women's sexual parts are repulsive part-objects. By gazing at women's nudity in the hammam, he/she provides the
following account:

J’avais tout le temps pour me promener comme un diable entre les cuisses de toutes les femmes. J’avais peur de glisser ou de tomber. Je m’accrochais à ces cuisses étalées et j’entrevoyais tous ces bas-ventres charnus et poilus. Ce n’était pas beau. C’était même dégoûtant...Je ne pouvais pas être comme elles...C’était pour moi une dégénérescence inadmissible (ES, p.36).

As repulsive bad part-objects, women’s genitalia become the means by which the narrator projects and expels his unconscious wishes, translated here by the desire not to identify with the rest of the female gender.

In counterpoint, female part-objects also contain the ego’s libidinal desire. As such, the mother’s breast is regarded as a source of food and as a protector. In Kleinian theory, this is referred to in the study of the paranoid-schizoid position whereby the mother’s breasts are split into good and bad parts. In the ‘depressive position’, the child realises that his fantasised attacks are aimed at his mother; he therefore feels sorrow and guilt. To remedy these feelings the child turns to the mother’s breasts for nourishment and protection. Accordingly, one could see why Le Consul (a substitute for the writer) turns to his sister L’Assise (a substitute for the mother) for protection and comfort when in a state of fear and confusion:

Je me suis précipitée dans sa chambre et l’ai always in a sitting position screened by buckets of water) before their final wash, and then put towels around themselves.
trouvé [Le Consul] en pleurs comme un gosse. Il pleurait et ne savait pas pourquoi. Pour la première fois depuis notre vie commune, il me parla de notre mère. Il était persuadé qu'elle était en vie et qu'elle allait nous rendre visite. Je l'ai pris dans mes bras, je l'ai bercé, comme un bébé, je lui ai donné le sein. Il s'est endormi sans détacher ses lèvres de mon sein (NS, p.112).

This, of course, is directly linked to the oedipal complex, whereby the primitive dead father haunts his sons, returning to punish them for stealing his women. The father becomes thus a threatening persecutor, triggering the child's need for protection and security in the mother's bosom.

The child's need for the mother's breast stems from the former's libidinal desire to win the mother over the father. In _La Nuit sacrée_, this shows in the seemingly incestuous relation between L'Assise and Le Consul when they bathe in the hammam. The scene, as witnessed by Zahra, is altogether perplexing and unusual:


The breast becomes an object of desire through which Le
Consul's sexual fantasies are fulfilled. The location of the scene of incest -the hammam- operates as a metaphorical representation of the mother's womb; this is a critical point since it highlights the sexual connotation. Also, the fulfilment of such fantasies cannot be achieved unless the father-persecutor is removed from the scene. In so doing the triangle mother-father-son is shaped according to its oedipal structure.

Ahmed/Zahra's father, whose intervention altered the natural course of the protagonist's identity, dies on the twenty-seventh day of Ramadan, a sacred night for moslems during which it is believed that one's destiny is sealed. The father's death symbolises Zahra's rebirth, the re-establishment of her female identity. Her rebirth is enhanced by the blooming spring season, which begins as the father dies. For Zahra it is the beginning of a new life, "Je voulus alors être du printemps" (NS, p.35), and the realisation that the powerful restrictions forced on her by her father no longer exist, as she claims vociferously, "Je suis vivante...vivante!...Mon âme est revenue. Elle crie à l'intérieur de ma cage thoracique. Je suis vivante...vivante!" (NS, p.46).

In a scene quite reminiscent of another in La Civilisation, ma mère!..., though rather more macabre in La Nuit sacrée, Zahra opens up her father's grave in order to bury with him the clothes and possessions which link her to her twenty
years of life under a male identity. To accomplish the act and murder the father, Zahra ties a knot around the dead father's neck with the bandages she had to wear so as to flatten her growing breasts. This vengeful attack is later repeated in the murder of her uncle. The uncle, as the double figure of her father, symbolises here the return of the haunting father, whom she has to kill once again to preserve her freedom. It is only by acting in this way that she can finalise her rupture with the restraining and powerful Law-of-the-Father. As she herself states:


However, despite the symbolic murder of the father and the rupture with the domineering power he entails, Ben Jelloun's androgynous character fails to achieve unity of the self he/she seeks. What emerges from Ahmed/Zahra's battle with the Symbolic Order is a rather fragmented self. This fragmentation is due to the omnipresence of the father-persecutor.

The fear of the castrating father can be traced back to what seems like a traumatic experience for Ahmed when, as a child, he witnessed his parents having intercourse. The relevant passage, which is here quoted at length, reveals this castration-anxiety:

Il m'est arrivé d'entrevoir mon père, habillé, le
séroual baissé, donnant à ma mère la semence blanche; il est baissé sur elle, ne disant rien; elle, gémissant à peine. J'étais petit et j'ai gardé cette image que j'ai retrouvée plus tard chez les animaux de notre ferme. J'étais petit et pas dupe. Je savais la couleur blanchâtre de la semence pour l'avoir vue dans le hammam des hommes. J'étais petit et cela me dégoûtait. J'avais entrevu cette scène ridicule ou comique, je ne sais plus, et j'étais inconsolable. Ma tristesse ne me laissait aucun répit. Je courais pour oublier cette image ou l'enterrer dans la terre, sous un amas de pierres. Mais elle revenait, agrandie, transformée, agitée. Mon père était dans une position de plus en plus ridicule, gesticulant, balançant ses fesses flasques, ma mère entourant son dos avec ses jambes agiles, hurlant, et lui la frappant pour la faire taire, elle, criait encore plus fort, lui riait, ces corps mêlés étaient grotesques et moi, tout petit, assis sur le bord du lit, tellement petit qu'ils ne pouvaient pas me voir, petit mais réceptif, cloué par une espèce de colle très forte de la même couleur que la semence qu'éjecte mon père sur le ventre de ma mère, j'étais tout petit et collé sur le bois au bord du lit qui bougeait et grinçait; mes yeux étaient plus grands que mon visage; mon nez avait pris toutes les odeurs; j'étouffais; je toussais et personne ne m'entendait...J'essayai de me décoller, de me lever et de courir vomir et me cacher...Je tirai et je n'arrivai pas à bouger..., je tirai et m'accrochai, laissant sur le morceau de bois la peau de mes fesses..., je courais, mon derrière en sang, je courais en pleurant, dans un bois à la sortie de la ville, j'étais petit, et je sentais que l'énorme membre de mon père me poursuivait, il me rattrapa et me ramena à la maison...Je respirai, je respirai encore..., toutes ces images sont loin à présent... (ES, pp.102-103).

The patriarchal phallus is placed here at the origin of the child's anguish which develops with the castration complex. The father's penis is the pursuer and violator of the good mother, an image which creates fear in the child who subsumes that his parents's copulation happens under the concept of violence and persecution. Sex and sexuality are
often, if not always, linked to violence in Ben Jelloun's writing. In Freudian analysis the penis-anxiety is in the nature of a fantasy. Accordingly, the father's penis pursuing the child in the woods, as described in the passage quoted above, is fantasmagorically linked with the scene of the rape in La Nuit sacrée, which is also located in the forest. Further, one could even hypothesise as to whether such a scene could have been a relived experience.

The tensions in the position of the protagonist of L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée, which stem from the omnipresence of the castrating father and the absence of the caring mother, lead to the former's incapacity to unite and organise his/her self. Ahmed/Zahra's decentered subjectivity leads inevitably to a nihilistic solution. In the final chapter of La Nuit sacrée, Zahra leaves the world of reality and enters a more mystical and unreal world. A foggy atmosphere is used here as a theatrical device to mark the transition from one world to the other:

Je marchais lentement le long de la plage déserte. J'avancais dans la brume. Je ne voyais pas plus loin que quelques mètres. En regardant en arrière j'avais l'impression d'être cernée par une ceinture de brume, enveloppée d'un voile blanc qui me séparait du reste du monde (NS, p.187).

In effect, not only does the fog metaphorically suggest the separating screen between life and death but also signifies the white shroud with which it is customary for moslems to
dress their dead, as implied in the sentence "enveloppée d'un voile blanc."

The protagonist's achievement of unity is thus made possible only by death, which is symbolised by a heavenly light, "Tout d'un coup, une lumière forte, presque insoutenable, descendit du ciel...Elle chassa la brume. J'étais comme nue" (NS, pp.187-188). Zahra realises that (ironically) only in death can she gain a clearer insight into her identity:

Tout devenait clair dans mon esprit. Je pensais qu'entre la vie et la mort il n'y avait qu'une très mince couche faite de brume ou de ténèbres, que le mensonge tissait ses fils entre la réalité et l'apparence, le temps n'étant qu'une illusion de nos angoisses (NS, p.189).

It is therefore on a thoroughly nihilistic point that *La Nuit sacrée*, as well as Ahmed/Zahra's duality and ambiguity, ends. Ben Jelloun's inability to provide his protagonist, and by complementarity himself, with a united self resides in the underlying impossibility for such unity to happen. Consequently, opting for nihilism is the only answer that Ben Jelloun can offer to the dilemma of the fragmentation of the self.
Chapter Five
THE APPROPRIATION OF THE FEMALE VOICE

This chapter will examine the manner in which the female voice is represented (or rather misrepresented) in Moroccan male writing. Early francophone Moroccan literature, epitomized by Driss Chraïbi's *Le Passé Simple*, revolves understandably around the theme of protest against the patriarchal order. That order conveys a dual meaning: on the one hand, the protest is directed against the father as the powerful master of the family unit; on the other, it is aimed at French colonialism which disguises itself as a 'protectorate', i.e. as the protecting father. In both cases, to put across his message and to highlight the patriarchal oppression, the writer often portrays the woman as the prime, even the 'ideal', victim of oppression. The reader's attention and sympathy are drawn to the plight of
the enslaved and suffering woman; in return, the reader applauds the writer for bringing the woman out of the shadows and providing her with a voice. The writer is praised for denouncing patriarchy and a system which discriminates against women. However, the writer’s discourse, like any other discourse, is not innocent. In essence, writing is narcissistic, since it implies a certain self-reflection through words; and words are unreliable because of their metaphoricity. As such, the language used by the writer to expose the plight of woman is misleading, insofar as woman is used as a metaphor for the conscious or unconscious concerns of the one who deploys it.

Metaphor, according to Derrida exists "dans la mesure où quelqu’un est supposé manifester par une énonciation telle pensée qui elle-même reste inapparente, cachée ou latente".¹ Through the study of the female as metaphor, one can begin to disclose the way in which the writer uses woman’s voice as a displacement of his own quest for identity, his attempt to find his true self.² Unfortunately, contrary to the explicit aim of the writer, the metaphorical displacement leads towards a better knowledge of the writer’s self and his achievement of

¹ Jacques Derrida, "La mythologie blanche" in Poétique, No. 5, 1971, p.20
² Note how, in Appendix Two, Ben Jelloun displays a negative, dismissive attitude in answering questions. Such an attitude is in itself a compulsive tendency towards displacement.
subjectivity, rather than knowledge of the position of woman.

Tahar Ben Jelloun’s most prominent novels -Harrouda, L’Enfant de sable and its sequel La Nuit sacrée- are the focus of this study, most notably for their seeming concern with "the woman question". Harrouda is claimed to be autobiographical. It is rather complex, ambiguous and plotless. Its cover defines Harrouda as a "roman-poème" which makes the work even more ambiguous for it does not seem to correspond to any of these genres. Marc Gontard refers to it as "un itinéraire sémio-lyrique" in an attempt to ascribe it to a given genre. From its very title, it is clear that Harrouda revolves around a woman. In the mind of every Moroccan, the mythical name Harrouda connotes a prostitute and marginal who breaks all taboos.

In her essay, "Onomastique et personnages féminins", Rhita Iraqi writes:

Un nom que donne Ben Jelloun à l’un de ses personnages féminins pose problème, il s’agit de Harrouda. À l’opposé des noms qu’on vient de citer, celui-ci n’existe pas dans l’état civil. Par ailleurs, étymologiquement il ne signifie rien. Pour le comprendre, il faut se référer à la culture marocaine: dans le langage familier, il est utilisé en tant que qualificatif pour désigner toute femme de "mauvaise vie" qui traîne dans les rues. C’est certainement ce sens qui a incité Ben Jelloun à nommer son personnage Harrouda [...] Chez Ben Jelloun, le choix du nom est antiphrastique: son intention morale dans l’attribution de ce nom se sépare de celle de l’opinion publique, et ce qui est considéré comme

---

négatif est magiquement transformé pour devenir positif.*

It is not true, however, that the negative association of the name ‘Harrouda’ is the sole reason behind Ben Jelloun’s choice. Harrouda, in psychoanalytical terms, is the pre-oedipal and ‘abject’ mother who is omnipresent in the child’s unconscious, and who is seen as a threat to the patriarchal system.® We note how, in Harrouda, children view the ‘woman-demon’ as the source of gratification of their libidinal desires, and how their parents try to prevent such gratification by sending them to the Coranic school:

Nos rêves allaient prendre une nouvelle dimension. La disparition de Harrouda coïncida avec l’acquisition d’un langage neuf. Les mots étaient relégués au second plan. Le corps devint notre première parole sensée. Ce discours allait semer le trouble chez le vieil homme et ébranler l’enceinte de la petite mosquée (H, pp.20-21).

The repression of the Imaginary, symbolised here by Harrouda, is made by and in favour of the Symbolic Order, represented here by ‘le vieil homme’ as the guardian of the

---


5 Harrouda, or Aïcha Kandisha (as she is often called), is a mythical ogress in the collective Moroccan mind. While for women she is a source of help, for men she represents a demon who appears to them in the form of a beautiful young woman, and seduces them. Once sexual intercourse has taken place, she resumes her original form, that of a repulsive old woman. Men who fall into Aïcha Kandisha’s trap are said to become impotent. Aïcha Kandisha is, in this respect, the perfect archetypal figure of the castrating mother.
phallocentric patriarchal system. However, the repressed Imaginary is a constant threat to the Symbolic for, as we can see in the above quotation, it is a discourse which threatens to "semer le trouble chez le vieil homme", and to shake the foundations of patriarchal language. But as an 'abject', Harrouda is relegated to the unconscious, "Elle surveille notre sommeil et préside nos rêves" (H, p.14); the Coranic school with its Symbolic Order is there to repress her presence, and to teach children to "découvrir le mensonge sacratisé" (H, p.23).

Harrouda's repulsiveness is described by Ben Jelloun in such a way that the reader is presented with the portrait of a monstrosity. Harrouda is said to be half human, half devil. It is mostly her 'devilish' facets that are prominent in the novel. On first encountering Harrouda, the reader learns that she has the inhuman ability to walk through walls. From time to time she is referred to as a spider-woman, and often she is located in filthy environments such as "Oued Boukhrareb" (sewage canal). Ben Jelloun's (and the collective Moroccan mind's) association of Harrouda with such environments is very suggestive as, in terms of psychoanalysis, it refers us to the cloacal theory of birth. According to Freud in his essay "On the Sexual Theories of Children" (1908c), infants of both sexes ignore the distinction between the vagina and the anus. Accordingly, the mother, like many animals, is believed to have only one orifice which serves to expel both babies and
excrement. However, in the paranoid position, as studied by Klein, Harrouda could be regarded as the dead object the child internalises and equates with faeces. Harrouda, as the substitute for the bad mother, is at the level of the Oedipus conflict, a fearsome and castrating agent who is equated for containing the faeces, the father's penis and by implication the child's penis. Harrouda, we are told, "serre la tête des enfants entre ses cuisses. Les os craquent, se dissolvent. Un liquide blanchâtre dégouline sur [ses] jambes" (H, p.15). Like Harrouda who "vient répandre ses excréments dans les ruelles noires" (H, p.16) the writer spreads his ink over the pages. In relation to the cloacal theory, ink is equated with the cloaca; it is a mark of dirt and smearing. Clay, paint and ink are all, in this context, 'dirty' artistic products which are used to produce a permanence. The notion of dirt is also closely linked to the theme of the prostitute as is the case for Harrouda. Bouhdiba proposes the following hypothesis which links the prostitute to the mother:

La prostituée dans cette initiation à l'amour n'est que le substitut de la mère. Dans une société qui exalte le désir et le freine elle seule peut transcender les tabous, violer les interdits et les assouvir. Dans une société où le regard est souvent pécheur, où le voile soustrait à la vue les formes en les déformant, la prostituée propose la nudité intégrale. Elle est double promesse de liberté: vis-à-vis des contraintes sociales et vis-à-vis des contraintes du désir. Le rôle de la prostitution est d'apaiser les tensions, de dépasser les angoisses et d'intégrer, sur le mode de l'ambiguïté, les franges de la sexualité.®

® A.Bouhdiba, La sexualité en Islam, p.238.
Indeed, Harrouda is the substitute for the incestuous mother. By gratifying the libidinal desire of the child at the level of the Oedipal conflict, the prostitute lessens the child’s sense of guilt and allows the image of the good mother to remain unblemished. It is a kind of valorisation of the mother at the expense of her other, the prostitute, who is devalorised. The prostitute is depicted as inferior, not only in terms of morality but also in her physical appearance. In Ben Jelloun’s narrative Harrouda is described as "laide", "sale", and "ses seins pèsent et pendent". We also understand that her sexual parts are inhumanly out of proportion. There are many other similar descriptions. In effect, this tells us more about Ben Jelloun’s patriarchal inheritance than anything else: female characters are generally described according to their appearance, whereas male characters are portrayed according to their spiritual faculties.

Ben Jelloun’s male characters are almost never described physically. What is highlighted is their hypocrisy and manipulation of the weak; Ben Jelloun, on the face of it, seems to speak for the weak. The mother (with her monstrous double one can detect in Harrouda) has weaknesses and the narrator thinks of it as his duty to bring them to light. The very fact of giving a voice to the mother is patronising; implicitly, it reduces the mother to the child’s status, implying that she is incapable of ‘voicing’ herself. In the chapter entitled "Entretien avec ma mère", 
the narrator deplores the condition of the voiceless and oppressed mother, and like a saviour he uses his eloquence to give her a voice. Unfortunately, that is where the problem lies. The voice he gives her cannot be considered hers, as it bears the indelible stamp of a language that belongs to the narrator himself. He, so to speak, puts words into the mother’s mouth and pretends she is the one who confides in her son by telling him about her previous two miserable marriages. Obviously this is what authors do; however, could anyone imagine a woman confiding in her son in the following words?

La nuit, après m’avoir pénétrée, il me tournait le dos et reprenait son chapelet et ses prières [...] Dès qu’il se mettait au lit, j’ouvrais mes jambes et j’attendais. Quand il éteignait la lampe, il me prenait les jambes, les déposait sur ses épaules et me pénétrait en silence (H, p.68).

One could go on quoting passages such as this, for Harrouda (as well as some other works by Ben Jelloun) is rich with what struck readers as deviations and sexual tastes. In fact "Entretien avec ma mère" greatly angered the Moroccan literary milieu. The extent of that anger is epitomized by Mohammed Boughali’s vociferous attack on Ben Jelloun in a chapter entitled "Tahar Ben Jelloun, ou la plus basse des impostures":

Il convient de faire remarquer que c’est essentiellement à travers une sexualité très mal vécue et imposée comme une tare que l’auteur évoque sa mère à qui il attribue sans le moindre scrupule des témoignages et des plaintes qu’aucune Marocaine dans le contexte traditionnel
It seems that Ben Jelloun not only failed his mother-character, but he also failed the rest of her gender. Boughali goes even further in his attack on Ben Jelloun by labelling him "l'amuseur exotique" whose writing is designed for a certain French audience which yearns for the extraordinary and the exotic (even if the truth is left far behind).

Ben Jelloun has surely done more harm than good by his appropriation of the Moroccan female voice. His embodiment of the female voice has only engraved more deeply in the global mind a certain image of the Moroccan woman in particular, and the moslem woman in general. He has contributed to and helped to reinforce certain clichés and stereotypes. Faced with the suggestion that he does not, as is supposed to be believed, provide women with a voice to express their condition, and that instead he uses and appropriates the female voice (the voice of absence) in order to formulate his own latent needs, Ben Jelloun provides a rather contradictory answer. While stating that he does not appropriate anyone's voice, "je m'introduis dans ce personnage pour parler par sa voix", which is exactly what happens in the case of the mother in Harrouda,


8 See Appendix Two, p.236.
he adds: "ce serait par exemple le cas si j'empruntais une voix réelle existante et que je disais que c'est ma voix." What Ben Jelloun does not seem to recognize is that he appropriates a female voice, whether in reality or fiction, and it is the essence of this gendered voice which is real. He infiltrates, so to speak, the mother whose voice is absent, and uses this absence to express his voice. While vigorously denying his appropriation of the female voice, Ben Jelloun nonetheless contradicts his own denial by stating that "ce qui est d'abord fascinant dans l'écriture c'est de parler par la voix des autres tout en étant soi-même." In other words, he as a man has the privilege to have his own voice and the added opportunities and possibilities to use other voices (female as is mostly the case) as means of expression. What is at stake here is not so much his voice but others. Unlike men, women's voices are quietened and silenced and, also unlike men, there are no other voices available for them.

At first glance, the language Ben Jelloun uses might sound "feminine", but in reality it is rooted in the norms of patriarchy. It tells you one thing while meaning something else. For instance, in *Harrouda*, in the scene of the hammam (public bath), where the narrator, as a young boy, is allowed to enter with his mother, we witness what seems

---

9 Ibid.

like female bonding. Talking to her son about the hammam sessions, the mother says: "On se faisait des confidences, on se racontait ses malheurs. On découvrait l’amitié. Il était difficile pour nous de garder le silence" (H, p.77). Unfortunately, this female bonding is distorted by the writer, whose aim is to provide his target audience with oriental erotica. Thus the hammam becomes the scene where women, like in the famous 19th-century painting of Ingres, fondule each other, suggesting thus that they indulge in sexual acts with each other.

In her work, Hélène Cixous opposes writing to speech, and in so doing she relies mostly on Derrida’s notion that speech conveys a phallic truth. Accordingly she urges women to produce an "écriture féminine", a feminine writing that is free from phallocentrism -that is, a language based on and governed by the phallus:

Il faut que la femme s’écrive: que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l’écriture, dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu’elles l’ont été de leurs corps; pour les mêmes raisons, par la même loi, dans le même but mortel. Il faut que la femme se mette au texte -comme au monde et à l’histoire- de son propre mouvement.  

In order to do this, Cixous lines up in La jeune née the following list of binary oppositions in order to illustrate

what she calls the "patriarchal binary thought":

Activité/Passivité
Soleil/Lune
Culture/Nature
Jour/Nuit
Père/Mère
Tête/sentiment
Intelligible/sensible
Logos/Pathos

Such oppositions are based on and follow the Aristotelian social hierarchies:

Greek/Barbarian
Master/Slave
Man/Woman
Husband/Wife
Mind/Body
Reason/Emotion
Human/Animal

According to Cixous's hierarchical binary oppositions, language seems to be endlessly underlaid by the opposing couple male/female, which is evaluated as positive/negative. In these terms femininity is equated with passivity. Cixous's "écriture féminine" is thus an effort to subvert the language of patriarchy which is meant to oppress and silence women.

As I have argued, Ben Jelloun's writing seems to do just that. However, a close analysis of his use of metaphors shows that, far from being "féminine", his writing, in

---


fact, only appropriates femininity in an attempt to explore and achieve his self-truth. Contrary to what the reader is asked to believe, femininity is not celebrated but is used to assert and redress masculinity. On the whole, Ben Jelloun's use and appropriation of femininity tends to reduce the latter to a mere signifier for his own conflictual situation. As Andrea Nye puts it:

In a doubling of self, the male subject creates the possibility of representing an object and an imaginary universe of symbols. In language he can live another kind of existence regulated by desire that has nothing to do with physical need. Out of this redoubling, a syntax and a semantics can be articulated and an existence created in which women are no longer the needed, but not always available, warmth of the maternal presence, but a sign, in fact the sign, that provides the contrast necessary for meaning.¹⁵

In this respect, the mother and the prostitute in Harrouda (along with Zahra in L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée) are voices Ben Jelloun incorporates to his language in order to confront not so much the 'woman question' but the 'man question'. Women are in this way the necessary sign against which the male self is defined.

Ben Jelloun's attempt to speak for the mother is far from liberating. As an alert writer he recognises that the mother speaks through the voice of the narrator, "Cette prise de la parole est peut-être illusoire puisqu'elle s'énonce dans le langage de l'Autre. Mais le plus important

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.208-209.
Ben Jelloun's (re)presentation of women and their voice carries over to *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée*. These two novels tell the story of a father who yearns for a son in order to perpetuate his male lineage. However, when his wife gives birth to her eighth child, it turns out to be yet another girl. The father, alongside the obedient wife, decides to conceal the real identity of the child from the rest of the family and from the community. The child is given the name of Ahmed and everything is done to suppress her female identity. Ahmed is brought up in such a way that he/she learns not to cry or show any signs of emotions -for only girls do that- and has to wear firm bandages to conceal her growing breasts. Twenty years later, Ahmed becomes Zahra and regains her original identity.

The theme of the androgyne can be understood better if we consider Barthes's *S/Z*, where he provides a structural study of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*. In this study he analyses the phonetic sound of the letter 's' in the second syllable of the patronym Sarrasine. This letter 's' is phonetically pronounced /z/; a 'cutting' sound Barthes equates with castration:
174

Z est la lettre de la mutilation: phonétiquement Z est cinglant à la façon d'un fouet châtier, d'un insecte érinnyque; graphiquement, jeté par la main, en écharpe, à travers la blancheur égale de la page, parmi les rondeurs de l'alphabet, comme un tranchant oblique et illégal, il coupe, il barre, il zèbre [...]. Ce Z [...]. est la lettre de la déviance [...]. Z est la lettre inaugurale de la Zambinella, l'initiale de la castration [...]. Sarrasine reçoit le Z zambinellien selon sa véritable nature, qui est la blessure du manque.¹⁶

There seems to be a striking analogy between the Barthesian S/Z and the Ben Jellounian A/Z (Ahmed/Zahra). Firstly, one can look at A/Z as an indication of the first and last letters of the alphabet. The predicament of the androgynous Ahmed/Zahra is presented as a journey for self-discovery in terms of a social and especially sexual identity. This journey is illustrated by the length between the letters 'A' and 'Z' of the alphabet. The initial 'A' of Ahmed is the metaphorical beginning of the protagonist's quest, a quest that will be achieved when the end –that is 'Z'– is reached. As obvious as it is, there is no other letter after 'Z'; and as will be discussed later, the protagonist's quest meets with failure and the selfhood remains unachieved and elusive. As such the 'Z' of Zahra is the letter of a deadlock, of frustration and closure. Also, like the zambinellian 'Z', the initial of the castrato, Zahra's 'Z' is for Ahmed the lacking feminine. As a "lettre de la déviance", it diverges the masculine and the feminine, creating a state of censorship. In Moroccan

Arabic 'Z' is the inaugural letter of the word 'zamel' (meaning 'gay', homosexual), and in the Moroccan collective mind homosexuality is linked to femininity. Accordingly, the 'Z' of Zahra is the letter of the feminine sexual identity that the patriarchal system represses and quietens.

Yet again, as in Harrouda, we encounter an ambiguous character with an ambiguous sexuality. One could possibly draw a parallel between the character Ahmed and the writer for they both enjoy writing and story-telling. When asked if there were elements of autobiography in L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée, Ben Jelloun replied:

> Ce qu'il y aurait d'autobiographique... c'est ce problème d'ambiguïté et d'ambivalence sur deux cultures et sur deux langues, comme lui [Ahmed] il est sur deux sexes, deux univers. Je pense aussi que l'écrivain vit cette espèce de double; l'intérieur et l'extérieur... Je ne sais pas si dans mon cas l'intérieur c'est la langue arabe, et l'extérieur c'est la langue française.  

It is interesting here to see Ben Jelloun transposing sexuality to culture by referring to Arabic as his inner double. Arabic is his mother-tongue, yet it is a language in which he is unable to write and express himself. In

---

17 The phrase 'mrioua' ('little woman') is often used in Moroccan Arabic to designate a homosexual. 'Mrioua' is strictly used for a homosexual to differentiate him from 'mra' ('woman'), that is a woman in the biological sense. The belittling adjective 'little' incorporated in 'mrioua' is meant to qualify the homosexual as a defective woman, and as of a lesser status than woman.

fact, as a mother-tongue, Arabic is for him inhibiting. Taboo subjects, such as sexuality, are prone to censorship in Arabic; in a borrowed language inhibitions and censorship are lessened. To borrow Assia Djebar’s expressions, Arabic is Ben Jelloun’s "langue maternelle" which is continuously being suppressed by and in favour of French which is his "langue paternelle". On another level, we could look at these linguistic opposites as being representative of the tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In the texts of Ben Jelloun the Imaginary reveals itself in metaphors on and about women, to the point of becoming a network of obsessive metaphors. According to Annette Lavers, "The Imaginary...is a renunciation of self-knowledge" and "The essence of the Imaginary is to pass itself off as truth"; which would incidently explain Ben Jelloun’s tension in writing the female body. The latter is compressed, so to speak, within a network of metaphors, such as castration, viol, mutilation, and déchirure, which nurture and categorise it. Such violent metaphors reveal a female body that is dismembered and fetishised. Roland Barthes observes that the female body is only known "sous forme d’une division et d’une dissémination d’objets partiels: une jambe, un sein, une épaule, un cou, des mains" and adds that "coupée en morceaux [...] partagée, écartée, la femme n’est qu’une sorte de dictionnaire

---


d'objets-fétiches."^{21}

In *L'Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* the reader is once again led into the steamy atmosphere of the hammam with its dark and secret corners (the hammam, this private, closed and humid space (or matrix) is yet another obsessive metaphor of woman in Ben Jelloun's writing). Observing women washing themselves and listening to their discussions, the narrator defines their talk as "bavardages", whose content is "des phrases vides, creuses" (*ES*, p.35), implying that women are unable to produce a coherent and comprehensive language. By way of contrast, in the mosque, as the open public sphere for men, where Ahmed goes with his father, words are described as being beautiful and rich with spiritual meaning (another tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic). In Ben Jelloun's work women are not only portrayed as void spiritually, but even their bodily appearance is repulsive in the eyes of the narrator. In the hammam they trigger disgust and revulsion in him. To this one should add the character of Ahmed, unachieved as a woman and rather defective as a man. For the sake of social appearances Ahmed has to marry in order to keep his/her fraudulent identity protected. To achieve this, he can only unite with someone whose body is also a monstrosity. Indeed, Fatima, the cousin he chooses to marry, bears deformities. The writer seems to have

---

endowed Ahmed and Fatima with crippling abnormalities in order to make them join the rest of their gender in his novels (it is worth noting that there is no mention of male deformities).

Had it been an example of "feminine writing" that is free from the constraints of the Symbolic, and had it been narrated by a genuine female voice, La Nuit sacrée would not have presented the reader with a fairy-tale like story. On the surface, La Nuit sacrée is about Zahra’s reintegration of her female identity and eventually reaching freedom. However, the narrative voice is so well embedded in the language of patriarchy that we learn that the freedom of our heroine comes in the shape of a man, "Un cavalier en gandoura bleue du sud" (NS, p.37). Indeed, as in the tale of Sleeping Beauty, the knight is the saviour whose kiss of life will free the heroine of La Nuit sacrée from her false identity. Ben Jelloun’s message is predictable as it seems limited to the sexual encounter. Zahra follows the mysterious knight in a journey towards her freedom which is accounted for in these terms:

Le voyage dura toute la journée. Il me parlait de temps en temps, me disant les mêmes mots, m’appelant tantôt "princesse du sud", tantôt "lune des lunes", tantôt "la première lumière du matin". Enveloppée dans le burnous, j’étais derrière, mes bras entourant sa taille. Les secousses de la jument faisaient que mes bras croisés caressaient dans un mouvement de haut en bas son ventre ferme. J’avais une impression étrange à laquelle je me laissais aller, renonçant à me poser des questions comme lorsqu’un rêve se poursuit dans la petite somnolence. C’était la première fois que je montais à cheval. J’accumulais ainsi les émotions
The sexual symbolism is highly evident here. Surely the quest for identity for the heroine of *L’Enfant de sable* and *La Nuit sacrée* would begin with the freedom of her body. But it seems that this freedom can only be translated in terms of sexual experience. Furthermore, the visual effect in the passage mentioned above portrays the heroine as sexually passive as she is led by the mysterious knight.

In his narrative about the freedom of the female body, Ben Jelloun fails to do justice to a gender he pretends to know. He seems to have preconceived ideas of how a female body should appear:


Needless to say that once again the image of the woman falls into stereotypes which insinuate that woman’s main characteristic is frailty. The clichés go even further by symbolising her as provocative and as a temptress. In the scene of the rape, the heroine of *La Nuit sacrée* is made to sound delighted by the idea that the man following her in the woods is going to rape her, "Un homme dont je ne connaissais même pas le visage éveillait en moi des
And when the rape actually takes place (she is sodomised) she finds herself free and fulfilled: "J’étais libre sous le poids de ce corps fiévreux" (NS, p.60). One does not have to look far to see here the conventional male thought by which women are believed to be masochistic and that they cannot find happiness unless they are mistreated. In fact, what Ben Jelloun seems to say, though he does it in a poetically disguised manner, is not very different from the Freudian concept whereby female pleasure is linked to suffering. Perhaps there is nothing surprising in Ben Jelloun’s adherence to this aspect of Freudianism; he was after all trained as a psychiatrist before he started writing.

Before closing this chapter on Ben Jelloun, it is worth noting that he not only portrays the female body as a monstrosity, but also as being mutilated. Indeed, just as we think that the heroine of La Nuit sacrée is in full possession of her femaleness we are told that she is circumcised by her sisters (the basic fact we need to know here is that female circumcision, in any of its forms, does not exist in Morocco).

Like a eunuch, she is free but castrated.

---

22 Nor is excision or any other form of female circumcision a requirement of Islam. The most that can be said is that it is practised within some Islamic countries.
The fact that Ahmed/Zahra remains unfulfilled is not a matter of mere chance. The failure to find a solution to the ambiguous sexuality and ambivalent identity of the protagonist reflects the writer’s own failure in reaching a united self. Through a detour -that of the female voice as a metaphor- Ben Jelloun reveals his own ambiguity, that of a writer astride two cultures and two languages namely Arabic and French. He reveals also an ambivalence about sexuality, a theme pursued in the following chapter.
In his book *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier, sur l’histoire de sa personnalité".\(^1\) Using this definition to place Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *La Prière de l’absent*\(^2\) in the category of autobiography would seem far-fetched. There is, on the face of it, nothing in this text that would suggest that it is an autobiographical piece of work. It seems purely fictional, delving as it does into the realm of the unreal and the fantastic, thus pushing

---


away any suggestion that it might have any link with reality. In *La Prière de l’absent*, the oneiric aspect of time is the main factor which locates the story at the level of myth, where action surpasses human belief. The characters themselves are well entrenched in the domain of disbelief. They bear characteristics, variously physical or spiritual, which make it hard if not impossible for any reader to draw any comparison or link with them and his or her human state, let alone any identification.

So, in the light of Lejeune’s above definition, *La Prière de l’absent* does not seem to offer a story a real person would construct from his or her own life; nor does it seem to deal with a real life. However, autobiography is not necessarily a straightforward telling of one’s own life story. Neither does it necessarily take the form of a confessional text. Autobiographies differ in genres and forms. A poem, for example, can be autobiographical as much as a novel. Both genres in this case rely on metaphor; a device which, once decoded, reveals a good deal about the person who forges it. The power of metaphor is so great that it judiciously covers and shapes a reality to the extent of making it unintelligible in everyday discourse. However, even if a person uses metaphor in order to subvert a reality, the fact remains that it is that same person’s reality which has been subverted. Metaphor, in this case, would merely be a strategy, used either consciously or unconsciously, for masking one’s thought or reality.
Autobiography, especially when it is not classified as such, as is clearly the case with La Prière de l'absent, is one master metaphor which conceals and masks any authorial presence in a given text. To be able to say that a work is pure fiction, the author's self is said to be (and made to be believed) disengaged. But even this seemingly disengaged attitude is in itself a metaphorical self-denigration or a misrecognised selfhood. The self, as it appears in either an overt or covert autobiography, is constructed from one's past. However, autobiography, as Georges Gusdorf argues, "is not a simple recapitulation of the past; it is also the attempt and the drama of a man struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment of his history".3 This, indeed, is what most autobiographers would do: reconstruct a past self not as it really was, but as they think or wish it was. To be completely truthful and authentic in telling one's past self is beyond possibility. The passing of time creates gaps in one's memories to the extent that it becomes unfeasible to recollect the past in its authentic chronology and happening. Thus the self, that is the centre of an autobiography, becomes necessarily an invented self. Because of verifiable factual elements of an author's life, one could easily mistake it for the author's self; but the strong point remains that this self is an invention of the author. It might closely resemble his or

her real self, but it is only a resemblance not a sameness.

Ben Jelloun's *La Prière de l'absent*, as stated earlier, is not what one would call an autobiographical novel for it bears very little resemblance to a real life and a real world. But, as Ben Jelloun himself puts it: "Ce qui est intéressant c'est de voir comment un écrivain transfigure le réel, le change, le transforme, le perturbe".⁴ Indeed, a story does not have to be faithful to reality to inform us about an author's self. The subversion of reality in a story can be just as revealing. The following then will be an attempt to extract the autobiographical self in *La Prière de l'absent* and demonstrate how the authorial authority plays a role in constructing and deconstructing it.

Although Ben Jelloun maintains that *La Prière de l'absent* is not autobiographical,⁵ it nevertheless carries verifiable biographical facts which can be revealing. The central character is said to have been a philosophy teacher in his anterior life (*PA*, p.13), a profession Ben Jelloun himself practised in Tangier after he graduated in Philosophy from the University of Rabat. One can also notice a physical resemblance between the author and his character as they both wear a beard (*PA*, p.18). The author

---

⁴ See Appendix Two, p.235.

⁵ Ibid, p.233.
provides the reader with other details: the year of birth of the hero (1944), and the fact that Fès is his native town. Here, the author is stating precisely his own year and place of birth. More specifically, he offers the reader further information about historical events in the year of his birth: the famine Moroccans suffered in the year preceding the end of World War II, and the system of rationing and the epidemics of typhus which struck at national level (themselves closely linked to the famine blight).

Such veracity accredits *La Prière de l’absent* with ontological validity, but within the limits dictated by the author. These limits are drawn by the latter’s opting for displacement and apparent disengagement. The dreamlike events in *La Prière de l’absent* make of the text, as J.M.G. Le Clézio puts it in the blurb of the book, "[Une] histoire imparfaite et hasardeuse, car les hommes et les femmes qui l’habitent sont des ombres fugitives...". Le Clézio adds that Tahar Ben Jelloun is a writer "qui sait changer le cours du temps." This, in fact, is a major factor in *La Prière de l’absent*. The author does not respect or follow a chronological order in the telling of his story. In fact, he reverses the chronology so that the beginning is the end. To symbolise this, the first chapter of *La Prière de l’absent* begins with the negation of a previous life. Considering the ambiguity surrounding the concept of ‘negation’ in psychoanalysis (denial, disavowal,
Verneinung, méconnaissance etc.), the focus here is on the notion that is linked to the Existentialist philosophy of being and nothingness, but also related to the notion of rejection. In an example on negation and rejection, Kristeva shows that when a schizophrenic patient was asked to provide the opposite of "naître" [to be born], he answered "ne pas être" [not to be], which makes "naître" dissolve with its homophone "n'être". This example is relevant to the theme of La Prière de l’absent for the Child, who is at the centre of the narrative, is both "n’est" (dead) and "né" (born).

The story/birth of the Child, who is at the centre of the narrative, begins with his death. Thus, with an overall Nietzschean tone, the narrative provides the reversed time path which the events are to follow. The Child -after the event of his death- and his companions who are, to borrow Le Clézio’s expression, "des ombres fugitives", embark on a journey from the city of Fès to the south of Morocco. Fès, being known as the spiritual capital city of Morocco, is regarded as the cradle of religious ideology and traditions. It epitomizes the patriarchal situation of the whole country. So, to leave Fès symbolises the departure from the strings and constraints which subordinate the individual. Leaving, in this case, is seeking freedom. This journey undoubtedly reveals the metaphorical journey into

---

6 J.Kristeva, La révolution du langage poétique, p. 115.
the depths of one's self. It is through this perspective that we will attempt to analyze how the Child and the other characters constitute at different times both the fragmented self of the author and his other or double. To a certain extent one could see the Child and his companions as examples of the author's narcissistic object-choice. As objects, they would represent aspects of himself but in relation to his own self. In his essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914c), Freud provides four sets of narcissistic types of object-choice:

1- What he himself is,
2- What he himself was,
3- What he himself would like to be,
4- Someone who was once part of himself.

As is going to be shown, the Child could represent the future self the author would like to be (3), while the Child's companions could represent his present and past (1 and 2). At the same time, we will focus on the journey to the South as the author's autobiographical recreation of his self which stems from nothingness.

---

8 Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914c), S.E., XIV, 90.
9 This fourth set does not necessarily apply in the study of this novel; however, in the case of L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée we could see this as explanatory in the analysis of the androgyny Ahmed/Zahra. Zahra, as the feminine side of the author, could be regarded as what was once part of himself; that is before the castration complex. It is, thus, the gender difference of the feminine object which allows the author to restore the unity of his self.
The verifiable facts, stated earlier, mark the link between the Child and the author. By offering the reader a story which begins with death, it is somehow the death of his own subjectivity the author seems to lay down. The dead Child is the metaphorical deconstructed self of the author, and the dichotomy of life and death provides the setting for such deconstruction to happen.

The idea of a deconstructed self in *La Prière de l’absent* begins by looking at the individual as void of subjectivity. It seems to suggest that to achieve subjectivity one has first to assume otherness; in other words, one has to die in order to exist. Ben Jelloun’s message in *La Prière de l’absent* indicates that to be able to construct a self one has to do so from the abyss of nothingness; a notion which is a close reminder of the Sartrean "le néant". In this constructive development, the search for the true self starts by annihilating the being and by assuming otherness. As the opening lines of *La Prière de l’absent* reflect: "À présent qu’il était devenu un autre...il venait de remporter la première victoire sur lui-même, sur ses manques et ses petits desseins" (*PA*, p.11). Death represents a victory over the assumed self and an accomplishment of otherness. It is also the symbolic "death of the author". The author kills himself, so to speak, in an act of defacement; thus he can assume objectivity and narrate his self as if it were other. Narrating the other is one way for the author to involve
his personality less and restrict his name solely to the book cover.

To avoid acknowledging his novel as autobiographical is Ben Jelloun's attempt somehow to avoid self-analysis. As he writes: "Ce retour sur soi l'oppressait et lui rappelait toute la fragilité du monde" (PA, p.13), which implies that it is the author's world and reality which are oppressive; and that their frailty is that of his own self.

Analyzing one's self is, in one way or another, part of an attempt to reach one's truth. However, while everything in La Prière de l'absent seems to indicate that the overall aim behind the characters' journey to the South is an attempt to reach the truth about their being, we as readers are made aware of the Child's fear of the truth. The symbolic journey from darkness to light (or from death to life) seems to trigger a sense of apprehension and agitation in the Child. Light, here symbolising truth, becomes a negative source of knowledge: "C'est pour cela que la lumière lui faisait peur. Il craignait son pouvoir: elle devait préciser dans le miroir son image pleine, son être achevé" (PA, p.14). This is, in fact, ominous of what happens in the novel later. To become an "être achevé" ¹⁰ is what the journey to the South is meant to achieve; but for

¹⁰ The adjective "achevé" has a double meaning in French. It means fulfilled as well as finished, in the sense of killed. Both are relevant here in the description of the being.
the Child, it is a journey to be dreaded. It is not surprising then that when the journey comes to an end, the symbolic search for the true self remains incomplete and unresolved.

Confusion, hesitation and fear of truth seem to be the main preoccupations for the author in writing his novel. After the tremendous and tortuous trepidations he makes his characters undergo, Ben Jelloun’s narrative, which seems more like improvisation, bounces back every time there seems to be a final statement to be made. One could only see this kind of hide-and-seek game between the author and his readers in terms of the author taunting the readers’ imagination and curiosity by pretending to reveal something but at the same time not divulging enough. It is almost as if the author is actually making up the story as he goes along.¹¹ He, himself, does not seem to have a precise plot to follow, "Je m'éloigne des mots de peur que mes lèvres ne saignent. Je garde l'épreuve de la blessure des mots pour la fin. La fin de quoi? Vous ne le saurez pas" (PA, p.160). Furthermore, there seems to be an authorial confession through the following statement of Sindibad: "Cette mémoire effilochée me lasse. Je suis fatigué de courir derrière des morceaux de souvenirs" (PA, p.163). One could only see this as a way of giving up the search for what appears to be unobtainable, i.e: truth.

¹¹ The same applies to the story of Ahmed/Zahra in L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée.
However, before giving up the quest, the author goes to great lengths in trying to assemble a fragmented self. And to do so, he opts, as was mentioned earlier, for a Nietzschean/Sartrean interpretation of being. He provides the readers with a set of characters who adopt nothingness before generating their existence.

The Child, around whom the other characters evolve, is born of a union between a spring of water and an old olive tree in a cemetery in the old city of Fès. The Child is said to be immaterial and is nameless, which further adds to his immateriality and disconnection with the real world. Naming is castrating. A name is a code whereby one has a place in an ordered society. By not naming the Child, the author is emphasising the point that the Child is out of reach of the power of castration. He is, in effect, a pre-oedipal child who has not encountered the Law-of-the-Father.

Like the Child, the other characters are all disconnected from the real world, and assume an identity totally different from any previous one. For example, Sindibad's

12. Note the Coranic and Biblical allusions to the resurrection of Christ on the Mount of Olives. The novel depicts the Child with prophetic and messianic endowments. We are told that in his previous life he was named Mohammed Mokhtar (the latter meaning the chosen one).

13. "Il est d'un horizon immatériel" (PA, p.54).
real name is Ahmad Suleiman,\textsuperscript{14} son of a craftsman and a brilliant student of Qaraouiyine, the Islamic university of Fez. Following his failure to freely declare his love for Jamal, one of his peers and fellow students, he sinks into depression, then becomes known by the name of Hammou (a derivative of Ahmad). As his depression drives him into madness he assumes the identity of Sindibad, the legendary mariner. He becomes thus "Un mythomane. Il raconte qu'il a fait tellement de voyages qu'il a tout confondu et perdu la mémoire" (PA, pp.47-48). Yamna is the eldest of eight children. Her father emigrated to work as a miner in the north of France and was never heard of again. After many tribulations she ended up working as a prostitute in a brothel in Azrou and later for a Jewish fortune-teller in Fez. The latter treated her well, but after her death Yamna had no other choice but to prostitute herself again. She contracted syphilis, remained untreated and finally succumbed to madness. On a winter morning she was found dead in an empty street where she was begging. She was buried in a dump by rubbish collectors. Upon her encounter with Sindibad, she explains that "Yamna est morte. Et moi, je ne suis que son image..." (PA, p.54). Boby\textsuperscript{15}, the third character evolving around the Child has Brahim as his real name, but prefers to be called Boby and aspires to be

\textsuperscript{14} Note that the name of Ahmed/Zahra's father is also Ahmed Souleïman (L'Enfant de sable, p.30). The spelling is probably deliberately different and both fathers are craftsmen.

\textsuperscript{15} Boby (as opposed to Bobby) is a dog's name. In Moroccan Arabic, it is actually synonymous with 'dog', like 'hoover' is with vacuum cleaner.
acknowledged as a dog and adopted by a caring French family. He ran away from his parents when he surprised his father bargaining his sale with a foreigner (unlike Boby's sisters, whom we are told were placed as maids with rich families, Ben Jelloun seems to be hinting here that Boby was going to be subject to a paedophiliac transaction). Ironically, Boby runs away from a situation which is meant to dehumanise him only to assume that of a dog. The major difference is that the latter is of his free choice.

What Sindibad, Yamna and Boby have in common is their madness and their being other than they are. They all assume an identity which is different from their original one. What links them to the Child —whom they have to care for and accompany to the South— is this lack of identity: a lack which the journey to the South is supposed to resolve. As stated earlier, these characters ought to be considered as metaphorical displacements due to the author's search for subjectivity. This subjectivity can only be proven by first assuming that it does not exist. This is not so much different from the mathematical theory of the absurd (le raisonnement par l'absurde). That is, to prove, for instance, that one plus one equals two, one has to start with the assumption that one plus one does not equal two and analyze all possibilities which will finally prove the contrary and show that the result of one plus one is definitely two. So, in the case of La Prière de l'absent, subjectivity is what is to be proven by first
assuming otherness. This otherness is translated by the author in terms of becoming a self from nothing; just like writing a book which has yet to be written. The self and the book thus become the parallel tasks the author sets himself to accomplish. As he puts it:

Le livre avec des pages blanches, encore intactes, c'est cet enfant. Il est l'histoire que nous vivons déjà. Ce qui nous arriver est tellement extraordinaire qu'il faut qu'il parvienne -bien après notre mort- à un conteur, quelqu'un qui pourra l'écrire et le raconter aux générations futures (PA, p.57).

One's mind, at birth, is void of any ideas: a tabula rasa, a blank page. It becomes then the author's task to fill in the blank pages with his writing so as to create a book and simultaneously provide the Child with ideas to nourish his mind and make him acquire his selfhood. The end result of both tasks will be the writer's recreation or rewriting of his own self. For, as it transpires from the above-quoted passage, there is an implicit need and desire from the part of the author for immortality. Why would anyone need other generations to know about his or her life? Only a person who thinks and regards his or her life as extraordinary and therefore worth being told and immortalised by writing it. As Georges Gusdorf remarks: "Un individu qui ne se considère pas comme le centre du monde -ou le centre d'un monde- ne s'adonnera pas aux écritures du Moi." It is, indeed, an act of egotism which drives one to seek

---

immortality. Writing one's self is not only driven by this sense of egotistic behaviour, but also by an implicit need for self-reconstruction and self-recreation. Besides the desire for eternity, the author also shows an underlying discontent with the course of his life before he decides to retell it. In fact, as Roland Barthes puts it: "Raconter, n'est-ce pas toujours chercher son origine, dire ses démêlés avec la Loi...",¹⁷ which sustains the view of the individual's need to break away from the dictates of the patriarchal law which prevents the self from becoming one. And as such, the self that is going to be reconstructed will undoubtedly also be rectified.

So the act of reconstructing one's self will inevitably lead not to the recreation of the past self, but to the creation of a completely new self, despite the fact that it will be nourished by past memories and thus bear a likeness to the past self. These memories which will help reconstruct the self can be identified through the different characters which revolve around the Child.

Each of these characters is a reminder of an aspect of the author's life. In fact, they could be aspects of the author's life as he remembers them in their exactitude or inexactitude (that is, they are repressed), or as he imagines or fantasizes about them. Each one of the

characters has experiences that marked their life, which overlap with events of the author's own life. Looked at another way, one could see this as the author's projection of his self onto his characters. In effect, these characters could represent memories which keep reappearing during the process whereby the author is trying to rewrite a new self. As memories, they keep surfacing into the present and hinder the possibilities of the author to recreate a self as a tabula rasa.

The author's task is thus threatened by the 'return of the repressed', which manifests itself in terms of memories and past experiences:

Cet état d'absence et d'insistance que seul un corps vidé, un être réduit à sa seule forme, pouvait connaître, lui [the Child] procurait une espèce de sérénité mêlée d'inquiétude. En fait, il n'était pas totalement libéré de l'histoire, du passé et des traces de l'autre. Il sentait au fond de lui-même comme un reste de présence, un murmure de ce qu'il avait été (PA, p.15).

The author is well aware here that it becomes an impossible task to account for one's life as if it were new, without being threatened by the emergence of past memories and events. One's present is, therefore, conditioned by and bears traces of the past. As he puts it: "Des liens invisibles persistaient" (PA, p.16), meaning that he cannot renew his self and be totally free from his past. In desperation, he assumes that rewriting the past will deliver him from it:

Effacer, couper les racines de ce passé, son
passé, celui qui s'était malencontreusement amassé dans un coin de sa vie et qui se faisait tumultueux à l'heure de l'oubli [...] Il comprit que seul le récit de son histoire pouvait le laver de cette emprise, le détacher définitivement de ces liens (PA, p.41).

It is, in a sense, an attempt to exorcise himself from his past. Self-exorcism is often characteristic of autobiographical writing. The need for self-exorcism is intrinsically a need for freedom. And this freedom seems attainable to the extent that one denigrates one's self and becomes other, "L'autre en toi prit de l'avance. A lui tu dois ta libération" (PA, p.45). However, to become other does not necessarily mean becoming something new; but simply becoming something that was already there, but hidden. As the author says: "L'autre t'habitait déjà, à ton insu, à l'insu de tous" (Ibid). Therefore, the whole attempt to break away from the past becomes unworkable; for the endorsement of the other comes hand in hand with the past, forcing thus the search into a deadlock where freedom is but an illusion.

Consequently, the attempt to recreate the self turns out to be a failure. As the task proves to be impossible for the writer to accomplish, he sets out to dispose of his characters one by one. Indeed, as the symbolic journey to the South starts showing signs of failure, the characters

\[^{18}\] The same cannot be said about writing though for objectively the novel exists.
begin to leave the scene. Their exit takes a dramatic shape. They either die of exhaustion like Yamna, or succumb to a horrific madness like Boby.\(^{19}\)

The journey to the South parallels the glorification of the historical Moroccan war-leader Ma-al-Aynayn (1830-1910). As the Child and his companions proceed towards the South, so does the narrative about the Sheikh. His unification of the Moroccan southern tribes and his leading role against the colonial army are celebrated. He becomes thus the target of the journey. As his name suggests: Ma-al-Aynayn means in Arabic the water (ma) of the two springs (al-aynayn). The word 'al-aynayn' also means eyes. Both meanings in the novel are significant as they suggest the gaze\(^{20}\) and the water, hinting at the story of Narcissus. Further, the notion of finding water springs in the South points to the difficulty of the journey, as the South is geographically the Sahara desert where water springs are a rarity. Ma-al-Aynayn symbolises the spring of water towards which the Child is heading and which is supposed to reflect his

\(^{19}\) Such is often the tragic fate of doubles in literature. Chraibi's doubles also disappear tragically from the scene once they have served their purpose.

\(^{20}\) Note the destructive nature of the gaze. In the myth of Narcissus, the latter dies by gazing at his image in the water, and in La Prière de l'absent the destructive gaze is suggested by the story of Shmihan, the Jew of Melilla, whom people dread because of his evil eye (le mauvais oeil). Shmihan does as he was told by the woman he falls in love with and shaves his beard. He looks at himself in the mirror for a long time to admire his shaved face but dies by inflicting his own evil eye on himself. This notion of the killer-gaze suggests, in a sense, the destructiveness of self-introspection as it could lead to one discovering hidden truths one would rather not know.
image:

La mémoire de Ma-al-Aynayn sera le miroir suprême, le vrai, l’unique et le dernier miroir où ton visage viendra se fixer; ce sera la source et l’eau qui préservent tes racines en plein désert (PA, p.76).

The process of going to the South and learning the history of Ma-al-Aynayn is a metaphorical displacement of the author’s search for the authentic self. But Yamna’s declaration that: "Plus nous nous approchons du désert, moins je suis sûre de moi" (PA, p.195) reflects the ominous failure the search is facing. Ma-al-Aynayn becomes thus the metaphorical body of water where the Child, like Narcissus, meets his end.

The failure to construct a new self is symbolised by the Sheikh’s surrendering to the colonial power. And to demonstrate the impossibility of recreating a new self, the author proceeds to demystify the historical figure of Ma-al-Aynayn:

...Les ancêtres ne donnèrent du cheikh Ma-al-Aynayn que l’image du héros national, celui qui résista à la pénétration coloniale. Ils oublièrent de dire qu’ils avaient fait de lui un mythe, un saint, une image, dissimulant le caractère féodal, autoritaire et même esclavagiste de ce chef de tribu qui rêvait d’être le chef de tout un État (PA, p.224).

Alongside the demystification of the Sheikh, the author ironises about his own action by saying:

Emmener un enfant au Sud pour ressourcer sa mémoire et son être! Un beau sujet de roman ou de conte, mais une illusion dans le réel. Il fallait
The author's attempt to recreate a self from nothing is, in fact, to be understood as an attempt to deconstruct this notion of self-recreation and prove its impossibility. The author's demystification of the South and its hero goes hand in hand with his deconstruction of writing the self. In a sense, *La Prière de l'absent* could be regarded as a prototype theory of anti-autobiographical writing. It proves the unreliability of biographical elements from one's past life in the construction of a new self. The author holds, in fact, the power to alter those biographical elements—whether he is aware of this or not. It is an unavoidable fact that it is impossible for a recalled event in one's life to be the same as the real, lived one. The lived event is a past event and can only exist in the present as a memory; as for the recalled event, it is in actual terms that memory. So, a lived and recalled event can be similar but not the same. Accordingly, one could say that it is impossible to produce a truthful and authentic piece of writing of the self.

As the novel comes to a close so does the search. The author, after what seems like an endless juggling with events, resigns himself to the fact that he is unable to recreate his new self. And his inability to do so is primarily due to the return of the repressed, "Les souvenirs les plus enfouis finissent toujours par
réapparaître" (PA, p.186). With the removal of Yamna and Boby from the scene, the only remaining characters are Sindibad and the Child. The latter could be regarded as images or doubles of the author’s repressed self in the present and past (Sindibad) and as an image of the future (the Child).

However, the Child, who was supposed to be reborn free from all constraints of the past and illustrate the perfect self the author aspires to be, faces the resurgence of past memories. Consequently, as a metaphor which fails to provide the author with the possibility of self-recreation, the Child is, in turn, removed from the scene. In a circular movement of the story/search, the Child ceases to exist in precisely the same place where he began: in a cemetery between a spring of water and an old tree trunk. Deprived of his companions, only Sindibad remains surrounded by his loneliness. Unlike the other characters, Sindibad is the only one the reader could link closely to the author.\footnote{There are strong similarities between Sindibad and Ahmed/Zahra in L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée (note that Sindibad’s real name is Ahmad). Their depiction in earlier chapters discusses the displaced self of the author himself.}

In La Prière de l’absent, Sindibad’s troubled mind is said to be due to his inability to live his homosexual love
freely and publicly. His passionate liaison with Jamal is ended by their parents who are concerned that they do not transgress community norms. Jamal is thus taken to an unknown destination by his father, leaving Sindibad to sink into despair. In a similar way to the androgynous Ahmed/Zahra (when she was in prison and suffering the separation from Le Consul), the reader learns that, "La peur de perdre la raison le [Sindibad] hantait. Alors il s'était mis à écrire dans une chambre noire éclairée par une bougie. Tant qu'il écrivait, il se sentait en sécurité" (PA, p.79).

Quoting Bataille's words "J'écris pour ne pas être fou", Roland Barthes adds, "Ce qui voulait dire qu'il écrivait la folie". In this respect, the same could be said of La Prière de l'absent. The kind of febrile narrative throughout the novel could be regarded as an interpretation of the writer's inner struggle to make sense of and order his ideas as he writes. As such, writing ensures "Le chemin de la libération" (PA, p.41) and like Ahmed/Zahra, the only

---

22 It is worth noting that Ben Jelloun never uses the word homosexual in the text, but only love. One could obviously think that it could be because of the derogatory way the word homosexual is used in Moroccan society.

23 Jamal means beauty in Arabic. The author describes his femininity adding that he was, "L'élément féminin dans cette université où les seules jeunes filles qui étudiaient, venaient toutes enveloppées dans leur haïk, comme des momies qui auraient effacé leur corps" (La Prière de l'absent, p.84).

24 R.Barthes, Le Plaisir du texte, p.78.
salvation for Sindibad’s torment is writing. Sindibad’s suffering for the loss of Jamal is accentuated by his sense of exclusion from a society which forces him to keep his feelings secret and does not allow him to express himself. Fès (Sindibad’s and the author’s native city) becomes thus the target of revolt for Sindibad. However, in a remarkable shift of tone, the narrative shifts to a higher pitch whereby the anger it carries expresses more the feelings of the writer than his character’s. Indeed, Ben Jelloun takes on a prosecuting tone in dissecting, so to speak, and denouncing the double-standards and superficiality of the Fassi society he knows only too well:

Une société qui cultivait ses préjugés et s’accrochait à ses privilèges [...] Fès, creuset d’une civilisation et d’une culture! C’était vrai. Mais c’était aussi le lieu de la servitude de l’âme pour l’égoïsme et les lois de l’intérêt. Société arrogante [...] Fès, société secrète? Non, société fermée. Elle verrouillait ses portes sur ses biens, sur ses bijoux et jeunes filles [...] Si la médina de Fès est faite de ruelles basses et étroites, faite de labyrinthes sombres, de pierres vieilles et lourdes, c’est parce- qu’elle couve, telle une mère, des certitudes fortes et inébranlables (PA, pp.84-85).

It is, in fact, against such profoundly entrenched traditions that the author tries to fulfil his task: that of providing the self with freedom. However, like his

---

25 For Ben Jelloun and Chraïbi alike, in their struggle for identity in the midst of a traditional and judgemental society, writing is more than a refuge; it is a necessary means of expression and revolt.

26 Like Ulysses, Sindibad leaves his native city and later goes back to it a changed and different man. The journey here takes the shape of a forming phase whereby the individual acquires subjectivity.
character Sindibad, the author

[...] haïssait cette ville qui l’empêchait de respirer. Alors il préférait la chambre noire, chambre anonyme, fermée sur l’effervescence d’une pensée audacieuse [...] Il écrivait [...] des textes pris aux ténèbres d’une âme souffrante, torturée par la commodité et la médiocrité environnantes (PA, p.85).

These lines actually sum up Ben Jelloun’s writing. Amongst most maghrebian writers, he is the one considered most daring in approaching taboo themes such as sexuality and homosexuality. Like his character, the author’s only possible escape from the social constraints is his "effervescence d’une pensée audacieuse." However, the power of these constraints is so great that it is impossible to shake them off. Hence the failure of La Prière de l’absent to achieve and assert the self.

Unable to live a lie or stand against his society, Sindibad opts for madness and amnesia as ways out of his dilemma. The theme of madness is recurrent in most works by Tahar Ben Jelloun. Madness in Morocco is not, generally speaking, considered as a clinical condition. In fact, mental institutions in Morocco are very rare. There are two: one in Berrechid and one in Salé; these are mainly for extreme mentally disturbed patients who are a danger to society. In some cases, when madness is considered a source of shame and scandal, confinement is an explanation and justification to preserve family and social values intact. As Michel Foucault remarks: "Ce qui peut déterminer et
isoler le fait de la folie, ce n’est pas tellement une science médicale qu’une conscience susceptible de scandale". The mad person, in general, remains within his or her community. Though not necessarily integrated, he or she is tolerated. The Moroccan society’s definition of madness is rather loose. A person is characterised as mad if he or she does not conform to the prescribed codes of social behaviour. Also, considering the fact that the Moroccan global mind is entrenched in the notion of the sacred, a mad person is more likely to be regarded as someone endowed with sainthood. These two definitions are the ones used by Ben Jelloun in his depiction of madness. For example, Harrouda, Zahra, Yamna, Boby and Sindibad all illustrate, in one way or another, these two aspects of madness.  

In a sense, madness offers a shield and a safety zone for these characters to protect themselves against the servitude and constraints of society. Their madness is mainly a manifestation of anti-conformism. Prostitution and homosexuality, among others, are outlawed by society. They constitute behaviours that are regarded as perverted and deviant. Madness is thus a deviance from the norm. But it is also the vehicle by which the unspeakable can be spoken.

_____________________


28 Moha, most especially, is the perfect example of the predicament of madness in Moha le fou, Moha le sage (1978), a novel by Ben Jelloun not studied here.
The mad person is allowed to break the taboos of silence, but only because he or she is shielded by madness. This madness is a *trompe-l’oeil.*\(^29\) It is the kind of madness embodied by a buffoon in a royal court: the madness that allows one to speak the truth. Ben Jelloun makes use of this madness to allow his characters to speak out their truth. Such madness "n’a pas tellement affaire à la vérité et au monde, qu’à l’homme et à la vérité de lui-même qu’il sait percevoir".\(^30\) For instance, it is through madness that Sindibad’s homosexuality and love for Jamal are expressed. By opting for madness, Sindibad protects himself from the wrath of society; for if his homosexuality were expressed under the mode of ‘normality’ then his fate would have been met with violence by a condemning society. Ben Jelloun makes an allusion to this by incorporating love-poems of Al-Hallaj in his text.\(^31\)

Husain Mansur Al-Hallaj was a mystic sufi poet in tenth-century Baghdad. He is famous for his ill-fated declaration "Ana al-haq" ("I am the truth"), which brought his death. As a consequence of this declaration, he was tortured, decapitated and the rest of his body burnt; the remains were left in public for the people to see. Ben Jelloun transposes and intertextualises this fateful event in

\(^{29}\) M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie*, p.52.

\(^{30}\) Ibid, p.36.

\(^{31}\) The text shows the poems written in the Arabic script, followed by the author’s translation.
Hamaqa (a Moroccan term of endearment meaning 'mad') the madman of 'le village de l'attente'. Apart from being the only mad person in the village, he is also a fisherman. As such, he is the perfect double of Sindibad the mariner. Al-Hallaj's verses which prophesied the kind of death he met:

\[
\text{Tuez-moi donc} \\
\text{Brûlez-moi avec mes os fêlés} \\
\text{Passez ensuite voir mes restes} \\
\text{Eparpillés parmi les tombes oubliées (PA, p.194).}
\]

are echoed by Hamaqa's preparation of his own death for he believes that, "la mort est bonne, cependant il vaudrait mieux encore n'être jamais né" (PA, pp.202-203). After his death, his body is burnt and his remains, like Al-Hallaj's, are left unburied. Sindibad "s'arrêta un moment près du bûcher, sourit et salua de la main ce qui restait de Hamaqa" (PA, p.206); an ultimate gesture to his forthcoming death and separation from his double. Foucault says: "La folie, c'est le déjà-là de la mort."\(^{32}\) Madness and death are intertwined in this sense and constitute a phenomenon of revolt and escapism from the established laws.

The second instance of madness we encounter in Ben Jelloun's work is the model which sanctifies the mad person. Because of the superstitious belief that the mad person is in communication with spirits that the 'normal' person has no access to, he or she attracts reverence from his or her community. Such person is believed to be in

relation with the sacred and is therefore sanctified. This is quite often the case with communities and whole societies where the 'Low' form of Islam predominates. In his description and explanation of fundamentalism, Ernest Gellner distinguishes between the High and Low Cultures of Islam:

The area of dispute in which it [fundamentalism] does make itself most felt is an old internal division within Islam, long present though not always formally recognized, between what one might call the High and the Low Cultures of Islam. Fundamentalism is indeed opposed to alien un-belief, or the bowdlerizing interpretation, but it is also deeply concerned with encountering folk distortions of Islam, illegitimate superstitions and ritual accretions.  

Accordingly, Moroccan Islam as opposed, for example, to Iranian Islam answers the description of a Low Culture of Islam. The diversity between Arabs, Berbers and Jewish Berbers means the Islam professed by these groups is founded on the same principle but with variations pertaining to each group. Each of these groups kept certain of their pre-Islamic customs, beliefs and superstitions and incorporated them into their practice of Islam. Over the centuries and up to the present, certain beliefs and practices which are originally pagan have become an integral part in the Moroccan profession of Islam. An example of this is 'maraboutism' or the sanctification of

---

shrines\textsuperscript{34}. A 'marabout' is a French word (derived from the arabic 'morabit')\textsuperscript{35} used to designate a personage whose grave is a site of pilgrimage, and often 'marabout' is confused with 'sorcerer'. However, in Moroccan Arabic terminology such personages are referred to by the appellation 'sayyids', which provides a connotation of respectability and sovereignty. Though, in general, a marabout, like a saint, is someone who is revered after his death because in his life he was recognized for his piety and was a kind of religious leader of his community, it is also often the case that the marabout, during his life, was no more than a person suffering what modern psychiatry would have diagnosed as a form of mental disorder. It is his madness that provides the saint with respectability. His madness is translated into exceptional vision, in a society where superstition prevails. All over Morocco, in every city, town, village, and rural community, one can see sayyids' tombs. These are recognisable by their specific architectural design: whitewashed small round buildings with a dome. The cover picture of \textit{La Prière de l'absent} shows this exact architecture. Both Sindibad in his madness, and Zahra in her delirious state at the end of \textit{La Nuit sacrée}, illustrate the visionary insight the mad person is believed to possess and which permits him or her access to sainthood, or from a different perspective to

\textsuperscript{34} 'Maraboutism' has been severely condemned by the Salafist movement but to no avail (see Chapter One).

\textsuperscript{35} It also means 'moine' and/or 'ermite' in French.
self-protection.

As noted earlier, Sindibad for his part, through an existential choice, adopts madness as a solution to his conflictual position. However, no matter how many identities he adopts, his past keeps haunting him. The water that he hoped would provide him with the image of the self he aspires to, provides him instead with his own fragmented self: "Il se mit à genoux, regarda son visage dans la source calme. Il n'y vit rien, ou plutôt une image découpée d’un visage fatigué" (PA, p.225).

His reality translates into living a lie, living like the other, rather than being his own self. And for such a dilemma, there seems to be only one possible escape. As in L’Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée, La Prière de l’absent provides its hero with an apparently nihilistic end as the only solution to his torment. The theatrical ending of La Prière de l’absent is, indeed, very similar to that of L’Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée. The atmosphere is described with the same metaphors of fog and mist, and the death of Sindibad implies a visual effect of the separation of body and soul, "[Il] ferma les yeux et sentit son corps partir lentement, comme si on retirait une peau, une fourrure ou un vêtement" (PA, p.232). Free from his mask and from his false identity, Sindibad meets his death as an achievement; this is suggested by the smile on his face and the light surrounding him.
The last chapter, entitled "La Prière de l’absent" like the general title of the book, forms an epilogue to the whole novel. In Islam, outside the five daily prayers, there are other prayers which can be performed occasionally or only when required. The prayer for the absent, for example, is one that is performed in the mosque after the Friday prayer. It is usually requested by someone from the rest of the congregation. Such a prayer is said and performed on behalf of those who died but whose bodies remain absent. It is performed in the belief of reuniting the errant soul with its lost body. Ben Jelloun’s novel is thus a requiem for the absent self. The whole itinerary of the novel is a search to unite a body with its true self, a search which results in accentuating the absence of selfhood in a society that does not permit the individual the truthfulness of being.

Through his character, the reader witnesses the author’s own disillusion and resignation:

Il n’avait ni le désir ni la volonté d’aller fouiller dans les dédales d’une ville qu’il s’était appliqué à détruire maison par maison. Une ville démolie, anéantie par l’absence, vidée de son âme [...] Non, il n’allait pas agiter en lui le spectre d’un songe qui ne lui appartenait plus [...] Un songe douteux [...] reclus dans la honte et la peur (PA, p.228).

The true self remains beyond reach.\(^3^6\) It is a self which

\(^3^6\) Either because it is all too present, or embryonic and not yet constructed.
transgresses norms and taboos, it brings about a sense of shame and fear of a judgemental society in the individual seeking it. Therefore, it becomes an illicit self which one has to repress and disown. As such, Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *La Prière de l’absent* is his elegy for "l’être défunt, le personnage de lui-même, l’ombre de sa propre apparence" (Ibid).
CONCLUSION

By focusing on the identification of the displaced self in Moroccan male fictional narrative, I hope to have shown that the autobiographical dimension present in fiction can be detected not only through verifiable facts, but also through the transposition of events. That is, a real event can be misplaced in time and space to create novelistic effects. The reader in such cases becomes the devil’s advocate, so to speak, attempting to discover similarities whereby he or she can deduce the relationship between an event in the novel and events in the real life of the author.\(^1\) In addition, this process of identification has also helped to establish the case that women are the prime scapegoats for the displacement of the self. The female gender, or more specifically the mother, tends to be a favourite scapegoat amongst most male Maghrebian writers.

Women are therefore deployed by these male writers as the bearers of the wrongs of their society. They seem to suggest that if we want to see how society is founded on unfairness and hypocrisy, we only need to ponder the plight

\(^1\) In so doing there is an autobiographical pact between author and reader. As Philippe Lejeune puts it: "Si l'identité [the author’s] n'est pas affirmée (cas de la fiction), le lecteur cherchera à établir des ressemblances, malgré l'auteur; si elle est affirmée (cas de l'autobiographie), il aura tendance à vouloir chercher les différences (erreurs, déformations, etc.)." Le Pacte autobiographique, p.26.
of women. But if these male writers suggest that male power is the culprit in the unjust treatment of women, are they not themselves holders of this same power? How different are they from the rest of their gender? Are they not also contributors to the wrongs against women—the same wrongs they try to expose? To answer with fairness and to give them the benefit of the doubt, one could say that they have no choice. They were born men in a male-dominated society. They could either conform to the norms of that society or refuse them. But, as this thesis has shown, non-conformism leads to rejection and marginalisation. So, rather than jeopardise their privileged male status, the male writers studied here opt for a detour. That is where women are so important to their work. Through discussions and depictions of women's social predicament, they can indulge in non-conformism without risking their maleness.

Through their writing about women, these authors use a language which bears a patriarchal ideology. Though they might be unaware of this, their language gives away a male definition of woman. Thus woman becomes static in a literary language that pretends to defend and liberate her. Woman becomes a mere instrument of a male literary creation. She is the metaphor whereby patriarchy is denounced and the vehicle for the transgressive discourse as far as cultural and sexual alienation is concerned. What results from all of this is not so much woman's liberation but a deepening of her confinement. The overall view is
that this kind of male literature fails to transcend the realities of women's exploitation. In fact, as Assia Djebar puts it subtly: "Cette contrainte du voile abattu sur les corps et les bruits raréfie l'oxygène même aux personnages de fiction."²

In the face of such male (mis)representation of women, one wonders why women do not write themselves? The Arabo-moslem patrimony of the Moroccan society has an inevitable impact on women's freedom. Contradictory as it might sound, women are subjugated through patriarchal and ancestral laws, but they are not alienated. The very oppression women experience in Moroccan society inadvertently enables them to be aware of their identity both culturally and sexually. In the process of growing up, women's gender identity is established at the same time as their knowledge of the boundaries imposed on them are formed.

Accordingly, in writing, woman does not search for and try to achieve identity, she is more concerned about extending or transcending its boundaries. Consequently, the Moroccan woman tends to be more prolific in non-fiction (such as sociological studies on women's place in society) than in fiction writing. The reason for this is that fiction seems to allow for gaps and for imposed or self-imposed silences to happen. The outcome of this writing is a kind of self-

pitying women's literature. Women who try to find salvation in this writing often give up, never realising their potential. Non-fiction writing seems to have more to offer to women as they are aware that not only do they transgress or counter the censorship imposed by a patriarchal language and order, but also aware that a more direct discourse would be less likely to fall, so to speak, on deaf ears. Fatima Mernissi, Ghita El Khayat and Soumaya Naamane-Guessous to name but a few, are among women writers whose work carries a clear, unmistakable message: unlike men, women do not need to find a voice, they have one. It is there but is muted. It only needs to be heard.

3 The same cannot be said, however, about Moroccan Arabophone women's writing. There are well established authors in this field, like Khnata Bennouna for example -whose short-stories forsee women's liberation in their gradual involvement in the political sphere- but unfortunatly their work is less known outside Morocco and a few Arab countries.

Driss Chraibi: Je suis écrivain, ça c'est sûr. J’adore mon métier, mais je ne suis pas qu’écrivain. J’aime la vie et j’aime rire. Alors, je vais vous raconter une petite anecdote. Il y a fort longtemps, Mr André Malraux, ministre de la culture du Général de Gaulle, était venu au Maroc pour faire une série de conférences. Et dans l’amphithéâtre, archi-comble, le doyen de la faculté d’alors l’a accueilli en ces termes: "Loin de moi l’idée saugrenue de vous présenter Mr André Malraux. Il n’est pas présentable." Disons que moi non plus je ne suis pas présentable. Voici longtemps, une quarantaine d’années, que j’écris. Dois-je me prendre au sérieux pour autant? J’ai réalisé tout à fait récemment que, au terme de quarante ans
d'écriture, je n'avais aucun talent. Mais c'était trop tard. Quand j'ai réalisé, mes livres m'avaient rendu célèbre. Pour vous situer ma présence parmi vous, voici le périple. Hier, j'étais à Nottingham, il y a trois jours j'étais au Maroc, il y a huit jours j'étais à Madrid et ça va continuer jusqu'à début Mai. Je ne sais pas pourquoi, on me demande. Peut-être parce que j'ai le privilège de l'âge et je suis ce qu'on appelle l'ancêtre de la littérature dite 'maghrébine d'expression française'. Ce n'est pas à moi de juger mes œuvres, ni surtout de les vendre. Je ne suis pas un commerçant. J'ai commencé à écrire en 1952-53. J'étais ingénieur chimiste. Je pouvais faire une carrière...fonctionnaire de la chimie, avec une retraite et autres; mais dès le départ, je n'ai pas été content de notre société maghrébine, et Arabe en général, qui était statique et sclérosée. Je n'ai pas été non plus content de l'attitude de l'Occident dans son ensemble, et en particulier de la France vis-à-vis du Maghreb et de l'homo-Arabicus ou de l'homo-Islamicus, de telle façon que lorsque je lisais des écrits, des romans, des relations de voyage écrits par des Occidentaux sur nous autres, je me tournais en me disant: "Ce n'est pas vrai, ce n'est pas ça le Maghrébin!" Les personnages, tels qu'ils figuraient dans les romans européens, étaient pour moi des caricatures d'êtres humains, et pour tout dire, des indiens de Hollywood, exotiques. La troisième chose qui me révoltait énormément, aussi bien dans la littérature Arabe de chez nous que dans la littérature européenne, quand on abordait
notre monde, et il est extrêmement vaste, c’était toujours avec un style loukoum, style à l’eau de rose (que certains écrivains de la nouvelle génération continuent d’employer – je ne nomme personne, mais vous avez deviné.) Et donc, dès Le Passé simple, j’ai fait ce qu’on appelle de la prose sans le savoir. Il y a eu trois révoltes, trois cassures. La cassure de notre monde, la cassure d’un certain Occident protecteur et paternaliste, et surtout, surtout la cassure du style. Et le style, c’était de la TNT, c’était la bombe. Ce livre avait fait l’effet d’une bombe lors de sa parution, et je ne sais pas pourquoi. Peut-être parce qu’il y a eu une évolution. Il m’a suscité nombres de thèses, il a été constamment réédité depuis quarante ans, et enseigné au Maroc dans toutes les facultés. Mais il est également (il faut me pardonner de le dire, mais il faut le dire) enseigné un peu partout en France, aux États-Unis, en Hongrie etc… même en Australie. Par la suite j’ai écrit Les Boucs. Et Les Boucs était aussi un langage de brisure, de cassure. Mais ce livre-là était écrit deux ans après et était dirigé contre une certaine société dite démocratique et qui rejetait les immigrés et les exclus – que les immigrés soient Arabes, Juifs, Noirs ou simplement des laissés-pour-compte bien qu’ils soient "nationaux". Il a failli avoir le prix Goncourt, mais heureusement qu’il ne l’a pas eu, parce que ça monte et ça descend comme un feu de paille. Par la suite, j’ai écrit d’autres livres comme La Civilisation, ma Mère!..., je crois qu’on le connaît assez celui-là. Ce livre qui était un rêve éveillé. Très
ouvert, c'est-à-dire sur le problème de la femme dans notre société à nous. Un autre livre a été consacré à la femme Occidentale. Celui-là, on n'a pas tellement parlé de lui; c'est **Un ami viendra vous voir**, la femme-objet en société Occidentale, avec des personnages Occidentaux. Par la suite j'ai changé de registre et je suis allé à la recherche de notre passé. C'était d'abord avec **La Mère du printemps** (Oum Errabia), c'est-à-dire bien avant l'arrivée des Arabes en Afrique du Nord. La société berbère telle qu'elle était. J'ai dû tout imaginer, d'une part d'une photo, et d'autre part des quarante sources du fleuve Oum Errabia; c'est magnifique! Un autre livre a été pour moi l'objet de remontée aux sources des différentes cultures. C'est-à-dire, au moment de l'établissement de l'Andalousie berbéro-musulmane sous la conduite de Tarik Ibnou Ziad. Et là, j'ai posé les problèmes qui se posaient déjà au début du huitième siècle, et qui continuent de se poser à nous en 1995; que ce soit en Europe ou que ce soit au Maghreb. La connaissance de l'autre, la constitution d'une communauté multi-confessionnelle, pluri-ethnique et ainsi de suite. A partir de ce livre-là, j'ai changé de registre et de sujet. Là, ce n'était plus l'écrivain ou l'intellectuel qui était derrière ses personnages ou derrière l'action. J'ai pris quelqu'un de tout à fait "inintellectuel", un inspecteur de police de la banlieue de Casablanca. C'est l'innomable **Inspecteur Ali**. Parce qu'il a une carte de police, parce qu'il a une petite parcelle de pouvoir, bien-entendu toutes les portes lui sont ouvertes, et il voit ça de son côté à
lui, c’est-à-dire à travers sa mentalité; de l’autre côté de la lorgnette. Et ma foi, j’ai beaucoup ri, éclaté de rire en l’écrivant, et je crois mes lecteurs aussi en le lisant. Donc, il y a eu _Enquête au pays_, il y a eu _L’Inspecteur Ali_ et il y a eu _Une place au soleil_. Dans _L’Inspecteur Ali_, j’ai fait quelque chose d’assez particulier. Voilà l’histoire: un auteur de romans policiers, de romans de gare, qu’on n’invite à aucune conférence chez lui. Il s’appelle Brahim Orourke. Orourke, c’est un nom berbère, mais si vous mettez une apostrophe, ça vous donne un nom Irlandais -O’Rourke. Il rentre chez lui. Il a gagné plein d’argent avec _L’Inspecteur Ali_. J’ai imaginé qu’il a écrit des romans qu’on trouve dans les gares, les kiosques et qu’on feuille dans les trains ou en avion et après on les oublie. Mais ce genre de littérature marche, c’est un produit de marché. Vous voyez déjà la dérision et l’humour féroce. Et puis, il rentre, avec sa femme Ecossaise, au Maroc, à la Médina. Et il invite ses beaux-parents, très ‘fashionable’, bien civilisés. Il les invite au Maroc, à la Médina et il assiste tout-à-fait tranquillement à la confrontation entre deux mondes. Ça, ça baigne dans des situations plus cocasses les unes que les autres. Le dernier livre, c’est tout à fait autre chose. D’une situation à une autre, d’un personnage à un autre; si le style varie, eh bien il le faut bien. Moi, je ne suis pas un écrivain de livres copiés l’un sur l’autre, avec le même style, les mêmes préoccupations...Si j’ai en moi plusieurs cultures,
plusieurs classes sociales, il faut bien varier un peu de registre. Mais, quel que soit le livre, depuis Le Passé simple jusqu’au dernier, inconsciemment - je m’en suis rendu compte il y a quelques mois - j’ai appliqué la même technique; c’est-à-dire le lieu, donc l’espace, le temps et l’homme. Vous avez, par exemple, dans le cas du Passé simple, un lieu bien déterminé; c’est une maison bourgeoise. Vous avez le temps, ça commence un soir de Ramadan. Vous avez un personnage, c’est Driss Ferdi - le personnage principal qui lui, est hybride, il a deux cultures qui luttent l’une contre l’autre, il a 17 ou 18 ans. Mais voilà, au fur et à mesure que se déroule le récit, la maison va s’ouvrir et il s’ouvre à une autre civilisation, à une autre culture, à une autre langue. Le temps va aller et s’étendre vers l’avenir et revenir vers le passé, à la recherche des origines. Quant au personnage principal, il prend un essor tel qu’il devient le porte-parole malheureux de deux civilisations en lutte. C’est encore plus explicite dans le roman La Civilisation, ma Mère!... Le lieu, c’est une maison fermée; il y avait une femme enfermée. l’épouse de quelqu’un, d’un bourgeois très riche. La porte de cette maison va s’ouvrir, elle sort, elle découvre un jardin, elle découvre les autres, elle découvre son pays. Elle s’en va, à son âge, à 35 ou 36 ans, étudier; et à la fin du roman elle prend le bateau et va rejoindre l’Occident. Le temps est assez simple aussi... Mais je n’étais pas là en train de regarder mon nombril; c’est venu comme ça, tout seul, de façon
inconsciente. Elle était complètement illettrée, analphabète, qui ne connaissait ni son passé, ni son avenir; elle connaissait l'instant présent. À chaque jour suffisait sa peine. Et puis, du moment où elle a commencé à se prendre en main, elle a, si je me rappelle bien, cette phrase: "Demain n'est pas à attendre, il est à inventer."
Donc, elle retrouve ses origines. Elle va à la rencontre des origines, mais elle n'est pas contente. Elle va à la recherche des origines des autres; donc de l'avenir, et elle poursuit son chemin. Le personnage donc de la femme a pris une grande importance; c'est-à-dire, qu'à partir du moment où elle s'est prise en main, elle a tout simplement coupé ses cheveux qu'elle a offert à son mari. Voilà.

L.Ibnlfassi: Ma question se rapporte à La Civilisation, ma Mère!... La fin du roman a l'air assez optimiste. Ceci est illustré par le rire de la mère et par son départ pour découvrir d'autres horizons. Mais ai-je raison de dire qu'en fait, implicitement, il y a du pessimisme de la part de l'auteur qui semble nous dire que pour une femme telle que la mère, après s'être émancipée et découvert le monde extérieur, elle ne trouve plus de place chez elle et donc qu'elle est obligée de s'en aller?

DC: Oui. Ça va plus loin que cela. J'ai écrit la suite. Ce personnage arrive en Occident, mais à ce moment-là elle a perdu ses racines. Elle était devenue immigrée. J'ai pris ce manuscript et je l'ai brûlé dans la cheminée. Je n'en
veux pas.

Question [d’un auditeur Ivoirien]: Vous avez dit que vous avez plusieurs classes sociales en vous et que c’est pour cela que vous n’écriviez pas dans le même style. Alors, peut-on savoir le nombre de vies que vous avez menées? Car quand on dit qu’on a plusieurs classes en soi, ça sous-entend qu’on n’appartient à aucune.

DC: Malheureusement il ya plusieurs classes dans les sociétés, surtout chez nous. Ici, en Occident, il ya les classes possédantes, il y a les prolétaires, il y a la classe moyenne. Mais chez nous, bien que ça soit de plus en plus démocratisé, il y a les possédants et il y a les non-possédants, les pauvres; mais il n’y a pas de classe moyenne. Quand je dis qu’il y a plusieurs classes en moi, je pourrais aussi dire qu’il y a plusieurs pays en moi; parce que je n’ai pas uniquement vécu qu’au Maroc ou en France, mais j’ai vécu également au Canada et en Ecosse; et je n’arrête donc pas de voyager. Les voyages m’enrichissent. D’une façon ou d’une autre, je suis à cheval sur deux mondes. Et mon propos, depuis le départ, aussi bien dans ma vie que dans mes écrits, c’est d’établir un pont entre les deux rives de la méditerranée et entre nos deux mondes... Pourquoi un écrivain doit-il toujours parler de lui et de ses aperçus du monde à lui? Pourquoi ne pas parler des autres qui n’ont pas de voix? Donc, à chaque fois que je rencontre quelqu’un, je le sens et je me dis:
"Tiens, il est proche de moi, il devient mon frère, il faut que je parle de lui," et ça se sent. Ça se sent d'un livre à l'autre.

LI: Vous n'avez pas peur que les perceptions ne soient pas les mêmes quand vous parlez pour quelqu'un?

DC: Cela dépend. À l'encontre du monde dans lequel nous vivons et dans lequel nous écrivons, je l'ai dit et je l'ai écrit, il faut bien une certaine façon de faire dérailler la littérature dite 'maghrébine d'expression française' afin de la situer dans le réel dans lequel nous vivons et il faut sortir également du roman. Le roman, c'est un carcan, c'est trop étroit... Je crois que l'ensemble de nos pays du Tiers-Monde, en voie de développement, ont perdu leur identité et leur culture. Je pense notamment aux Emirats du Golfe Persique, c'est américainisé. Il y a quelques exceptions très, très violentes à la recherche de l'identité: c'est l'Algérie. Mais moi, je ne suis pas Algérien et je ne veux pas faire de politique. Il y a le Maroc qui essaie aussi. Mais moi, je dis que notre avenir à nous - que ce soit le monde Arabe ou le monde Africain - c'est la poésie. C'est une réponse humaine, ouverte à la technologie déshumanisante qui s'empare déjà du roman de telle façon que le roman lui-même a tendance à devenir un produit de marché... Bien sûr, derrière l'humour il y a un certain pessimisme. C'est vrai, je ne suis absolument pas content de cette fin de siècle où nous avons
tous les moyens de connaissance et de compréhension, où j’assiste à une incompréhension totale... Le danger qui guette un écrivain de quelque pays que ce soit, c’est qu’il s’encroûte dans le confort intellectuel. Il a trouvé une doctrine, il a trouvé un public et il s’arrête, c’est fini. Moi, il y a fort longtemps que je rêve de ne plus rien écrire, mais il y a quelque chose qui me pousse.

LI: Vous essayez de reproduire la réalité en faisant d’abord l’expérience de la vie que vous allez faire mener à vos personnages. N’était-ce pas le cas avec plusieurs de vos livres, surtout Les Boucs?

DC: Quand j’ai écrit Les Boucs, j’avais un pavillon à Villejuif que m’avait payé feu mon père. C’est un livre extrêmement violent sur l’exclusion des immigrés. Quelques scènes m’avaient frappé. C’est quelque chose que je ne peux pas accepter. Si l’art n’a pas de frontière, pourquoi pas l’être humain?... Alors, maintenant les frontières s’établissent encore de façon plus pernicieuse; celle de l’argent. Celle aussi de la culture. On est soit du monde francophone, soit du monde anglophone. Mais c’est là tout à fait un autre problème. Pour écrire Les Boucs, je vais répondre à votre question, certaines choses m’avaient frappé et j’étais journaliste. Je ne vous cite pas le nom du journal, c’est un journal de poissons comme aurait dit Coluche; mais j’ai fait un reportage. Et ce reportage-là n’a pas été accepté par le rédacteur-en-chef. Je me suis
dit je vais en faire un livre et j'ai fait *Les Boucs*... Je crois qu'à travers les personnages qui ne sont pas forcément moi ou des projections de moi, j'ai voulu montrer que la vie était un perpétuel mouvement, que la création est continue, que la mort n'existe pas. Tous mes personnages, d'une façon ou d'une autre, partent et sortent de leur coquille.

**Question** [d'un auditeur Français]: Pensez-vous que le carcan culturel de l'intégrisme dont on entend beaucoup parler puisse affecter ou affecte la littérature maghrébine des deux langues?

**DC**: Les intégristes? Je préfère dire terroristes, parce que j'aime beaucoup la langue française. J'ai appris le Français dans le Littré quand j'étais tout jeune. En quelque sorte, je suis un puriste mais n'en concluez pas pour autant que je sois un puritain. Pour moi, l'intégrisme a la même racine. Vous avez les intégrales mathématiques, vous avez l'intégrité personelle, vous avez quelqu'un qui est intègre... Alors, quant au problème de l'intégrisme qui n'accepte pas la littérature francophone, ça c'est une toute petite donnée du problème... Savent-ils déjà lire? Connaissent-ils le Coran? C'est la question que je me suis posée. Là s'est posé pour moi un problème, mais un problème très grave. J'avais à la fois lu Rushdie et Taslima Nasreen. Ça, c'est leur problème à eux. Surtout pour Rushdie. Je ne dis pas ça pour le démolir, mais Rushdie a
mis ses propres fantasmes dans le bouquin. Et là, il s'agissait d'un phénomène grave, c'est-à-dire de l'Islam. Il faut toujours s'interroger sur la genèse d'une œuvre. Qu'est-ce qui a présidé à cette naissance? Pourquoi tel livre et pas tel autre?... Il y a dix ans à peu près, j'avais assisté à la naissance d'un enfant et j'avais vu et lu sur le visage de la parturiente, et dans ses yeux, les affres, les douleurs de l'accouchement. Et puis, au moment de la naissance, lorsque l'enfant est sorti, encore attaché par le cordon ombilical, j'ai lu sur la figure et dans les yeux de cette même femme une joie incommensurable. La joie de la création. La plus belle, la plus bouleversante chose qui soit au monde. C'est à ce moment-là que s'est opéré en moi un déclic. N'importe quel musulman qui a lu le Coran, qui a été né dans le monde coranique, vous dira qu'un homme nommé Mohammed avait très souvent l'occasion, le besoin d'aller méditer dans une caverne près de la Mecque, dans le désert Arabique, le Mont Hira. Il était marié et heureux. Il avait une femme splendide qui avait quinze ans de plus que lui. Elle était à la fois son épouse et son amie. Elle lui donnait l'amour d'une femme et l'amitié d'une amie... Je connais parfaitement le Coran, je connais parfaitement ma culture, parfaitement. Je ne l'ai jamais oubliée. C'est mon fondement, très exactement comme la culture française; dans ce qu'elle a de magnifique, est devenue aussi mon deuxième fondement, ma deuxième base. Le déclic s'est donc produit un jour d'avril, il y a dix ans; le parallèle s'est établi entre cette grotte, où allait
méditer le prophète, et l'utérus. Tout simplement. Et je me suis dit que c'est vraiment formidable d'être un tout petit instant de l'instant avec cet homme bédouin, dans cette grotte au moment de la naissance; et puis la naissance donc de la religion. Après, j'ai arrêté. J'ai fait vingt quatre heures tout simplement. Je n'ai jamais parlé de moi dans ce livre; qui plus est, j'ai fait comme si je ne savais rien. Je n'ai pas voulu faire le prosélyte, contre ce que j'ai fait et qui a pris dix ans de ma vie. Bien entendu, dans ces dix ans j'ai publié trois ou quatre livres, mais de sujet-là j'étais comme enceint. Ce que j'ai fait, c'est d'essayer d'apporter le souffle poétique et sacré à la langue française. De telle façon que le style lui-même est devenu un personnage, le personnage principal. Et puis, une fois le livre terminé, j'ai eu le trac, peur; pas pour la réaction des intégristes que je ne connais pas, que je considère comme des jobards, mais peur vis-à-vis de moi-même. Est-ce que j'ai été assez intègre vis-à-vis de ce personnage-là en tant qu'homme et non pas en tant que prophète? Car à partir du moment où il a eu la première révélation, j'ai coupé. Fin... Bien que j'aie des contrats en France, avec Denoël, Gallimard, Le Seuil, je l'ai donné en priorité à un éditeur Marocain. D'abord comme une toute petite contribution à mon pays natal, et secundo pour voir comment allaient réagir mes compatriotes en terre d'Islam. C'était magnifique, magnifique.

LI: Au début de L'Homme du livre il y a un avertissement
Dans lequel vous précisez qu’il ne s’agissait pas d’un livre d’histoire mais d’une fiction qui a un rapport avec un personnage authentique. Ne vous adressez-vous pas là aux intégristes dont vous disiez que vous n’aviez pas peur?

DC: Vous êtes de mon pays, je peux vous dire la vérité. C’est une protection vis-à-vis de moi-même. C’est sous forme de question. Est-ce que j’ai fait un livre d’histoire ou est-ce que j’ai fait de la fiction? Voilà ce que ça veut dire.

LI: On remarque que chez plusieurs écrivains maghrébins il y a soudainement ce besoin de retour aux origines, au monde arabo-musulman. Cette remontée aux sources se retrouve aussi chez vous avec L’Homme du livre. À quoi donc est dû ce phénomène qui semble devenir d’un intérêt essentiel dans la littérature maghrébine?

L. Ibnlfassi: L'androgyne est un personnage qui peuple quelques-uns de vos livres, notamment Harrouda, L'Enfant de sable et La Nuit sacrée. On dirait que vous avez une obsession avec la même métaphore de ce personnage à moitié homme et à moitié femme, un personnage de sexualité ambiguë et ambivalente. N'est-ce pas là une certaine métaphoricité de l'auteur lui-même -non pas par rapport à sa sexualité mais plutôt par rapport à la dualité de son soi?

T. Ben Jelloun: D'abord je ne suis pas d'accord sur l'androgyne parce que ce n'est pas ça qui m'intéresse, ce qui m'intéresse c'est la dualité, la multi-culturalité. Ce
qui est aussi intéressant c’est de voir qu’un même personnage, on peut lui faire vivre deux conditions différentes mais pas en même temps, c’est ça qui est intéressant, c’est pourquoi on peut témoigner sur la condition de la femme. C’est comme quelqu’un qui se grime en noir pour connaître la condition des esclaves, ou quelqu’un qui se travestit pour mieux connaître les problèmes de telle ou telle catégorie sexuelle. Donc ce n’est pas le sexe qui est intéressant là-dedans, c’est plutôt le chemin qu’on prend pour témoigner sur une situation. Et ça, ça correspond aussi à la situation personnelle dans le sens biographique, mais étant donné que je suis dans deux cultures, arabo-musulmane et occidentale-européenne, c’est une façon aussi de transporter avec soi cette dualité et voir que dans cette dualité il y a matière à richesse et matière à approfondir plutôt que de réduire les choses.

LI: On parle souvent de La Prière de l’absent comme un roman autobiographique...

TBJ: Non, pas du tout.

LI: Peut-on dire alors qu’il s’agit d’une écriture anti-autobiographique puisqu’elle relate l’échec de vouloir se dire et s’écrire?

TBJ: Moi de toute façon, je n’ai pas cherché à me raconter
ni dans *La Prière* ni dans *Harrouda*. C'est-à-dire que je suis présent dans tous mes livres, parce que tout écrivain est présent dans ses livres et même s'il fait des livres de science-fiction. mais je ne suis pas présent en tant qu'objet se regardant soi-même. Je ne fais pas d'autofascination. Je ne suis pas fasciné par moi-même. Ce qui m'intéresse c'est qu'à partir de ma vie, à partir de mes mémoires, à partir de mes souvenirs, je peux alimenter les personnages que je crée. Comme je n'ai pas une imagination infinie, alors parfois je puise un peu dans mes connaissances les plus proches.

LI: Ma question à présent se porte sur *L'Enfant de sable* et *La Nuit sacrée*. A travers le personnage d'Ahmed/Zahra et celui du Consul, nous ne pouvons distinguer en fait qu'un seul personnage, mais fragmenté et qui se dédouble et qui vous représente. Ahmed/Zahra peut être interprété comme votre animus et anima, quant au Consul il a beaucoup en commun avec vous: l'amour pour la poésie, la lecture, l'écriture...

TBJ: Bon c'est une interprétation; mais moi je ne suis pas conscient de tout cela. Je n'ai pas prémédité tout ça, mais bon, moi je travaille un peu à tâtons; je suis là, je cherche puis je trouve un personnage et je le nourris par mes connaissances. Mais tous mes personnages portent ma marque si vous voulez, je me retrouve dans chacun; mais ce qui est intéressant dans un roman, ce n'est pas d'essayer
de vérifier si le réel est respecté, si l'identification est possible, ce qui est intéressant c'est de voir comment un écrivain transfigure le réel, le change, le transforme, le perturbe, c'est ça qui est intéressant. Voir qu'il le fait avec des personnages; ces personnages qu'il crée, dont il est responsable si vous voulez, mais en même temps c'est un personnage qui lui échappe. Un écrivain ne peut pas être entièrement lié par ses personnages. Ce sont eux qui parfois lui commandent l'écriture, ce sont ces personnages qui tracent les lignes principales d'un roman. Un roman, c'est quand même une aventure qui doit respecter certaines lois et ces lois, ce sont d'abord les personnages qui les inventent.

LI: En effet, d'ailleurs on a l'impression que les histoires dans vos livres prennent forme au fur et à mesure que vous écrivez et souvent sans aboutissement. Je pense précisément à L'Enfant de sable et La Nuit sacrée qui comportent une narration circulaire comme la "halqa" du conteur public. Par le biais de son personnage on distingue un auteur qui se cherche mais qui ne trouve rien. Il demeure, pour ainsi dire, prisonnier dans le cercle vicieux de sa narration.

TBJ: Disons que, de toute façon, l'auteur ne cherche pas. Si l'on se met à chercher, c'est sûr qu'on ne trouvera rien. L'auteur est quelqu'un qui raconte une histoire aussi simplement, il la raconte à sa manière; donc si à la
fin le lecteur est déçu, c'est que le point de départ n'a pas été assez clair. Autrement quand j'écris je ne cherche pas à prouver quelque chose. Comme ça, je pense que pour prouver des choses il faut écrire des essais. Je suis pour un peu raconter une histoire qui peut permettre aux gens, peut-être, de réfléchir, de rêver et de sentir que la réalité échappe un peu à l'enfermement. La réalité est beaucoup plus folle qu'on ne le croit. On a l'habitude de dire que la fiction dépasse la réalité; moi je dirais que c'est souvent le contraire, c'est-à-dire que c'est la réalité qui dépasse la fiction, c'est souvent comme ça.

LI: J'aimerais aborder avec vous maintenant un autre sujet: celui de la voix féminine. On vous dit souvent écrivain public; l'écrivain qui donne la voix à ceux qui ne l'ont pas. Cependant, ma lecture de vos textes m'amène à dire qu'en fait vous ne donnez la voix à personne; je pense que par contre vous vous appropriez la voix de l'absence et vous l'utilisez pour vos propres besoins.

BJT: C'est très alambiqué comme question parce que moi je ne m'approprie rien du tout, dans la mesure où quand je crée un personnage, je m'introduis dans ce personnage pour parler par sa voix je pense... Ce serait par exemple le cas si j'empruntais une voix réelle existante et que je disais que c'est ma voix. Non, puisque j'invente tout, je suis l'auteur et tout, par conséquent je ne vole rien à personne et je ne m'approprie rien; mais ce qui est d'abord
fascinant dans l’écriture c’est de parler par la voix des autres tout en étant soi-même. La voix des autres, dans ce cas précis, c’est la voix de personnages qui, bien sûr, sont inventés, créés, mais qui sont des personnages qui font partie, je dirais, du patrimoine ambiant de l’auteur. Je ne peux pas, par exemple, faire un livre sur un personnage pakistanais ou indien, parce que je ne connais pas cet univers, je ne connais pas ces gens, donc je suis forcément en train de faire des livres sur la réalité marocaine, sur les femmes marocaines, parce que je pense connaître un petit peu ça.

LI: L’homosexualité est un tabou de la société marocaine auquel vous touchez dans vos écrits. Vous n’entrez pas dans une analyse profonde certes, mais vous en parlez quand même par comparaison avec d’autres écrivains maghrébins qui peut-être évitent ce sujet ou par pudeur ou par auto-censure.

TBJ: Ce n’est pas un thème majeur dans ce que j’écris. C’est un thème qui est effleuré comme ça parce que d’abord, je ne connais pas très bien ce milieu; je l’observe comme tout le monde et je crois que notre société marocaine, comme toute autre société du monde, est traversée par ces choix sexuels différents, que la manière dont les Marocains vivent l’homosexualité intéresse plus que ce qu’est réellement la sexualité, parce que ce qui est intéressant de voir aussi chez les Marocains c’est leur attitude face
à des tabous, face à des interdits; or en général ce que je remarque c'est que l'homosexualité est une pratique qui se fait comme dans n'importe quelle société, mais en parler est pratiquement exclu, interdit, et c'est quelque chose d'assez confidentiel. Il y a un jeune Marocain qui a même publié deux livres jusqu'à présent en français. Il raconte ses expériences sexuelles...homosexuelles...

LI: Qui est-ce?

TBJ: Il s'appelle Rachid O. C'est quelqu'un... Ce n'est pas lui-même qui a eu l'idée d'écrire ces livres, ce sont ses amis français, il le dit d'ailleurs, qui l'ont poussé à raconter un peu ses expériences sexuelles, alors il raconte; il raconte et on retrouve un peu ce Maroc... Alors lui, il a un peu cette inconscience parce que je crois qu'il ne s'en rend pas compte, de dire tout, de dire ses relations sexuelles avec les hommes avec une crudité et une franchise assez rares chez nous. Alors j'avais fait un article l'année dernière sur ce jeune écrivain pour dire qu'il a de l'audace et c'est très bien. Cela dit, je pense qu'on ne peut pas aujourd'hui considérer que l'homosexualité est un tabou, parce que, bon, tout le monde en parle dans la société marocaine.

LI: Si jamais l'intégrisme musulman au Maroc prenait la même ampleur qu'en Algérie, vous sentiriez-vous alors menacé dans votre manière libre d'écrire, car qui dit
intégrisme dit censure?

TBJ: Bon cela n'a rien à voir avec mon cas puisque c'est un problème politique. C'est évident que l'intégrisme est une forme de totalitarisme politique extrêmement dangereux pour tout le monde, pour la réussite, pour le progrès du pays, etc... pas juste contre les intellectuels, mais il est évident que les intellectuels, les écrivains sont les premiers visés parce que ce sont eux qu'on voit en toute chose; ce qui est une menace grave... Enfin, cette menace - il ne faut surtout pas se taire, il faut continuer à écrire, à faire son travail.

LI: Pour terminer pourriez-vous me dire si vous travaillez sur un projet en ce moment.

TBJ: Oh oui, oui, je viens de terminer un travail sur lequel je travaille pendant quatre ans. J'ai travaillé sur ce roman tout en faisant autre chose. J'ai fait deux livres entre temps. Bon, c'est un roman qui n'est pas encore tout à fait terminé parce que ... bon, j'ai terminé l'écriture mais maintenant il est en train de se reposer et je le reprendrai plus tard. C'est à dire que je pense le publier l'année prochaine.¹

¹ Tahar Ben Jelloun is clearly referring to his novel La Nuit de l'erreur published by Le Seuil in January 1997. In an interview on the French television channel, TV5, he talks about the same length of time it took him to finish the novel (four years) and the complexity of its structure, just as he does in this interview. The story is about Zina, meaning both beauty and adultery, a liberated, modern and beautiful woman whose aim is to take revenge on the group of men who raped her.
LI: De quoi s'agit-il?

TBJ: C'est très compliqué, c'est un livre qui m'a donné beaucoup de mal, j'ai travaillé quatre ans dessus, je l'ai fait trois fois; c'est compliqué, je n'arrive pas à en parler sérieusement.

LI: Mais ça sera un roman maghrébin?

TBJ: Oh oui! Ça se passe à Tanger, au Maroc, ça se passe au nord du Maroc, oh, mais je reste proche, je ne peux pas aller ailleurs.

LI: Pourtant avec L'Ange aveugle...

TBJ: La Mafia; mais ça c'est une parenthèse. Ça ne rentre pas directement dans mon travail, ça rejoint un peu certains sujets comme l'étude sur la corruption de L'Homme rompu. C'est une littérature concrète, je dirais, qui est basée sur des problèmes très très précis.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Texts

(1)


(2)


Secondary Texts


Belsey, Catherine, Critical Practice, London: Methuen,
1980.


Bouraoui, Hédi, "Francophone Africa on Two Sides of the


Dziri, Mostafa, "Celui par qui le scandale arrive" in *Souffles*, No. 5, 1967.


Freud, Sigmund, "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914c), S.E., XIV, 90.


Marx-Scouras, Danielle, "Reconciling Language and History in Maghrebin Literary Criticism" in *The Maghreb Review*, vol. 9, No. 3-4, 1984.


Nisbet, Anne-Marie, Le personnage féminin dans le roman maghrébin de langue Française, Toronto: Editions Naaman, 1982.


Smith, Paul, *Discerning the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988 (Vol. 55 of *Theory and History of Literature*).


Wright, Elizabeth, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in*