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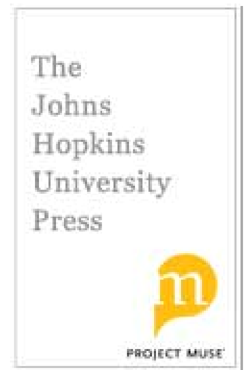

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Dis/Abling the Narrative: The Case of Tombéza

Salwa Ali Benzahra

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> We were told we were making the music of Satan. It wasn't just us Raï singers who were threatened, though. The fundamentalists used to kill all the journalists as well as the musicians. . . . They kept saying to me: "We'll kill you if you say anything and we'll kill you if you sing." In truth, they would have killed if I stayed quiet, too. The only thing I could do was sing. That was my weapon. (Chebb Khaled, *Le Monde* 2001)

It was with much dignity and considerable courage that the writer Rachid Mimouni labored fiercely for years to paint a grim picture of a mutilated society. It is no secret that he battled with ill health and fear until he died of cancer of the liver in Tangier in 1995. One may attribute his success as a writer at least in part to that same ill health, what Edward Said aptly called "illness as narrative." All of this struggle, however, should not be allowed to detract from his position as perhaps the most authentic voice that was

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determined to tell of the predicament his protagonists must endure before they liberate themselves from the instinctive life of an old, violent culture. The protagonists disturb and unsettle the reader because they live at the margin, the edge. It is the nature of their life.

My purpose in this essay is to reflect not on the victims of terror, but on the other victims: the marginalized from *within*; in sum, the physically disabled. *Tombéza*, by Rachid Mimouni, will serve as my *exempli gratia* of rejection and ostracism. This elegant and haunting novel casts us deep into the underworld of perversity. Unlike its author, it lives still in a country overtaken by a group of "insane" people, a group that seeks to control every element of life according to the laws of their stringent moral theology: no work of beauty created by human hands should rival the wonders of their God.

Silently holding his ground, Tombéza withstands the multi-dimensional oppression he is subjected to, using the narrative and his personal history as weapons against puritanical forces. In the process, the reader is taken into the abysmal depths of the protagonist's dreams, memories, hopes, and impediments and his now empty family life. The questions therefore arise: Why this violence (of the letter) that keeps being yanked back into the terror and drudgery of the daily routine by the vandalism, assaults, and death warrants that afflict the writer and the reader alike? How far can Tombéza go to maintain hope and renewal in a society that is running short of both? What are we to make of the allegory, bequeathed to the world by Mimouni, and can we read it as a humanistic testimony, gleaming from beyond the grave and beaming at the complacent conscience of the world? Without intending to answer all the questions raised here, I would like my views on the subject of writing against the knife and/or bullet in present-day Algeria to be clear from the outset.

Mimouni had an acute sensitivity to human suffering. He described the atrocities incidental to the Islamist action—prisoners shot, women raped, children and elders slain and mutilated, mosques burnt, even beehives torched—with an inarguable terseness. In a moving tribute to the outcasts, he sought to draw attention to their plight as well as represent their predicament. In doing so, he forces us to recognize the existence of an entire underworld of drifters and outcasts at "home," as it were. It is in this sense that he is unique because he allows broken individuals to lead in a narrative that teems with *half-made* lives. A case in point is *Tombéza* where the writer paints a character handicapped by numerous social and physical disadvantages, to relate the difficulties of the Algerian society and to trace its disability to complex cultural causes. At the same time, Mimouni demonstrates that the role the female plays in shaping the experiences of such men is crucial to their survival.

Tombéza, a child of rape, is born unwanted and unloved into a peasant family in 1930s Algeria. His fifteen-year-old mother has been so savagely beaten by Messaoud, her father, for dishonoring the family that she is seriously and permanently injured. Further cruelty ensues when her pregnancy becomes obvious and an abortion is attempted: eventually she dies giving birth. Tombéza, who is born deformed, describes his appearance as follows:

> Beau spectacle, en effet, que mon apparition offrait ! Noiraud, le visage déformé par une contraction musculaire qui me fermait aux trois quarts l'oeil gauche . . . rachitique et voûté, et de surcroît affecté d'une jambe un peu plus courte que l'autre. (Mimouni 1984, 33)
>
> [Indeed, what a lovely sight my appearance presented! Swarthy, my face distorted by a muscular contraction that three quarters closed my left eye . . . rickety and crooked and further hampered by one leg being a little shorter than the other.]

Although raised in his grandfather's household, the child is effectively excluded from family membership by his grandfather's refusal to recognize his existence or even to make eye contact with him. He is also left without a formal name, although the children of the village mockingly provide a nickname for him, "Tombéza," a word play on the French verb "tomber" (to fall), which ridicules both his appearance and the condition of his birth. His illegitimate status also excludes him from the local Quranic School. The best that he can possibly expect from life is to scratch a living running errands or subsist on charity as the village freak. But the very characteristics that alienate him from his fellow Algerians make him an attractive prospect for the French who plan to exploit his bitterness against his own society by recruiting him as a spy. This work provides him with the opportunity to accumulate wealth, marry advantageously, and exercise power over his compatriots, able and disabled alike. When, over the course of numerous surveillance missions, he infrequently encounters other disabled individuals, his reaction to them is interesting—sometimes empathetic, at other times callous. Ultimately however, he is betrayed, wounded, and finally, to ensure his silence, murdered by a policeman—a corrupt fellow Algerian and Tombéza's partner in crime. The story, tragic in its own right, unfolds against a backdrop of sweeping change and national tragedy as the French continue to entrench their imperialist presence. Even greater upheaval accompanies the onset of World War II with the influx of American troops when Algeria forms part of the theater of war.

The male dominated society that Mimouni depicts is founded both on a gendered concept of honor and a forced separation between the sexes. In The Maghreb women are still considered inferior; at a distinct disadvantage to men,[1] although society also requires that they be both good-looking and

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strong enough to deal with the demands of physical labor, particularly childbearing. The birth of a boy is cause for riotous celebration within a family. It is a much different matter, however, if paternity can not be established, as under these circumstances a male child will not be accorded the societal advantages that his sex would normally assure him—he will be rendered effectively genderless, his masculinity negated—in fact his social standing might be even lower than that of a woman.

During World War Two, the French forced tribal leaders to select the best physical specimens from amongst their men so that they could be sent to fight for *La Gloire de la France* (Mimouni 1984, 66). As a result, Algerian society became sensitive to the reality that the quality of the local bloodstock was being depleted. It was also important that the remaining manpower should be robust and capable of resisting the colonial presence, accordingly the disabled were viewed with increased intolerance. Tombéza's bizarre appearance, distressing in itself, is a constant reminder to his family and community of the condition of his birth; his physical disabilities are interpreted as a mark of divine punishment for the sins of his mother rather than as the result of the abusive treatment that she received. Tombéza explains:

> J'ai grandi sous la risée des enfants du *douar* . . . [Leurs] mères en profitaient pour faire un peu de morale à leurs rejetons.
>
> —Regardez, disaient-elles, le fruit de la débauche et de la fornication! (Mimouni 1984, 33)
>
> [I grew up as the laughing stock of the neighborhood children. Their mothers would make use of my appearance to lecture their offspring.
>
> —Look! They would say. The wages of sin and fornication.]

He also contests society's rationalization of his disabilities:

> Fruit de l'illégitimité . . . ! Allons donc, laissez-moi rire ! Je rirai des siècles entiers. Plutôt le résultat de la fantastique rossée qui laissa ma mère idiote, sans compter ce qu'elle a connu de rudoiements, de coups, de bousculades au cours de sa grossesse, sans compter les infâmes breuvages qu'elle fut forcée d'ingurgiter, sans compter le manque de soin, la saleté . . . , la faim, les maladies qui furent mon lot quotidien.
>
> —La fornication ! Hypocrite société! Comme si je ne savais pas ce que cachent tes apparences de vertu, tes pudibonderies. (Mimouni 1984, 34)
>
> [Fruit of illegitimacy . . . ! Come on, allow me to laugh! I could laugh for whole centuries. More likely the product of the unbelievable thrashing that left my mother an idiot, not counting the bullying that she had been subjected to, the blows, the knocks during her pregnancy, not counting the vile brews that she was forced to swallow, not counting the neglect, the filth, the hunger, the diseases that were my daily lot.

—Fornication! What hypocrites! As if I didn't know what your facade of virtue and prudishness conceals.]

Generally, Maghrebian society tends to be more forgiving and accommodating when physical abnormalities are borne by a male,[2] but because Tombéza has been denied his masculine status, he is left at an additional disadvantage. Doubly handicapped by his uncertain paternity and his physical disabilities, Tombéza is alienated. He, however, becomes the scapegoat for all the ills of his country and a pariah within his own community. Despite this rejection, he continues to define his disabilities as culturally acquired and blames the deplorable sanitary conditions, scarcity of food and the primitive traditional healing malpractices fostered by his community's superstition, which also had such a deadly effect on his mother.

Tombéza's lack of a name, almost a denial of his identity, could be a curious product of the prevailing culture of the time when male and female family members were discouraged from calling each other by name; married couples would refer to their spouse as "he" or "she." In his handling of his grandson, Messaoud chose to apply the social rules that were intended to govern a man's treatment of women rather than those that a family would normally employ towards a disadvantaged orphan boy in their midst.

It was also customary in those days when men chose to ignore the presence of women, to not look at them and therefore "not see" them. In Messaoud's refusal to gaze directly at his grandson, he could be deemed guilty of religious hypocrisy. Such an attitude could be interpreted as an extreme distortion and misapplication of the Islamic recommendation that men must avoid prolonged eye contact with women or that they lower their eyes when they interact with them. While Messaoud's behavior is strikingly similar to the way in which the men in his culture avoid looking at women out of (dis)respect for the other sex—although it is true that some Algerian/Arab/Muslim men do not look at women during conversation out of genuine respect and modesty and in the interests of listening more closely—the motive and impact of the grandfather's conduct is a far cry from any guiding religious principle. By refusing to name or to make eye contact with his illegitimate grandson he further reduces the child to a state of femaleness.

In traditional Islamic countries, it is also characteristic of the men to hold women responsible for all unwelcome changes to the world order and to vent their feelings of humiliation, frustration, and powerlessness on their female relatives. The beating that Messaoud administers to his daughter for having allowed his family to be dishonored is a violent manifestation of his sense of loss of control over the world as he used to know it. His disproportionate aggression expresses the rage, humiliation, and despair of a patriarch who finds himself a powerless spectator of the sweeping changes that are tak-

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ing place around him at the hands of the colonizer. Faced with the reality that in truth he retains command over only a few small elements of his shrinking world, he singles out the most vulnerable female in his household for punishment on the pretext that as a victim of rape she was transformed into a woman without allowing him to control the transfer of her domination to another man. This honor-related brutality echoes the deadly real-life practices that are still taking place today in other patriarchal societies such as Jordan and Bangladesh.[3] The following passage describes the father's punishment:

> Sans mot dire, l'homme alla décrocher sa canne . . . Ce bagarreur émérite des combats de *çofs* maniait en expert son bâton d'olivier à bout renflé, visant la tête, les articulations des membres, bien au fait des endroits sensibles du corps, où la douleur irradie jusqu'au cerveau, ou les coups laissent des séquelles indélébiles. La main tendue de la fille dans une muette et terrible supplication n'eut pour effet que de décupler la rage de l'homme, la violence et le rythme de ses gestes . . . La fille ne put jamais se remettre de ce phénoménal tabassage. Défigurée à jamais . . . Elle en sortit avec le regard fixe et l'esprit absent. Elle ne comprenait plus ce qu'on lui disait, ne savait plus parler . . . Toute la famille se mit à attendre sa mort. (Mimouni 1984, 30-31)[4]
>
> [Without saying a word, the man went to take down his stick . . . This renowned combatant of the *çofs* wielded his clubbed olive-wood stick with expertise, targeting her head, the joints of her limbs, aiming precisely at the most susceptible areas of the body where pain floods to the brain, where blows leave permanent scars. The girl's hand, extended in a mute and terrible supplication, served only to focus the man's rage, the violence and rhythm of his blows . . . The girl could never recover from this terrible beating. Disfigured forever . . . she emerged from it with a fixed stare, devoid of any spirit. She could no longer understand what anyone said to her, no longer knew how to speak. The whole family awaited her death.]

Cruel as is Tombéza's own predicament, he is also aware of the suffering of others. In one instance he draws attention to a woman who becomes "impotente" and is abandoned by her family at a hospital where subsequently she dies after being raped by a member of the staff (Mimouni 1984, 196). That this young woman should be cast off by her family within a culture where the bonds of kinship are supposed to be so strong testifies to the devaluation that the female body suffers within the same society upon loss of health. Absence of the protection and dignity that she would naturally receive at home leaves her in an utterly vulnerable situation, and it is the very knowledge of her insignificance and defenselessness that enables the hospital worker to violate her in the confident expectation of impunity. In fact, it is her family and society's failure to protect and serve the woman that is the most

crippling contribution to her condition. In dis/abling the narrative, Mimouni challenges his society's definition and management of disability.

The prevailing conditions of poverty and woefully inadequate medical care in pre-war Algeria were exacerbated by the onset of war and the increased Western presence. The Americans in particular, introduced irreversible changes to the indigenous culture and created long-term dependencies in the Algerian economy. It is interesting to note that the sense of American superiority as experienced by Tombéza and many of his fellow Algerians also extends to their concept of aesthetic perfection, in fact Tombéza begins the description of his own infirmities with his color "noiraud" (Mimouni 1984, 33). This is illuminating not only of the fact that being dark-complexioned seems to worsen the condition of a disabled individual in The Maghreb, but also that imported beauty standards appear to have reinforced and strengthened the existing preference for white skin in the region. What if Tombéza's skin had been white? What if, albeit illegitimate, he had been born healthy and looked like a "normal" French child? His experience in life might have been a little less wretched, both at home with his grandfather and in the outside world.

The very disadvantages that ensure Tombéza's rejection by his own society, however, have an entirely opposite effect on the French who welcome him into their workforce as a highly prized "ressource humaine." Already well aware of the alienation of the disabled within the colony, the French agents recognize the rich potential within Tombéza of a suppressed and internalized violence and anticipate a bitterness against his own society, which they intend to exploit. Tombéza is assigned to surveillance and information gathering where as a spy he acts as the eyes of the colonizers, somewhat ironic given that he is partially blind (Mimouni 1984, 101).

There is a poignant connection between elements of this narrative and the reality of violence in Algeria under Islamic extremism. An article recently appeared in a Tunisian newspaper, which dealt with the complex fundamentalist violence occurring in Algeria since the early nineties, and described an incident where a dwarf was responsible for the brutal butchery of a number of villagers. Irrespective of whether this is truth or fantasy, the article prompts the question of how much of a person's violence might be caused by oppression and exclusion from his own society as a result of his physical differences. Such an investigation could provide a valuable field of research for social scientists and statisticians who might be able to trace a correlation between those who espouse Islamist causes and the alienating effects of society's reaction to an individual's physical abnormalities and disabilities.[5]

Tombéza's recruitment by the French alters his relationship with his own people and in many respects sets him further apart from them, although it

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also provides some unexpected opportunities for human bonding. In one incident, Tombéza refuses to denounce a disabled and disfigured dwarf whom he glimpses in the dark during a surveillance mission (Mimouni 1984, 138). Although he appears only fleetingly in the novel, this man evokes rare sensitivity and emotion in the protagonist. The dwarf's deformities were politically acquired, his scars the product of Algeria's struggle against French imperial might. While fighting as a guerilla he was badly burned during an ambush, horribly disfigured by bombs that were dropped as a countermeasure by the French army. Tombéza identifies with this man and chooses to protect him from capture and torture since he can understand only too well the agony that he must have endured throughout his life as a result of people's reaction to his appearance:

> Pendant combien de temps encore cet homme pourra supporter la répulsion que son apparition provoque chez ses semblables ? Les jours passeront, s'émoussera lentement le prestige du maquisard, seront plus pénibles les humides nuits de l'hiver qui réveilleront la douleur, et les petits enfants effrayés que sa vision fera fondre en larmes, et la mère serrera dans ses bras son rejeton apeuré, cachant son visage contre son épaule, et devant cette scène mille fois répétée tu n'oseras plus sortir dans la rue qu'avec l'obscurité, la tête enfuie sous la cagoule de ta *kachabia*, et tu fuiras la lumière et les hommes. (Mimouni 1984, 157-58)
>
> [For how much longer could this man endure the revulsion that his appearance evokes in his fellow men? Time will pass, the prestige of the freedom fighter will fade, the damp winter nights that reawaken sorrow will become more painful, small, scared children will dissolve into tears at the sight of him and a mother will clutch her frightened child in her arms, hiding its face against her shoulder. Before this scene can repeat itself a thousandfold, you will not dare to go out into the street except under cover of darkness, your head tucked deep into the hood of your kachabia, you will avoid light and humankind.]

This benevolence is gratefully rewarded when Tombéza later finds himself held hostage by villagers who are seeking revenge for their mistreatment at the hands of French collaborators. Tombéza describes his reunion with the dwarf:

> Qui est cet homme ? . . . C'est étrange, mais je n'ai pas peur de lui. Il se glisse derrière moi . . . Mon libérateur détache aussi mes chevilles.
>
> —Fuis, me dit-il. Va-t'en, et ne reviens jamais dans la région. Je le regarde, muet d'étonnement avant de reconnaître ces yeux que le faisceau de ma lampe avait cueillis sous une haie dans la nuit du camp de regroupement.
>
> J'ébauche quelque gestes mais il m'est impossible de me relever. Je rampe vers la porte entrouverte. Alors, l'homme a eu ce geste que je n'oublierai

> jamais : son bras fraternel se place sous mon aisselle et me soulève. Pour la première fois de ma vie, j'ai pu m'appuyer sur une épaule offerte. (Mimouni 1984, 159)
>
> [Who is this man? . . . It is strange, but I have no fear of him. He slides behind me . . . My rescuer also frees my ankles.
>
> —Flee! He tells me. Get going and don't ever come back here! I stare at him in dumb astonishment before recognizing the eyes that the beam of flashlight had caught under a hedge on the night of the rallying camp.
>
> I try to move but it is impossible for me to get up. I crawl toward the half-opened door. It was then that this man made a gesture that I shall never forget, he places a brotherly arm under mine and raises me from the ground. For the first time in my life I could lean against a kindly shoulder.]

This expression of understanding, sympathy and acceptance is a touching episode in Tombéza's bleak existence.

Toward the end of the novel, another incident warrants examination. Tombéza's response to the blind man, Bismillah, is both interesting and significant. Bismillah, whose name is Arabic for "in the name of God," is so called not only because he is a religious man who faithfully attends prayers but also because he utters the expression frequently as he finds his way along the street with his olive-wood cane. Tombéza is intrigued by this person, but reacts to him with a puzzling combination of cruel superiority and reluctant respect, exemplifying the divided consciousness with which disabled individuals sometimes relate to each other. At the same time, Tombéza's depiction of Bismillah draws on a traditional image of the blind as visionaries, and it is, in fact, this insight that enables Bismillah to rationalize his own maltreatment when Tombéza threatens to push him over a cliff to force an admission from him that his life rests entirely in Tombéza's hands, thereby negating the will of Allah. Bismillah's response is astute:

> C'est ma cécité qui t'encourage à me tenir ce discours. . . . Tu n'oserais pas blasphémer ainsi si tu savais mes yeux fixés sur toi. C'est donc que tu n'as pas de regard intérieur. (Mimouni 1984, 262)
>
> [It is my blindness that encourages you to force this conversation on me. . . . You could not dare blaspheme in this way if you could see me staring at you. Therefore (I conclude that) you have no insight.]

However, Tombéza finally offers Bismillah's guidance as good counsel to their society: that a possible solution to the ills of Algeria is a return to the roots of the Islamic faith by following the teachings of Allah, not in a hypocritically selective, dogmatic, or violent manner, but in a poetic and merciful spirit. Tombéza had also been inspired by another teacher who believed that the

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Algerian people should reclaim the essential power of the Arabic language by combining Western education with the reading of canonical works like those of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. But, above all, Tombéza hopes that his people should again learn the divine poetry and practice its teachings with compassion for their fellow humans, particularly the disabled.

Beyond his portrayal of the predicament of the Algerian society in the throes of transition, there is one theme which runs through everything Mimouni has written—human communication and the lack of it. In *Tombéza*, he shows us the impossibly complicated difficulties of one person speaking to another, attempting to make himself known to another, attempting to hear—really hear—what another is saying. One of the things that accompanies the throes of transition is the explosion of narratives that manage against all odds to tell of their experiences. The result of decolonization and the development of newly independent peoples, like the rise of the women's movement from subaltern to coeval status, like the appearance from obscurity of various and variously suppressed minority voices, these things have demonstrated that all forms of knowledge about human history are forms of engagement in it (Said 1993, 215). This is particularly true, of course, in the experience of writing back to the West, where we have come to realize—if not always to acknowledge—that the formation of such voices in emergent narratives like *Tombéza* occur within those sites of intensity and contest we have tended to associate only with political struggle. The scientific images of inferior races that marked the nineteenth century are, to use a notion elaborated by Edward Said, part of the production of these beings as second class, and hence as dominated by the wielders of the scientific discourse about blacks, Arabs, women and primitives. Mimouni, on the other hand, brings forward another breadth to post-independence narrative. It teems with hitherto excluded voices, voices like that of Tombéza, which makes another topic, subject and "matter" about which interest and knowledge have evolved, but like all other such knowledge they are implicated in the contest over and about Algeria.

This measure is nowhere more evident than in Mimouni's unblinking witness and electric, heroically wrought prose, of which a final measure of slangy pungency must inevitably shock his readers. He certainly could invent, and the forces that oppressed him were *interior* enough to be converted into giant fables, tragic representation of the brown man's burden and unease. There are other oppressors too. The ones standing on the outside or the *exterior*—the philistine censors and paranoid enforcers of the increasingly totalitarian revolution he initially supported and, to the end, sought to accommodate. But no imaginative conversion, and not even silence, once his talent had announced itself, could evade or placate them. His narrative

and/or art flourished in Algeria's false dawn. As darkness fell, he became his talent's warder; his vitality became his enemy.

Notes

I wholeheartedly thank Fran Devlin for reading and polishing the manuscript in its entirety as well as translating the quotations from French to English and acknowledge her kind generosity. Heartfelt thanks also go to Carolyn Bryson for proofreading the text. Mustapha Marrouchi helped me coin a befitting title. To him I say many thanks.

[1] Think of the period 1930s-1950s and the case will be clear enough. Women have evolved in spite of all the limitations imposed upon them.

[2] A disabled man in The Maghreb can easily get married. The same cannot be said of a disabled woman. A good example is to be found in *The Wedding of Zein* by Tayeb Salih (1976). The bride is usually very pretty. This is the case of Tombéza's bride. It is worth pointing out that the manhood that is forcibly granted Tombéza in marriage is in another gesture taken away from him as a bogus medico-societal narrative sterilizes him and makes him unable/disabled to father a child, less of a man once again. This could also be read as a fictional representation of the forced sterilization that society has variously subjected disabled people to. For more on the subject, see Mimouni (1993).

[3] I owe this insight to Barbara Walters, 20/20 ABC (November 1, 1999).

[4] *Çofs* were guilds, unions of men carrying on the same profession or trade in the Kabylie region.

[5] It may be useful to point to the blind Islamist Sheik, Omar Abdel Rahmen, who is serving a sentence in a New York jail for masterminding the first bombing of the World Trade Center.

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