Birth and Development of the Moroccan Short Story

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Studies in the field of Moroccan literature show that the Moroccan short story written in Arabic has known four phases of development (El Koudia 3-7).[1] These phases remarkably reflect the writers' different reactions to their contemporary socio-political reality. Thus, we find that the dominant themes in each phase give expression to the major preoccupations of the Moroccan people during the period in question.

In terms of artistic presentation, the Moroccan short story has since its birth experimented with a variety of themes and techniques. In one of her pronouncements on the short story, Eudora Welty states that

> A short story writer can try anything. He has tried anything — but presumably not everything. Variety is, has been, and no doubt will remain endless in possibilities, because the power and stirring of the mind never rests. It is what the power will try that will most pertinently define the short story. Not rules, not aesthetics, not problems and their solution. It is not rules as long as there is imagination; not aesthetics as long as there is passion; not success as long as there is intensity behind the effort that calls forth and communicates, that will try and try again. (qtd. in Shaw 1)

The Moroccan short story is no exception to this statement.

We will chart out here the development of the Moroccan short story from its birth in the early 1940s to its present state in the late 1990s. For a comprehensive survey, attention is given both to the socio-cultural background in which the genre first saw the light and later developed as well as to the major narrative techniques this literary category has experimented with in the last fifty years.

In general, the beginning of a literary or critical movement is not easy to determine with precision, for artistic activity is a collective phenomenon, not an individual attempt; it requires the efforts of a number of writers and the emergence of a number of creative writings to assert itself. For a literary or critical trend to impose itself as new, it has to have idiosyncratic aspects that distinguish

it from already existing ones, and this would be impossible unless a number of attempts were made to crystallize it. Thus, it is difficult to set an exact date for the beginning of the short story in Morocco.

What is certain, however, is that the short story was late to reach the Atlantic side of the Arab world. Besides the fact that the short story as a genre is a relatively recent one in literary history, a number of elements contributed to its late arrival in Morocco, most of which are related to the socio-cultural scene in the country. In his *The Art of the Short Story in Morocco*, Ahmed El Madini attributes the late arrival of the short story to five reasons: 1) the short story in Egypt, which is considered the most important source for the Moroccan short story, took some time to mature enough to be influential or to set a model for other Arab countries, and when it seeped into the Moroccan cultural scene, it took some more time to be assimilated as a narrative mode in its own right; 2) the influence of *Assalafya*[2] was very strong; it encouraged Islamic education and a return to one's cultural heritage[3]; 3) writers' efforts were scattered among many different literary genres; 4) the condescending attitude towards the genre led to its being considered a kind of pastime, not a serious form of art; 5) the fact that the country was under European colonization for the better part of the first half of the century repressed the social structures into stasis, knowing that everywhere in the world the short story is mostly an artistic expression of middle-class reality, of its difficulties and crises, Gogol's, Maupassant's, and Chekhov's stories being cases in point (El Madini 55-59).[4]

Thus, El Madini suggests that we cannot speak of the Moroccan short story proper until the late 1940s (65). This date is controversial, however; in his MA thesis, *The Art of the Short Story in Morocco 1914-1966* (1966), Ahmed El Yabouri dates the beginning of the Moroccan short story from the publication of "The Two Brothers" in a Tangerine newspaper by its editor in chief on May 20, 1914, although the story in question is problematic in terms of both the nationality of its writer as well as its narrative structure.[5] According to El Yabouri,

> the period between 1914 and 1935 knew the production of stories in the form of rhythmic prose narratives, narrative dialogues, and travel narratives; immediately after this period flourished the social and historical story. This period, then, paved the way for the emergence of the artistic short story in Morocco. (qtd. in El Aoufi, *An Approach to Reality* 20)

A statement like this one suggests that the difficulty of dating the Moroccan short story may also be the result of the difficulty of defining the short story genre itself. For the period in question, as El Yabouri states, knew the emergence of various narrative forms which, though they could not be subsumed under the short story category, were not hopelessly remote from it, since those very writings were the

womb in which the artistic short story was conceived. We may consider that period, as El Aoufi suggests, "a complex chemical laboratory for the short story" (*Approach* 49).

Be that as it may, except for Ahmed El Madini, most Moroccan scholars, however (like Najib El Aoufi, Abdelkrim Ghallab, Ahmed El Yabouri, Ahmed Ziyad) agree that the late 1930s and the early 1940s is where we should look for the birth of the Moroccan short story.

The real short story, then, began in the early 1940s, and coincides with the birth of nationalism and anti-colonial resistance.[6] The fact is that the national movement was the womb in which the modern cultural movement was conceived, and it was in the cradle of this cultural movement that the short story was reared. For "the search for national identity … was a point of departure for a parallel and complementary search for a cultural identity," says El Aoufi (*Approach* 42). It is not a coincidence, then, that one of the main factors leading to the birth of the short story was the widespread circulation of newspapers and magazines, which were used primarily for militancy and ideological purposes. Thus the press turned out to be a double-edged weapon that served political and cultural purposes at the same time.

Hence it is that the colonizer's repression ultimately led to unexpected results: "the awakening of the national consciousness as a reaction to colonization found one of its best expressions in the short story," says Jilali El Koudia (3).The dominant concern in the stories of this period was the threat colonization posed to national identity, whence the writers' awareness of the necessity to defend that identity.

In Najib El Aoufi's words,

> From the turn of this century, Morocco witnessed deep historical and social transformations and interactions as a result of the complex shock of colonization, which upset its equilibrium, shook its fixed stars, and put it in a dilemma between rickety traditional structures and relationships and rising new ones. In other words, the shock put the country through a test of "identity."
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> These deep transformations and interactions had to be matched with similar ones on the level of thought and expression, on the level of cultural sensitivity and world view. New literary observatories were necessary to capture the echoes and rhythms of the new transformation, and the short story was, on the level of creative writing, the most important of such observatories. It came both as a witness to "the shock of modernism" and its result. (*Approach* 7-8)

But given the fact that this period is also characterized by a strong realistic strand, other social themes were tackled such as those that touched upon Moroccan traditions and institutions. The representatives of this period are Abdelmajid

Benjelloun, *The Valley of Blood*, Ahmed Bennani, *Fes in Seven Stories*, Ahmed Abdessalam El Bakkali, *Stories from Morocco*, Abderrahmane El Fassi, *Uncle Bouchnak*, Mohammed Khadir Raisouni, *Feasts and Tears*, and *The Spring of Life*, to cite only the most prominent.

The period of post-independence, the "second beginning," covers a time-span of about ten years: from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, during which the Moroccan short story "tried to assert its identity" (El Aoufi, *Approach* 10). "Politically speaking," says El Aoufi, "this period knew the setting of the traditional, direct colonizer and the rising of the new, indirect colonizer" (183). Again, talking about the short story in this historical juncture invokes a survey of the socio-political history of the period.

Now that the colonizer was out of the country, the national concern gave way to a deadly struggle over political power. In less than three years following the independence (1956), four cabinets took turns governing the country; the squabbles led to the dismissal from power of the left wing in 1960, which inaugurated the "new colonialism," as there was now no rival to compete with the dominant political class, which was made up mostly of those who had cooperated with the European colonizer, and who were consequently the first to benefit from the independence by safeguarding the ex-colonizer's interest in the country. Thus, in the absence of economic independence and social and political democracy, the ruling minority reaped the benefits of independence in wealth and political power while the overwhelming majority reaped the bitter fruits of independence in poverty, injustice and suffering (El Aoufi, *Approach* 188-192).

Culturally speaking, the period immediately following the independence and up to 1960 was a period of stagnation due to the lack of social and political stability. Moroccan intellectuals were waiting for the events to calm down so they could judge their position within the new situation. They had expected to be called upon to play a role in the country's leadership, only to realize ultimately the supreme hegemony of the political over the cultural.

It was natural, then, that the short story, with its sensitivity and its ability to capture dissonance in the rhythm of life, was a means of expression *par excellence* during this period. Thus the short story shifted, in terms of theme, from nationalism to the disillusionment that accompanied the Moroccan independence. The general feeling depicted in the short story written in this period is what Najib El Aoufi sums up as "the mirage of independence" ("The Moroccan Short Story" 72). El Aoufi thus links the development of the Moroccan short story to the development of the lower middle class (its intellectual minority, particularly), pointing to the interaction between the two from "the lean years of colonization, which were

characterized by a search for national identity, to the leaner years of independence, which were characterized by a search for social identity" ("Moroccan" 70). Thus, El Aoufi considers "the Moroccan short story as the official artistic mouthpiece for the lower middle class, the way the European novel, for instance, was the official artistic mouthpiece for the European bourgeoisie" ("Moroccan" 69). It is only natural, then, that the mood in the stories belonging to this period is one of disappointment, frustration, and indignation.

The intellectual elite thus became *engagé* and raised such mottoes as "There is a political commitment that we cannot avoid; it is that literature should be at the service of society, at the service of freedom; it should censure tyranny in all its manifestations; it should reveal social ills to help us be aware of them and eradicate them,"[7] upon which the short story subscribed to realism as a mode of representation.

But this period should indeed be considered an important one in terms of the development of the genre in Morocco. The short story began, indeed, to assert its identity on three levels: first, it became more sensitive to its artistic constitutive elements; second, it became more aware of its subject matter and critical role; third, it became more conscious of its Moroccan identity. It was also a period in which there was great interest in the short story as an art, independence having allowed for an influx of literary products, both in Arabic (Egyptian literature) and in translations (especially Russian and French literatures). Thus, the production and consumption of the short story increased considerably, the publication of short stories became a tradition in newspapers and magazines (there was even a specialized magazine: *Story and Drama*), story reading sessions were organized, collections were published, and the story began to benefit from critical response (El Aoufi, *Approach* 204).

In terms of form, there was a growing awareness of the necessity to move away from the classical symmetrical plot and to explore the potentialities of language in such a way as to make the short story able to respond powerfully to the new social reality. It is worth noting that the Moroccan university played a leading role in this movement. In his *The Language of Childhood and Dream*, Mohammed Berrada, who was then professor of Arabic Literature at Mohammed V University, states that

> Our concerted effort was focused on sensitizing the students to the necessity of change in all genres of expression, for the classical forms had grown inadequate, and the social and political changes necessitated a new language and new forms, etc. … and so we did not care for the "Timorian"[8] story with its beginning, climax and resolution; we rather highlighted the instant-story like that written by

> Chekhov, Catherine Mansfield, and El Kharrat, as this kind of story transcends the symmetrical structure, conceived of in terms of a ruler and compasses, to the depiction of spaces and movements, and the exploration of what is raging within our depth of sentiments opposed to what we see around us. (6)

It is not a coincidence that the most famous short story writers of this period were, besides Mohammed Berrada himself, students who had attended such lectures: Mohammed Sebbagh, Moubarak Rabiâ, Abdeljebbar S'himi, Driss El Khouri, and Mohammed Zefzaf are a few examples.

More domestic frustration and disappointment characterize the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, to which is added the Middle East crisis. After the independence, the "nation" gave way to "man" as a rich substance for dramatization. Now a new shift occurred: it is no longer the "nation" or the "man," but the frustrated intellectual's crisis that became the pivot of the short story. Of particular relevance in this respect is Abdellah El Aroui's statement in his book *The Contemporary Arab Ideology*: "the short story appears to be the matching literary form for our dispersed society, which is lacking in collective consciousness" (qtd. in El Aoufi, "Moroccan" 68). The topicality of this statement derives from the fact that the situation in Morocco was in fact an echo of the same situation all over the Arab world. Mohammed Zefzaf, himself a short story writer, confessed in 1971 that

> when the short story writer loses contact with his surroundings, he feels exiled, and his impressions turn into an attitude to the world; we thus find that the Arab short story is most often the short story of the intellectual élite, not that of a hundred million Arabs. (qtd. in El Aoufi, "Moroccan" 81)

But still, the domestic strand in the Moroccan short story remained by far the more dominant; witness the following titles of short story collections: *Down with Silence*, *Violence in the Brain*, *Sadness in the Heart and Head*, *Blood and Smoke*, *Shadows*, *The Search for a Happy Moment*, *The Simoom*, *Bitter Almonds*, *Flower Freak* — to cite only a few. A quick examination of these titles reveals the dominant melodies sung by these collections: repression, violence, helplessness, alienation.

Najib El Aoufi considers the focus on such topics and themes a sign of the serious crisis the Moroccan short story suffered during this period, in the sense that the stories appear to be variations on the same tune, which, for El Aoufi, means that the scope of the Moroccan short story was limited, dealing only with what Mohammed Berrada calls the "secret geography" of the self, at a time when it should have transcended it to deal with the secret geography of society itself.

In this light, the Moroccan short story of this period appears to be exclusively centered on the intellectual self. But we can certainly look at the issue from another perspective. In his article "Symbolic Realism in the Moroccan Story," Idriss Ennakouri sees that this situation is a sign of richness rather than weakness; the variations on the same tune

> did not preclude a variety of methods of treatment or a variety of insights of varying degrees.... [These stories] share a characteristic that makes them strange and thrilling texts with a powerful suggestive thrust.... They are characterized also by their high-profile intellectual attitude that reflects its keen awareness of its reality and its willingness to change it and go beyond it. (229-230)

As such, then, the variations on the same tune appear to be a positive rather than a negative feature of the Moroccan short story from the 1970s onward.

As we approach the 1990s, we find that the psychological story gains more and more ground. Mohammed Mouâtassim calls this trend "existential romanticism" (26), in which most writers, more keenly aware of the individual's isolation and of the difference between their values and those of society, focus not so much on a theme as on psychological introspection — not so much on what happens in reality as on how that reality impinges on their psyche. Thus the story tends not to express an intellectual attitude or ideology, nor does it tend to celebrate the self in a melancholic romanticism; it is simply a response to a tremor that it communicates to the reader. The act of writing itself thus appears to be a sort of safety valve for the maladjusted writer and a shield that protects him from the violence of social reality. That is why most narratives appear to be taking place in a no man's land between sleep and wakefulness; hence the presence in these stories of the interplay between light and darkness, day and night, phantoms and shadows, fantasies and illusions (Mouâtassim 26).

It is natural, then, that this period shows the influence of the nouveau roman, Kafkaism, stream of consciousness, and the theater of the absurd — these trends being indicative of the writers' awareness of the effect of matching form with content. The number of writers belonging to this period is too long to cite here; Mohammed Choukri, Ahmed Bouzfour, Miloudi Chaghmoum, Mohammed Daghmoumi, Mohammed Azzeddine Tazi, Hassan Bakkali, and Abderrahim Moueddin may be said to be representative of the 1970s and 1980s, but as we move forward towards the 1990s, we find Abdessalam Taouil, Mohammed Anakkar, Rajaâ Talbi, Abdelmajid Lahouas, and Latifa Bakka, to cite only a few.

In sum, then, it appears that both the birth and the development of the short story in Morocco are linked to the Moroccan social reality, and that this literary genre has always been the mouthpiece for that reality. But perhaps the prosperity

of the short story in Morocco originates also in its ability to adopt narrative modes that have matched its thematic evolution. This brings us up to the narrative aspects of the Moroccan short story.

As mentioned above, as early as the 1960s, the Moroccan literary scholars were aware of the necessity to break away from the Aristotelian conception of plot in the short story to meet the demands of rapid changes on the level of the social, intellectual, and political scene in Morocco. On the level of content, it is only natural that the thematic strand should reflect the idiosyncrasy of Moroccan life in general. We therefore consider the Moroccan short story from these two perspectives: the thematic and the formalistic.

From the 1940s until the Independence, as we have seen, the short story took upon itself the role of defending the threatened national identity. Thus, the majority of the stories written during this period dramatized conflicts in which the protagonist was the Moroccan nation and the antagonist was the colonizer. The Moroccan citizen was thus portrayed as a Prometheus defying his fate, wrenching his identity from the voracious teeth of the colonizer.[9]

But the colonizer's invasion of the country posed a threat not only to the national identity, but to the social identity as well. For "Just as the colonizer introduced his political and military … systems and laws, he introduced … his economic and social systems and laws" (El Aoufi, *Approach* 92). The Moroccan economic power, consequently, lost ground to the industrialized economy of the colonizer, which ended up banishing the traditional local economy from the sphere of competition. In this context, there emerged a social stratum that thrived on the misery of small craftsmen. This was a challenge to the social identity, for the social conflict that had remained latent for a long time was now brought to surface.

This new situation found extensive expression in the short stories of the time. In "The Weaver" by Abdelmajid Benjelloun, for instance, the protagonist finds himself helpless with his wooden loom in the midst of European factories that threaten his craft with the new weaving machines that work as fast "as if they were haunted by spirits." Here the narrator intervenes, saying that "what happened to Abdellah happened to those who had inherited their crafts, methods and tools from bygone days." The same thing happens to Abbas in the "Fisherman" (by the same writer), who realizes that his little skiff is primitive in comparison with the colonizer's well-made fishing boats.

It was natural in this context, too, that the Moroccan customs and traditions were negatively affected, especially as new ethical codes were introduced with sophisticated fishing boats and weaving machines. Thus, in Abderrahmane El Fassi's

"Uncle Bouchnak," the protagonist is a witness to the disintegration of moral and social values.

The national and social concerns thus appear to have been two sides of the same coin, which only shows how omnipresent the short story writer was on the national scene. In Mohammed Mouâtassim's words, during this period, the historical reality imposed on the writer the role of guardian of values and inspiring agent who fires the people's imagination; he thus

> takes pride in the customs and native language, criticizes the enemy, warns of his evil deeds, reveals his cunning ways, and predicts his untrustworthiness.... [He also] cites examples of historical figures, mythologizes contemporary heroes and celebrates their heroism to make of them models to be followed. (Mouâtassim 23)

In parallel with stories of a militant and social nature, there appeared a sort of didactic story of a melodramatic turn. Dickens-wise, Mohammed Khadir Raisouni dipped his stories into a Utopian, romantic world where the conflict is between goodness, faith, beauty, and love, on the one hand, and evil, degeneration, weakness, and poverty, on the other. The recurrent themes in these stories are love, nature, the irony of fate, conjugal life, the conflict of customs, the poor's hardships, and the callousness of the rich; but the happy ending is always there.

With the shift of concern after independence, the thematic aspect of the Moroccan short story also underwent a shift of focus. It is of course impossible to pin down the thematic strand of this period to a single motif, but the general trend was social concern. Three main themes constitute the weft and warp of the short story in this period: the marginalized working class, the intellectual, and the educated woman. In cinematic jargon, the long shot had given way to a close shot; the panoramic view of the nation as a unit had given way to a narrow view of the country as chopped up into classes.

In these stories, the laboring masses are always presented as victims of a flagrant social injustice that is perpetrated by those who exploit them and who treat them as if they were things or animals. But the conflict arising from the juxtaposition of the two social classes is not crowned with any awareness of that conflict or the necessity of facing it. The protagonist is always a defeatist who surrenders to social injustice, which is natural if we consider the helplessness of the social class he belongs to. It is also artistically plausible, given the fact that realism is the mode of representation characterizing this period. But these defeatist characters cannot be considered utterly negative, if we note that, in spite of their surrender to social injustice, they do not lose hope; they are endowed with a human energy that protects them from despair and extinction. Mohammed Ibrahim Bouallou is

the leader of this trend, to which belong also Moubarak Rabiâ, Mohammed Bidi, Abdejebbar S'himi, Khnata Bennouna, Rafikat Attabia, Mohammed Zefzaf, and Mohammed Berrada, to cite the most important.

The second recurring thematic element in the short story during this period is the intellectual. Socially speaking, the intellectual treads the fine line between the exploited proletariat and the exploiting bourgeoisie. And most of them, including short story writers, sympathize with the repressed social classes and sing their hopes and aspirations. That is why we find that one of the important strands of the short story in the 1960s is the social injustice weighing down the proletariat. But, being himself part of the conflict, the short story writer cannot help being present in what he writes, if only as a consciousness. Thus, the stories written by Idriss El Khouri and Mohammed Zefzaf, for instance, present exhaustive artistic reports on the intellectual within a social reality that is scrutinized with the eye of the intellectual himself.

A survey of the collections published on this theme shows that all of them dramatize the educated person as someone whose intellectual advantage does not entitle him to any social advantages; as such, he appears to be so like the proletariat, but his torment is a double one, in the sense that, unlike the proletarian protagonist, who is too busy carving out of the impossible something to live on, the intellectual is aware of his plight and knows how it has been brought about. He can also afford time to think about it, and thus has a keener sense of that injustice. In this respect, Mustapha Yaâla confesses that he wrote for two reasons:

> Living within a traditional society that was crippled and invalid, in a milieu that was weighed down with fetters and taboos, and confronting the difficulties and tensions of a backward reality, I felt the necessity of expression on behalf both of a self that was a victim of a crisis and of a censured society that was in search of a psychological equilibrium … but also in solidarity with other honorable writers who had taken upon themselves the task of revealing the decadence of the period, especially during the crucial seventies. (151)

The intellectual protagonist's response to this situation differs, however, from one writer to another. In Idriss El Khouri and Mohammed Zefzaf, the intellectual's response takes the form of a rebellion against extant social norms and values, as a form of a refusal of society and a rebellion against it, which, in the final analysis, is but a rebellion against and a refusal of the self. Such protagonists are always victims of loneliness and lack of communication, and they consequently find themselves turning in a vicious circle. Unlike El Khouri's and Zefzaf's, Mohammed Bidi's protagonists open up to their surroundings in an attempt to engage in a dialogue with society. Abdeljebbar S'himi's intellectual, on the other hand, turns

romantic, dreamy, and Utopian; he refuses society but does not rebel against it. Mohammed Znibar steers a different course; it is the opportunist intellectual who is the protagonist. In his "Overnight," for instance, the repressed, marginalized Amr turns into a repressing agent once, through nepotism, he realizes his dream and becomes the president of the religious scholars' council.

The third salient motif of the short story during the 1960s is the educated woman. A survey of the literary product of the time shows that it was largely the work of the male sex; this circumstance testifies to the marginalization of the woman not only socially but culturally as well, to which is added patriarchal repression. The two spokeswomen for this condition, Khnata Bennouna and Rafikat Attabia, belonged to the same social class as their male counterparts and held the same attitudes to the lower social orders, but the central conflict in the two women's stories was largely between the male and the female, disregarding the fact that the male was himself a victim of social and cultural injustice. The personality of the educated woman in Khnata Bennouna's *Down with Silence* and Rafikat Attabia's *A Man and a Woman*, however, is always negative, alienated, and lost, although the voice of the intellectual woman in these stories sounds protesting, rebellious, and refusing. The female protagonist thus appears to be of a schizophrenic nature: she rejects her self while celebrating her femaleness, she rejects the other (the male) while she feels a nostalgic desire for his presence, and she rejects society while surrendering to its dominant values and traditions (El Aoufi, *Approach* 343).

In general, then, the stories belonging to this period dealt respectively with class repression, spiritual repression, and patriarchal repression (El Aoufi, *Approach* 360), but underlying all of these, class antagonism remains the evil womb that gives birth to all kinds of repression. Thus, as we move through the three kinds of repression, we find that it is a cumulative process: class repression for the proletariat, class repression + spiritual repression for the male intellectual, and class repression + spiritual repression + patriarchal repression for the female intellectual. In essence, then, the difference between the three kinds of repression is a difference in degree, not in kind, and hence the difference in the respective protagonists' awareness of it.

The same situation persists through the 1970s and the 1980s — only with a keener awareness of the situation. In his study of short stories representing the period between the late 1960s and mid-1980s, Mohammed Berrada distinguishes what he calls four moments: the moment of recollection, the moment of revelation, the moment of confrontation, and the fantastic moment (11-26).

The focus in the stories dramatizing the moment of recollection is on the past: the invocation of childhood and a recourse to dream. But usually the radius of such moments becomes wider through bridges laid between the past and the present. The moment of recollection often frees itself from the compulsion of the past through a focus on the present. In Miloudi Chaghmoum's story "Shadow and Darkness" (1985), for instance, the narrator says: "In a state of nostalgia, the heart goes back to the past, but the past might be the future, sometimes when it is too late." The past thus becomes a pretext for a comment on the bleak present, or even the future: since the present is unpromising, the narrator often philosophizes his potentialities in an attempt to seek in dream such protection as would enable him to continue living. In the same story, the element of dream is foregrounded to such an extent that the reader begins to wonder whether the story is about dreams. It is not. But for the protagonist narrator, dreams are the only solace in a life that has always been torment and suffering:

> Dreams may be an antidote to madness … the best means of confronting reality…. If I could, I would ask people to take up dreams as an alternative to reality…. The one who gives up dreaming is dead; he has no wish to live…. Dreams are like art; art is dreams. You dream to cleanse things in the world, to return to the world its innocence and cleanliness…. Were it not for dreams, I would have died long ago; I would have become helpless to do anything.

The effect of these statements derives from the fate reserved for those who do not dream. The narrator mentions three of his friends: one is in prison, the other has launched himself in dishonest commercial activities, and the third has gone mad. The tragic undertones in these friends' fate originate in the narrator's subsequent statement that "we do not dream of the impossible; we dream of what is there, but which is difficult to obtain." In this respect, Mohammed Berrada says that, in the world depicted in such stories,

> there is madness and there is suicide, but there is that life within us that resists defeat, so it resorts to dream to retrieve things and to possess time through interpretation; it transforms dream into an element that helps create an inner Utopia that protects us from extinction. (32)

After all, as Plato says, in default of the real thing, dreams are a good substitute.

Stories dramatizing the moment of revelation are concerned with the revealing of relationships and their transformation. The focus in these stories is on man's relation to himself, to others, to time, to values, and on how these relations, noble as they may be in theory, are determined to a large extent by concrete reality. In "Sabaâ"[10] (1982) by Mohammed Zefzaf, for instance, we are called upon to witness a world of inverted values; the parameters defining man's relation to man and

to values have become the ability to earn, no matter how — to do anything that may keep poverty at bay. At one point in this story, the narrator says: "When the specter of poverty and indigence appears, values fade away, and the road is paved for transformations of all kinds."

Such stories are characterized by a powerful suggestive thrust: they revolve around an epiphany that suddenly infuses the whole story with significance, obliging us to readjust our reading of the scenes and incidents in the light of that moment, and at the same time to read beyond the story ending, which is usually an open one. In Abdeljebbar S'himi's "The Mirror Lady" (1980), for instance, the art exhibition, which is the pivot of the story, is but a pretext to re-draw a socio-cultural process in a society that is stumbling in its bourgeois aspirations, and where class strata overlap. The illuminating moment comes when, in the midst of the dazzling lights of this artistic event, the lady's husband says: "it is true that art is a sign of civilization, but the hungry stomach will look for bread first." At this moment, the reader has to re-read the story backwards, to question the wisdom of such exhibitions at a time when society is still struggling with the bare necessities of life. The characters' relations thus appear to have been fragile and sham from the start; all that is needed is a simple statement to reveal their frailty and to put them in the right perspective for the reader.

Stories dramatizing the moment of confrontation involve man's conflict with society and its formidable institutions and customs. In "The Strangers" (1969) by Rafikat Attabia, the woman who, in an attempt to build a Utopian relationship, defies society through a long-standing secret relation with her lover, only to realize after twenty-four years that she experiences a double alienation. In "The Man from Ceuta" (1970) by Hassan Ezzaoui, the same fate is met by the protagonist, who, in his confrontation with society, ends up realizing that "our tragedy is that we see a mirage and realize at the same time that it is a visual trick"; in other words, our tragedy is that we tend to see truth in what is sham. The drama in such stories refers us to the nature of the lurking society, to double-standard morality, and to a reality that banishes Utopian language and the realization of dream.

Stories dramatizing the fantastic moment blur the line of demarcation between truth and doubt, between the real and the unreal, to link observation to imagination, reflection to dream, to give the impression that what we think is not likely to happen is actually the usual and normal in our society, where the strings are pulled by invisible, though omnipresent and omnipotent hands.

"The fantastic is an unrealistic artistic tool used to depict a terrifying, strange reality" (Ennakouri 239). The fantastic mode of presentation is strongly linked to those stories dealing with the various manifestations of repression. These stories

are characterized by a strangeness of events and a choice of a matching language, which either denotes or connotes strangeness. Thus we find that these stories rely on disfigurement or metamorphosis that results from violent repression, so that entities lose their original shape and are transmuted into strange or futile beings. The reader thus finds himself in front of a strange and terrifying reality, hesitatingly facing a supernatural world with natural logic, trying to find an explanation, and that explanation is what ultimately extricates the text from its fantastic aura and brings it back to reality.

In this kind of stories the fantastic is usually coupled with parody, the purpose being to satirize the official government discourse by forcing into its compact structure fissures through which shine the marginalized unofficial languages — those languages that are a faithful expression of the 'real' reality. Another aspect of such stories is the strong presence of inter-textuality, which puts the dramatized experience into a wider context from which it draws wider significance and reveals the essence of the theme in a quick, economical way. We thus find references to Greek myth, English plays, French stories, folk tale, the Koran, the Hadith,[11] etc.

Whatever the nature of the thematic strand in any narrative form, it is only one side of the coin; the manner of presentation is the other side. In the early, founding period, the temporal framework of the short story was large enough to include years, sometimes a lifetime. Often, the story contained motifs that offered the possibility of further development, hence its heavy reliance on the traditional symmetrical plot. Violating the principle of make-believe, the founding period was characterized by a thin rendering of the reality so that the reader was at no pain making out the antagonists engaged in the conflict. El Aoufi suggests two main reasons for this: the first is the nature of the socio-political context of the 1940s and 1950s, in which, given the national cause, the antagonists were clearly known: national identity vs. the colonizer; and the second is the newness of the genre, which was at this stage still looking for an identity within the Moroccan literary scene, and which was therefore largely characterized by a one-to-one correspondence between text and reality.

In the 1960s, and with the adoption of the Chekhovian model, the narrative time was reduced to a minimum, often a day or so, more often an instant. This is one of the major developments the story underwent during this period, and which appears to have remained — to a large extent — a narrative constant up to now. The 1960s knew a change in the relationship between the narrative text and its extra-textual reality, too. The mode of representation was largely indirect, hinting and suggestive, and the reader was called upon to read between the lines. This is

the general mode of representation, for as this period was a middle one, there were a few writers who still wrote like their predecessors, while others went well beyond indirectness, looking forward to the kind of stylization that was to become dominant as from the late 1970s.

As mentioned earlier, the Moroccan University played a leading role in giving the short story the shape it has today, but this contribution ought to be viewed in its general context. As early as the 1960s, there was a growing awareness that the Moroccan literary scene, like that in the Arab world in general, needed serious reconsideration in the light of academic research undertaken worldwide. At the time in question, says Mohammed Berrada,

> critical discourse in Morocco … suffered from the hegemony and reductiveness of criteria. Primacy was given to definitions and standards drawn from different perspectives and trends; the critic thus judged the writer by the degree of his conformity to those standards — and so did the reader. The recurrent question was: what is poetry? what is the novel? or what is the short story? And on the basis of the answer to that question the writer's text was evaluated an external evaluation in which the categorizing effort was the leading factor. (7)

The fact was that such a reductive approach to literature no longer matched the academic awareness of the necessity to interrogate the literary text — not to categorize it — in order to disengage its cultural and ideological contents. The Chekhovian concept of the short story thus presented itself as a model to be followed, given the fact that such a model, with its focus on the epiphany, itself interrogates the dramatized reality instead of xeroxing it.

It is worth noting here that the Chekhovian conception of the short story rests on the premise that short fiction focuses on one character, in a one situation, at a single moment in time. These narrow limits allow for a close scrutiny of the dramatized incident in such a way that the fictional work appears to interrogate the depicted reality for a moment of truth in which the essence of the drama is revealed, and the whole story is suddenly infused with significance. For Mohammed Berrada,

> the short story has often been associated in our minds with its being a moment that is wrenched from time and its consecutive, uninterrupted rhythms, with its ability to fix a situation, a scene or an introspective process by means of a slow-motion camera that endows the snapshot with intense permanence. (5)

Put in Moroccan social history, Berrada's definition explains the urgency of moving away from the classical conception of the short story. The Moroccan writer was no longer satisfied with holding up a mirror to reality and presenting the reader with a copy of what he already knew, for what was not known was infinitely more

important than what was. And this would have been impossible unless the writer conceived of the short story as a medium that could fix reality and put it under a microscope. Thus, the evolutionary process of the classical form of short fiction had to give way to a short story as a medium of expression in which revelation was the watch word.

The Chekhovian model proved useful also in its "focus on one or two individuals who are seen as separated from their fellow men, at odds with social norms, beyond the pale," as Ian Reid says (27). The social disillusionment in the 1960s was largely the result of the marginalization of the social, economic, and cultural issues that affected the majority of people in Morocco. With this marginalization, ordinary citizens were marginalized in every sphere of life, hence the suitability of the short story, in its Chekhovian form, as a medium of expression during the 1960s.

From the 1970s onward, with the deepening of frustration, and when the intellectual ego became the pivot of the short story, the intellectual was dramatized within a spatio-temporal vicious circle, where temporal stasis and spatial circularity played an important role: indignation was celebrated in psychological introspection within a narrow sphere where the intellectual moved, usually between his home, the street, and a public house. Superficial realism thus gave way to "critical realism", which Housam Al Khatib defines as "a literary trend that is critical in attitude, realistic in style" (qtd. in El Madini 308). And this was coupled with an extensive use of the fantastic as a roundabout way of depicting the bitter reality.

In his study of a selection of Moroccan short stories written between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, Mohammed Berrada states that

> the memory of these stories is not what a mirror reflects…; it picks up and records what is lost in the midst of big events, and sees what the eye ignores while riveted to the lights of huge shows and the din of diverting scenes…. It does not record specific events, formulate demands, or lodge complaints; it picks up from different contexts, and through stylization and language, what confers on its framing moments the status of recollection affixed to existence within that experience… [The story], with its language, imagination and generecity, is able to reveal to us that what we lived through could have been different from what it was. (29)

Hence, modern and contemporary Moroccan short stories focus on the instant; they explore the density of that instant by cutting through the multiple layers of the dramatized situation.

"In the last few years, the Moroccan short story has resorted to experimentalism and a generation of forms," says El Aoufi (*Approach* 667). The recent period,

which Mohammed Mouâtassim labels "existential romanticism," is characterized by omission and implication; the language is always terse, the meaning concentrated. It suggests through symbols and hints through signs. Examples of this experimentalism are the use of folklore and Arab culture, the dramatization of the narrative text, or an exclusive focus on the potentialities of the linguistic medium, coined as "exploding the language," which sometimes gives the impression that the language is narrating itself, in the absence of an incident to narrate.

But the most remarkable distinctive feature of the contemporary Moroccan story remains by far the disruption of the story structure in a way that threatens a disruption of the communication between sender and receiver. Any reader of the stories written in the 1990s will notice that there is a radical departure from the classical form of the short story in the direction of a new form of writing in which the disintegration of social reality is reflected in the disintegration of the short story form: the story is chopped up into units with no apparent link between them; each has its own theme and subtitle (or number). Of course, given the fact that literary genres are in constant development, we cannot reject a new trend offhand. But while some experienced writers are skillfully laying the foundations for a new short story, at the hands of beginning writers, who naturally lack skill and experience, this new form of writing is often broadcast on a band of receptivity to which the Moroccan reader cannot tune himself.

The philosophy behind this new writing style is that since reality is splintered and chaotic, so the story should be — it being a medium of expression of that reality. The writer holds the mirror up to reality but then he breaks up the mirror into fragments and expects the reader to piece up that mirror in order to reconstruct the reality it reflects. Often, however, the reader is unable to.

There is an awareness of this situation on the part of Moroccan scholars; however, there is a scarcity of critical response to this new movement. Mohammed Anakkar, an established critic and short story writer, questions the wisdom of this trend and voices his concern about the hegemony of the theoretical aspect over the spontaneous impulse in short story writing; he states that the contemporary Moroccan short story writers

> have been transported by the zeal of theories, architectural planning and imported critical terminology, and they have consequently gone too far in this respect; this is one of the main causes that have contributed to the sterility of our narrative experiments and their backward evolution. ("The Short Story" 201-202)

Anakkar is actually concerned here with the essence of the short story as a narrative genre. In a very recent meeting with him, I asked him for an input on the issue. It was as follows:

> I think the aesthetic consciousness underlying the concept of the "splintered frame" in the short story is very far from the reality of the short story and its basic nature. In essence, the story is a narrative process, essentially concerned with the constitutive elements of narration — namely, characters, space, time and incident. Any narrative process that departs from narration or incident is actually delineating a philosophical concept more than it is aiming at narration itself as an uninterrupted flow of events and a depiction of passions, ideas, and emotions in a kinetic, dynamic manner.[12]

It is clear from this statement that Anakkar is taking issue also with any attempt at "exploding the language" at the expense of the narrative drive.

One may be tempted to consider this new movement as ushering in a new phase of development in the Moroccan short story. Only, it may be too early to make such an assertion now, given the fact that there is no sure indication that the new writing style will survive the test of time.

In a still unpublished article, Anakkar is deeply concerned with the repercussions of this narrative style on the relationship between writer and reader. He sees the new trend as a rift in the process of the development of the short story genre in Morocco, in the sense that the new trend has broken away from the models established by Bennani, Abdelmajid Benjelloun, Abdelaziz Ben Abdellah, and Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi. The new writers, says Anakkar,

> are starting from scratch, and this will oblige them to invest great efforts that may tax their creative gifts and prevent them from continuing their creative writing. Previous experiences in the field have proved that the new critics' and writers' belief in breaking with the past has caused a great number of Moroccan readers to shy away from keeping abreast with the young writers' narrative contributions. ("Questions")

Thus, Mohammed Anakkar takes issue with any approach to short story writing that does not take into consideration the fact that the short story is first and foremost a narrative genre. In this respect, Anakkar echoes Brander Mathews' century-old assertion that "a short-story in which nothing happens at all is an absolute impossibility" (77).

A legitimate question here is the following: if the classical model appears to have been exhausted and the new one has so far failed to impose itself on the Moroccan literary scene, what is the alternative? Anakkar suggests a compromise. In *The Patient's Companion*, a collection of short stories that he is getting ready for

publication, he suggests a model in which the short story may be divided into parts, each dealing with a specific theme or incident, but in which the organic unity is achieved through extension and complementarity between the constitutive elements in each of the parts.

We may conclude, then, by saying that the birth and development of the Moroccan short story has been linked to the Moroccan social reality, on the one hand, and to the educated middle-class consciousness, on the other. The way the former impinged on the latter was bound to find artistic expression in a narrative genre that has an inherent hypersensitivity to capture dissonance in the rhythm of life, but which, at the same time, and because of its scope, allowed that middle-class consciousness to explore the different facets of irksome social inadequacies. A hundred years ago, Henry James found this aspect of the short story a convenient one: "by doing short things, I can do so many, … touch so many subjects, break out in so many places, handle so many of the threads of life" (qtd. in Shaw 10). This may explain why the short story has flourished in Morocco in the latter half of this century, perhaps at the expense of other literary genres: neither the scope of the novel, nor its rhythm, nor else its sensitivity would have made it a suitable mode of expression for the historical juncture in question.

But the Moroccan short story owes its success no less to its openness to experimentation formwise. Since the 1960s, writers have embraced the Chekhovian conception of the short story and stuck to it to a large extent, in spite of continuing experimentation, convinced that the Chekhovian model is the most suitable one for the dramatization of themes worthy of a short story. In my opinion, the moment the writer decides that an impression is worth a short story, he implies that it is worth scrutinizing under a microscope, worth his cutting through the layers to reach its essence; and the Chekhovian model does just that.

However, Najib El Aoufi suggests that the Moroccan story "is still suffering the trauma of birth" (El Aoufi, *Approach* 661), despite what it has achieved. But after all, and allowing for a difference in degree, this is the case of the short story the world over. The short story will keep being born again and again:

> Variety is, has been, and no doubt will remain endless in possibilities, because the power and stirring of the mind never rests. It is what the power will try that will most pertinently define the short story. Not rules, not aesthetics, not problems and their solution,

as we have quoted Eudora Welty saying.

Experimentation is always a slippery ground; thus, recently, some writers, especially beginners, have indeed blundered into narrative exercises that barely touch the short story genre. But it would be wrong to generalize. There is reason to fore-

see a bright future for the Moroccan short story within the framework of experimentalism. Moroccan writers have never been self-centered: they are fully aware of what is going on in the world on the level of creative writing. Already, some writers like Mustapha Mesnaoui, Mohammed Berrada, Ahmed Bouzfour, Mohammed Ayachi, Mohammed Anakkar, and Miloudi Chaghmoum have gone some way in the founding of a new style of writing within the short story genre in Morocco. But an objective evaluation of these attempts has yet to wait for some more time. ❋

Notes

[1] Except for El Koudia's book, which is originally written in English, all the works quoted here are in Arabic, and the translations are mine.

[2] *Assalafya* (Traditionalism) is an Islamic reform movement founded in Egypt by Mohammed Abduh (1849-1905).

[3] This was a necessary step towards the achievement of a national unity in the face of colonization. The idea was to unify the Moroccan people under the banner of religion in which the different ethnic groups and social strata recognized their real enemy. Najib El Aoufi comments on this historical period as follows: "Since its inception, the National Movement [in Morocco] … subscribed to *Assalafya* and was guided by its principles; it adopted it as a theoretical and ideological basis for mobilizing people … [against] the colonizer's ideology and … conspiracies" (El Aoufi, *An Approach to Reality* 36).

[4] Ironically, however — as we shall see later — this very repression is one of the factors that later led to the emergence of the short story as an intellectual weapon to defend threatened Moroccan identity. El Madini's *The Art of the Short Story in Morocco* was an MA thesis, supervised by Dr. Mohammed Serghini and defended at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in Fes, Morocco, in 1979.

[5] The newspaper in question, *Essaâda*, was founded by the French Protectorate, which hired Lebanese journalists to run it. Its editor-in-chief was the Lebanese Wadiâ Karam. The story in question is more of an essay than a short story.

[6] El Aoufi considers the Moroccan short story as having two beginnings: the first in the early 1940s, the second in the 1960s. According to him, the 1960s is the second beginning because, with a few exceptions, the writers belonging to this period were hardly influenced by those belonging to the earlier one (*Approach* 200).

[7] Mohammed Znibar in his Introduction to his collection of short stories *The New Air* (qtd. in El Aoufi, *Approach*, 335).

[8] He refers to Mahmoud Taimour, an Egyptian writer.

[9] It is worth noting that the Moroccan woman played heroic roles in some of the stories of this period, especially in Abdelmajid Benjelloun's work.

[10] A ceremony that takes place seven days after a baby is born, and in which it is given a name.

[11] The sayings of Prophet Mohammed.

[12] I had a meeting with Dr. Mohammed Anakkar in Tétouan, Morocco, on 7 July 1999.

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