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Five Moroccan Writers Give Their Stories Echoes of the Experience

By Mohammed Saeed el-Rihani *

Interviewing writers could be an unpredictable venture due to the suffering, woes and bitterness entailing the art of creative writing. In a society that still suffers from a number of daily life hardships and suffering, writing becomes more distressing agony than a talent or blessing. To earn a living through writing is a painful ordeal than simply making a living. Writers' hardships do not stop here as they have a lot to tell. With a view to get an insight into the lives and experience of writers, we spoke to five Moroccan short-story writers: Esmail Ghazali, Ahmed Fetnasi, Ezzadine al-Ma'izi, Mohammed Tetwani and Saeed Ahbat.

When asked about his biography and writing career, Esmail Ghazali said he cannot forget about his early life when he wasn't more than a carelessly North African gangster. Pocket-knife was his closest associate. But, thanks to God, the pen and writing became his most intimate associates. His intense and obscure writings at the beginning of his writing career have rescued him from falling into the world of criminality and absolute loss. If he had been once a member of a small gang whose most affiliates have experienced imprisonment, madness and death that Bohemian guy is now reckoned as a member of the experimentalism's gang.

While at the age of 20, he published the first book that actually forced him into the world of story-telling, his second work was in 2005, a collection of short-stories entitled "Dance in the Wilderness". A second collection of short-stories entitled "Ratanta Dik Khalasi" was also released. This was a U-turn in his writing philosophy that took an extremely different track to his previous collection. Through this collection, he meant to lay the groundwork for a kamikaze-styled shift in short-writing styles.

The style blends a couple of techniques, skills, faculties and tricks to conceive a novel art for Arab story-telling based on a special radical hypothesis: the perfection of metaphysical story-telling. He is also planning to publish a series of short-stories and novels in the near future.

Ahmed Fetnasi on his part said the seventies with their thriving ideological, political and cultural trends were his gateway to the world of theatre, which is replete with the ironies of life. He still remembers the first role he played in the Hirman Play by the late playwright Abduljabar el-Yemani. The stage was for him more like an open book where he noted down his inner woes and setbacks. A series of performances and experiences continued until the beginning of the 1990s when he decided with a group of young artists to realise their dream. They performed at the Mimidi Playhouse where they staged six playing concerts.

Today, he is repeating the experience with Ruaa Playhouse. The "Dream of a Portrait" debut performance has recently staged. His role this time was merely supervisory as he wanted to give the opportunity for the younger generation to build their skills and expertise. Yet, he was attracted again to writing a new play. Thus he produced the "Dada Salt" in 2003. "Dada Salt was a response to



the irresistible desire to empty my memory from the recurring thoughts inside me, he says. These thoughts and memories continued to haunt him for years. The imaginary place that he thought of continued to pop up in his memory and formed for him the imaginative scene that guided the detailed path of these revelations. Thus, he published his novel "The Sins" in 2006. He is neither a confessions writer nor a literary technician. He is obsessed with the echoes of a silent eloquence that controls him. This eloquence could be one part of the metaphor implied even in his portraits displayed in Assfun Assiff exhibition, or more or less the revelations implied in his paintings. He still remembers the comments made by spectators of his exhibition held in France who dubbed him as a magician coming from the south.

To Saeed Ahbat the margins of freedom are not known.

They actually made him choose his literary experience. It is always his belief that creativity is governed by a set of factors existing inside every human. The thoughts sitting deep inside one constitute the first part of the literary experience. They interact with other issues related to the external human behaviours. Based on this, he sees creativity as a reproduction of all these factors and issues while guided at the same time by the artist's experiences and thoughts.

Ezzadine al-Ma'izi, says it's pretty difficult to speak about this delicate issue. He always likes to talk about others: a friend or a loved one. By writing about them, he really speaks about himself. Al-Ma'izi is a story-writer who also writes essays and reviews for a number of newspapers, magazines and websites. He works as a teacher. He is a member of a number of literary asso-

ciations, including the Short-story Club and the Writers Guild of Morocco. Al-Ma'izi has published "The Journals of a Teacher in the Mountain" in two parts and a collection of concise short-stories entitled "Love in Grown-Ups' Ways. He has various interests in syndicate works, literature and culture in general.

Mohammed Tetwani claims there are certain concepts that are deemed as part of tradition and thus should be preserved. He is a traditionalist who loves everything traditional. It is a shame and a humiliation to rebel against norms and traditions.

As far as publishing experiences is concerned, Ezzadine el-Ma'izi says publishing is more like walking on burning sands. He really loathes publishing because it kills creativity and traumatises writers. Creative writers become prisoners of fear and uncertainty.

Yet to Esmail Ghazali, publishing is a sad and agonising experience. How come that he can forget about the time when he was a university student and ventured to suspend a full academic year to concentrate on publishing his first cursed work. It was a difficult time, where he got hungry sometimes. He had to pay again the fees in full for the wasted academic year and mourn every penny spent on cigarettes and other stuffs. It was a really damned work similar to a resounding cry in the wilderness, the only thing one gets back is a melancholic rhythm.

He wretchedly still recalls the moment when he and his friend novelist Achuer Abdussi were tricked by the owner of the Sa'adah Offset-printing Press. They were almost burned by the scorching summer sun when they walked all the way from Zaitun to Hamriyah Quarters to check how his

premier work had been printed. They were shocked when they saw how bad the layout of the book's cover were, the low quality paper and unclean typesetting.

It was as if all the misfortunes came to take their share of his first work. Writers in Morocco fund the publication of the works from their own pockets as is the case with all of his colleagues.

In fact, he does not expect anything from the useless cultural establishment neither does he recognise the people running the cultural show. Instead of helping artists, they are running after worthless material gains. He adds he will stick to his anarchism following the Hegelian philosophy, though somehow differently.

Concerning Saeed Ahbat, he perceives artists who have no good personal connections with some institutions as ignored. Nevertheless, the power of artists lies in their works. To Mohammed Tetwani, publishing is a calamity. It has never been an easy thing neither in the Arab countries nor even in Europe. But still there are some key differences. Unlike in modern Europe, Artists in the Arab world need to have very good connections and show loyalty to influential circles to gain their confidence otherwise they will be cursed writers.

This is not any more the case in Europe. As far as he can recall, publishing was once marred by the hostility between Catholicism and Protestantism. This conflict was primarily a by-product of Renaissance. Despite this the religious circles did not set their own standards as is the case in the Arab world in the past and present. Censorship is now practiced to some extent in Europe on the publications deemed inconsistent with the values of their societies. This unfortunately came after decades of liberal policies towards publishing.

Censorship has yet harmed the quality of literary production there. Ironically, some publishing houses were also implicated in printing and distributing works written by some emigrants who offended their own countries. Being away from his homeland, he is under no obligation to offer lip-service or appeal to anyone. Similarly, his relation with some newspapers whether in Morocco or abroad is a matter of simple contact. He is committed to traditionalism. He always attaches a thank-you letter to his writings and takes a long breath until they are published. He believes that writing is an art still blessed by mercy.

In this context, Ahmed Fetnasi considers the trauma of publishing is suffered by all writers. It is an agonising nightmare that requires a lot of patience. It is perhaps one of the paradoxes of the complex cultural scene. While his "Dada Salt" novel was thankfully published with support from an institution, his novel "The Sins" and many others play-concerts came to light only after a horrendous journey and sacrifices. Self-reliance and dedication gave him the stamina to realise his works. To get one's literary works published is really a distressing experience. This only confirms that writers and artists, at least in Morocco, are not given the due care and respect.

Asked about his interactions with his readerships and the funniest remark they made to him, Saeed Aghat said "some people tend to ask the same questions every now and then. The types of questions made to him sometimes make him ask himself whether the questions he prompted through his work on their parts are in their favour. He thinks the authentic creativity is what really leaves something inside him."

Referring to his personal experience, Ezzadine el-Ma'izi said he listened to some people who just liked to dictate on him to adopt a certain approach. He followed their advice unwillingly and became as a blind who is led by a blind. So, he wrote the "Protest of the Blind" tale to appeal to them to break ranks with him and give him a break from their dictations.

To Esmail Ghazali, the rudest experience he has ever had was when a muscled guy was hired by some one to assault him after his first work was published. It was a silly instigator who was driven by a silly motive. He was actually enraged because he exposed his personality through one of the characters of his damned novel. He waited for him together with two idiots in an alleyway. It was a horrific, unfair battle where batons and knives were used. But, he managed to leave the scene thanks to his parent's prayers. He also feels proud of one experience. It was about a man imprisoned at Akhanfir Jail. He used to read his book in his dark prison's cell. He has no idea how it reached him. Once he was released the first thing he did was to look for him.

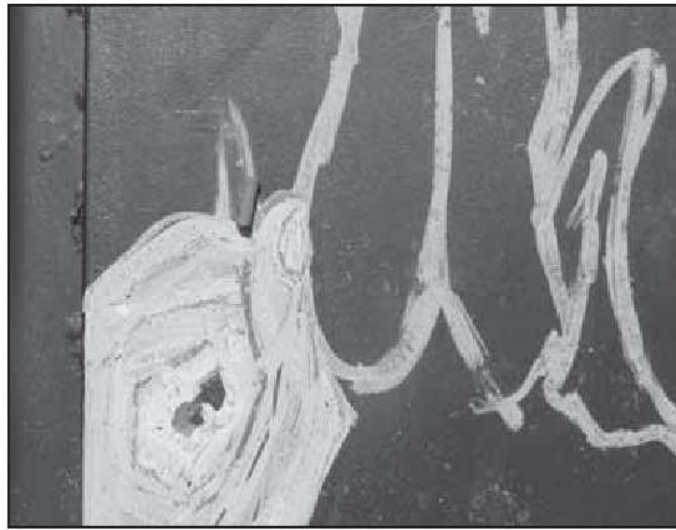
By chance, a friend brought him over to meet him at one public street. He hugged him passionately and read to him a chapter from his book which he memorised by heart. He told him he read it more than ten times and that it was his only solace during his imprisonment. He also feels proud of another experience that happened to him in a public park. A person strongly held his shirt and dragged him cruelly. He seemed as if he wanted to give him a blow and said: you bad guy, I read it more than once and felt as if I wrote it myself.

The guy was talking about his last novel "Ratanan Dik Khalas." One more unforgettable and funny encounter was by a woman who practices the oldest business in human history. He still remembers how she received the news of releasing his collection "Dances in the Wilderness", given to her by a friend. She ran in the street shouting and rejoicing like an insane. While he was shopping in a fish market, said Ahmed Fetnasi, one seller approached him and told him he heard through Tangiers Radio that his "Dada Salt" tales had been released." He added that due to his financial conditions he was unable to buy the book.

He smiled and returned the second day and gave him a copy of it. He hugged him tightly to express his appreciation. It happened that the two met again and discovered that he knew the small details of almost all places. By the end of their meeting, he asked him to write about the forgotten people.

He did not forget the echoes of his word inside him. Following the publication of his novel "The Sins", he asked to see him along with a friend of him.

Mohammed Tetwani says: "I started writing at a very early stage of my life. I only started thinking of publishing my works by the turn of 1970s. My first work was published in the popular London-based Arabic language Al Arab newspaper. I have been a regular reader of its culture page. At the beginning, most of my readers were Arabs since I lived for a period of time in the Netherlands and I had to visit Arab countries from time to time. I met readers whose pains and worries were similar



to mine. Since I belong to a generation who lived in a time marred by a spate of setbacks – starting with the 1967 setback

[the defeat of Arabs by Israel] until this very day – most of the readers were asking us to echo the despair of our societies and not to be far from their concerns. One interesting experience that I came across happened to me when I was invited to a story-telling event organised in the city of Araich, north of Morocco. There was a good presence of members of the public and prominent writers from Ariah and other Moroccan cities. In brief, five or six writers got up to the auditorium to read out their works. All at a sudden, a new person turned up at the auditorium. It was a French poet, who was not invited, as I believe.

She recited her poems in French. The audience gave her a warm round of applause. I asked the person sitting next to me why was all that excitement and applause? He replied: the audience did not express admiration for the Moroccan writers and poets because they knew clearly what they were saying. However, the unintelligible shouting of this blonde beat inside their ears since the majority knew no French. That was why this blonde got all that applause."

Mohammed Tetwani conceives of readers as bees, they pick up the nectar as they want and from wherever they want. It is wrong to make assumptions of supposed readers. There are readers who prefer to read headlines, others like skim reading, while some others read for particular authors.

Nonetheless, this has been the case for now and ordinary readers have been sidelined and left trying to discover. In fact, Tetwani is not attempting to do away with assumptions.

This had been practiced widely in the 1960s and 1970s. They were then very much interested in borrowing books even though they were in short supply. It is no longer possible to control the notion of assumption in the time being due to the high number of innovations, specialities and demands. The only thing that can supply all these is the department store.

As he was asked about the readers' reception of his books, Ezzadine el-Ma'izi said if the answer is found then writers should have made up their minds along time ago about the course of writing and its misery.

To Saeed Aghat, writing hasn't brought many things one dreamed of, it gives one in the meanwhile the love of the people and a lot of friends. This is really what's good about it. Yet, Esmail Ghazali considers the resolve to continue committing [the sin] of writing

is akin to the resolve to continue committing [the sin] of wanting to live. He couldn't imagine himself living a worthy and meaningful life without committing these sins. Writing remains to him an incurable, ecstatic, intriguing and hopeless business.

Writing is the only possible way for challenging the principle of cruel death. As for the Arab societies, which are controlled by outcast regimes, they have continually proved that they are awfully inclined to believing lies and illusions. In this context, Majdoub Mohammed al-Maghout says: I wished if countries can be changed like prostitutes in a brothel.

Ahmed Fetnasi, on his part is not that pessimistic. He believes that they still have a broad and promising space within the gap between writing and reading. For this reason, he was interested in that issue.

If one was with him and saw children extending their hand to snatch their coloured stories books, one would only then hold higher hopes as he does.

With regard to writing, Mohammed Tetwani perceives it a craze and could probably be an angel that can't be repulsed. Though writing is like "a Tsunami tide", it had faced a dark uncertainty following the 1967 catastrophe. There were many camps and blocs that affected all writers. The situation became very cloudy and uncertain. It gives the opportunity for the detractors to take on one. These were just very few problems that he wanted to highlight. It was a difficult situation that made societies worn-out in all fields and not only in politics, science and technology. It is a total loss that is a little bit similar to the fall of Andalusia. But, he wants to stress with all optimism that their ships were not burned and they will not bow and throw ourselves for the devil. That was in the bygone days and they are in a totally different time. Writers will get back to their minds and readers will take interest in writing. As far as the issue of literary writing in a globalised world is concerned, Ezzadine el-Ma'izi thinks that writing is a weapon for resisting all forms of domesticating and taming. It's a veto against the unwarranted death. Esmail Ghazali, a careless person maintains that globalisation is only deepening the rift and differences among nations of earth. It is apparently abusing humanity for the sake of commodities and economies.

The importance of literature has always been a human and a global value. The essence of writing is its urgency, value and meaning which will stay on as long as humans are on earth. Assuming that writing is a medium for

expressing an identity, Ahmed Fetnasi considers that creative writing should inhale the dust of earth where it was inscribed. Living in a world that's replete with contradictions should not make one forget the duty to defend one's identity by writing its details and elements.

Explaining further, Mohammed Tetwani asserts globalisation is up for those who want it. If almost 80 percent of the people in the West veto the storm of globalisation, Muslims, should stand by this anti-globalisation movement. Globalisation only does good for a little minority while harms the majority of people. Writing is a train that will keep going against the will of it. Creativity will go on unchecked despite all the hardships and uncertainty.

To Saeed Aghat new communication technologies have some negative aspects. Undoubtedly, communication technologies can be employed for serving and promoting literature and art.

Concerning issues pertinent to literary creativity, theoretical background, creative passage and future projects, Mohammed Tetwani said creativity is preceded by beauty – words only become complete when they draw a picture. Creativity is the spirit of any literary writing as long as it interacts with a number of inspirations and signals by employing the language. The beauty of any passage is decided by the readers not the writers.

Yet, Ahmed Fetnasi does not have a definite answer for that. He absolutely cannot say that he has a cultural or a creative project. The issue is to be decided by the public and critics. What is he sure about is the cultural backgrounds. He is extremely keen to have a multicultural identity – namely the Amazigh, African and Arab identities. Without these identities, he cannot decide on the way how to write.

Being a writer, says Esmail Ghazali means that he is a project. He does not believe in spontaneity when it comes to the art. A creative piece of literature can not be prompted by the spur-of-the-moment. He is one of those who claim to have a project of beauty based on a conscious vision and an artistic common sense. In this context, Ezzadine el-Ma'izi claims literary writing is the soul of the writer who works on a creative project that embraces a unique sense for beauty. It gives one a unique and an autonomous identity that is easily recognisable by the readership.

On his part, Saeed Aghat advocates the idea that writers should be open to embrace all kinds of ideas instead of eyeing things through one perspective.

That is why he tries all literary genres, but always finds himself in story-writing. This is probably because he thinks stories are the most appropriate way for contemplating on the world.

As far as culture and authorities, creativity and censorship, liberal thinking and redlines are concerned, Ahmed Fetnasi considers writing and creativity have no limits, though he does respect traditions and beliefs.

Endorsing the same principle, Ezzadine el-Ma'izi always takes into consideration these concepts. He ignores them while feeling uncomfortable. The more he feels comfortable the more he becomes worried.

To Saeed Aghat, artists and writers should only be accounted for their works and creativity. Their personal attitudes and political affiliations should not be involved. Concluding the discussion, Esmail Ghazali argued that writing should not be influenced by whatever authorities, which made him always, take the risk of writing things overlooking redlines. Authentic writings are wild, daring and bothering.

* A Moroccan novelist and writer