

# The Poetics and Hermeneutics of Pain and Pleasure



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Edited by

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## Time to Calm Our Feelings!

Those were painful moments  
In my rambunctious heart  
I felt and continued to feel  
That, alas, they did forget.  
But those were only passengers  
Toiling and boiling  
to finally come back  
home and earn some bread.  
Now behold! “Painful moments of sanity”<sup>1</sup> cannot but make me  
ponder:  
If pain is everywhere,  
Then shouldn’t it be high time  
One refrained from being atavistic and driven alone and insane?  
And further,  
If “All the devils are here”<sup>2</sup>,  
Then trickles of tears are not enough to save the ship from its wreck  
And maybe should not allow themselves to be shed  
to make the devils go away  
and call for angels to come around  
Because only now do we begin  
to see that, after all,  
Life is somewhere else.  
So, how about calming our feelings!

**Chokri Omri**  
(February 2021)

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<sup>1</sup> “I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity” is gleaned from a letter Edgar Alan Poe wrote to G.W. Eveleth in January 4, 1848.

<sup>2</sup> “All the devils are here” is taken from a line in William Shakespeare's play: *The Tempest*: Act 1, Scene 2. In it, Ariel seeks out to magically work out a tempest to cause a shipwreck but Ferdinand abandons the ship and cries out, “Hell is empty, / And all the devils are here” (1.2.250–251).



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# FOREWORD 1

## PHILOSOPHY, PAIN AND PLEASURE

CYNTHIA WILLETT

As a student of philosophy, literature, and political science in the 1970s and the 1980s, I watched up close the French-born movement of post-structuralism spread across the humanistic disciplines in the U.S. academy. For the poststructuralists, the primary tropes positioned the subject in an endless hall of mirrors populated by literary signifiers. This prison-house of language blocked any path out of a signifier's dizzying displacement with another signifier. There is nothing outside the text was the mantra for the era, making it very difficult to find adequate expression for the pathos of existence. Cracks in the prison's hall of mirrors exposed not a vista for imagination or witness for pain but shards of glass and a fragmented subject. Outside the walls of the universities, however, very real political forces brought in a new era of incarceration, both in the US and elsewhere as neocolonialism advanced across the globe. In this political atmosphere, the postmodern text threatened to become a fetish as its advocates failed to provide any decisive source of reckoning with the realities of power and domination. The postmodernist's cynic posture had deconstructed any stable ground for social and political change, rendering useless for agency or action even the most immediate of motivating drives, the sensations of pleasure and pain.

This cynic posture was not a match for the neo-conservatism that emerged in the U.S. as the Cold War was winding down. Leading political figures declared a victory for liberal capitalism and by 1992, Francis Fukuyama rather notoriously declared the end of history. Stripped of intellectual leadership or political example, the left seemed to lose its compass. Meanwhile, postmodernists had fallen down the rabbit hole of language with its endless games of self-referentiality. Scholars and artists influenced by this movement found themselves paralyzed in aporias without any clear

existential reference. How could we find some way back to elementary experiences that define us as living creatures with real needs and desires?

I studied with the extraordinarily influential Algerian-born francophone philosopher Jacques Derrida. In his classes, I was among those pressing him on the political implications of his thought. In my own scholarship, I mined Derridean texts on pleasure and pain to discover if there might not be among the fleeting signifiers unexpected tropes that could prove useful for politics. In those texts, I discovered that lyrical expressions of pleasure and pain, even when convoluted by endless webs of obscure associations and sliding signifiers, compel us, readers, in directions that spin out of control of any strict logic of undecidability. The poetics and hermeneutics of pleasure and pain elude capture by a postmodern grammar of aporia. There lurked in postmodern texts a barely accounted for erotic energy that, however inaccessible in its full meaning, is lived as a motivating force and a direction—a source of hope, as well as fear. The text that would lead us down a pit of sliding signifiers inevitably encounters the surprise of sensations that open up a source of eros--of life. Even if this erotic source, twisted by ambiguity, yields nothing more than a brute force of intensity--where pleasure cannot be distinguished from pain--it nonetheless offers a sense of agency and freedom. It offers a sense of life. In the face of dark histories and inescapable realities, through the intensity of a murky but vital desire rooted in the most elementary of sensations, we might find the ability to feel, even to laugh.

The essays in this volume take up the quest to find some hermeneutic sense, some poetic trope, for the obscure but compelling forces of pleasure and pain. The collection begins with a literary essay on the humor that enables survival in a Tunisian dungeon and ends with an interview with a visionary painter. In addition to painters and literary scholars, the contributors include poets, writers, philosophers, and even a literary scholar who is also a vocalist. These contributors represent an exciting range of approaches and inspired perspectives, hailing from their locations across the Mediterranean including Tunisia, Morocco, Italy, France, to India. Essays tackle the Tunisian prison literature that distracts from the screams of torture's victims with the pleasures of comic songs. But this literature does more. Prison literature becomes the unexpected cultural achievement of periods of incarceration, and a primary source and a driving force for setting right not only the minds of its victims but also the narratives of history that tell their stories (Amraoui, Baroumi). In poignant contrast, another essay explores the refusal of Philip Roth's guilt-ridden alter ego to find meaning or worthy metaphor in his struggles with illness (Miceli). Existential paradoxes appear

not just in the prisoner's humor or in the turmoil of the guilt-ridden psyche but also in the story of the libertine who seeks the most refined pleasures only to find them inextricably linked to experiences of pain (Peter). There is a paradox too in the way that a painting's silent scream offers glimpses into eternity (Majoul). Novelist Toni Morrison, on the other hand, draws from African sources of pleasure to channel the healing forces from ancestors and community (Hejaiej). In another contribution, we learn how first-wave feminism critiqued the painful underside of marriage as an institution in the Victorian era (Marino). But then again, we will also learn how the novelist Jean Rhys provides a counterpoint to any easy feminist rejection of pain, arguing that the bourgeois depictions of female masochism are not necessarily forms of submission (Nicolosi). In a nice contrast, a coauthored essay traces the emergence of the modern Arab female voice and of newly ambiguous forms of pleasure as portrayed by novelist Jokha Alharthi (Kumar and M).

This lovely collection from authors and artists joins forces across national and cultural boundaries to give us compelling reasons to suspect that none of us can afford to ignore what classical Western philosophy dismissed as the lowest of our motivations and that the most compelling philosophical movement of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century, poststructuralism, left in paradoxes more theoretical than real. These essays find that there is a new life to be found in those most ancient and debased categories, pleasure and pain. Indeed, that this may be where life becomes creative.

## FOREWORD 2

### LANGUAGES OF PAIN, FLIGHTS OF PLEASURE

ANNE E. FERNALD

Pain, grief, and sorrow contract us. Withdrawn into suffering, we retreat from our world, our village, our families, and even ourselves. At the peak of suffering, the world feels vast and distant. Even our own skin can feel meters away from the heart of our sorrow, as if touch itself, our very contact with the world, becomes a journey too exhausting and ambitious to contemplate. If we speak, we weep or we howl, and words are whittled down to those very few that stand on the border between language and just sound—hey, ow, woe, ay. Everyday language is not up for the task. Think of all the language we have to describe joy, happiness, and pleasure and contrast it with how difficult it is to convey our pain. As Virginia Woolf wrote:

the merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the inhabitants of Babel did in the beginning) so to crush them together that a brand-new word in the end drops out.<sup>1</sup>

Then, somehow, if we survive, the worst recedes. We may turn our backs on these times, shove them down and away, and turn our faces to the sunshine. Or, like Woolf's sufferer, we may try to coin the words ourselves. Those who coin the words, the writers and artists, are people who "must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone."<sup>2</sup> In creative solitude, the artist not only confronts pain,

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia, "On Being Ill." 1926. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4., 1925-28. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. New York: Harcourt, 317-29, 318-9.

<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, James. "The Creative Process." 1962. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. 315-18, 315.

but also wrestles it into a representation that translates that pain for others. And as artists put those experiences of suffering into language, they may bridge that gulf between the contraction of pain and the inchoate howl and the richer, subtler language of poetry. Then, thanks to these men and women, if we are fortunate, we find companions in our suffering. For a profile in *Life* magazine in 1963, James Baldwin said:

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people.<sup>3</sup>

The essays collected here invite us to make Baldwin's connection and to feel, as Baldwin did, that, in facing our wounds, we not only become more alive, but we understand each other more fully. Connections, like what connects Baldwin to Dostoevsky and Dickens, connections made—across race, time, language and continents, and between states of being—are at the heart of this volume. And in these moments of recognition, these surprises across differences, that we may even arrive at pleasure, this volume's second animating theme. Mohamed Choukri's narrator feels "orphaned by pain," but, in communicating it, Choukri invites us to bear witness to how pain divides and reconnects us. The pain the father caused, the pain the father failed to comprehend, becomes the pain the son communicates with us. We see the abject poverty of one who steals from hunger and the need to feel abjection of Augustine, stealing what he did not need in order to feel what it is to transgress. Or we are invited to witness the interlocking experiences of pain and pleasure in a multigenerational family of Middle Eastern women. We read of the Tunisian political prisoners, shackled together in a cold, wet cave, sharing a single pair of slippers and marvel at the resilience that makes such an abject and absurd horror into comedy. And we recognize, in the prison narratives, as in Toni Morrison's novels of Black life in the United States, how, when we come together to share the pain, we sometimes find joy. Endlessly adaptable as we humans are, pleasure does breakthrough. In laughing, we connect.

When we look at the paintings of Frida Kahlo or read the novels of Jean Rhys, are we experiencing pain or pleasure? We witness the pain in the eyes of Frida's self-portraits; we may recoil from the self-destructive spirals of

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<sup>3</sup> Howard, Jane, "Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are" (Profile of James Baldwin). *Life*. May 28, 1963. 67-70. 69.

one of Rhys' characters. At the same time, Kahlo's colors, her imaginative flights, her surreal juxtapositions, and beautifully symmetrical compositions thrill; Rhys's wry satire of the men and women who prey on her hapless, lonely protagonists, her funny understanding of the woman who knows—despite all evidence to the contrary—that if she just had the right coat, the correct hat, all would right itself, make us laugh in rueful recognition and admiration. We marvel at the artist's ability to capture with precision moments that, in life, we may seek to avoid.

In an earlier era, someone writing an introduction to a collection like this one might have written that these essays remind us that pain is *universal*, that pleasure *transcends* boundaries. At this moment, we are too wise, or perhaps too spooked by awareness of our edges, the complexities of our identities, to use such words to make a whole of these parts. One of the strengths of this collection is its refusal to reach for universals, its insistence on the specific. We move among writers of many faiths, from different continents and nations whose specific circumstances—imprisonment, abuse, injury, disability, poverty, patriarchy, racial injustice—shape their sense of the value of pain and its cost, as well as the difficulty and importance of pleasure. Reading each of these accounts, in different voices and through differing theoretical lenses, we deepen our own understanding of the ways that pain and pleasure are mutually entangled and how both shape our lives and the lives of others.

James Baldwin wrote of feeling alone in his suffering, “but then you read.” What better envoi for this wonderful, surprising, and rich collection on pain and pleasure? The essays collected here invite us to listen, to bear witness, to coin new words, and to take joy. They add to our language. I invite you now, quite simply, to read.

## INTRODUCTION

### BOOTHEINA MAJOUL & HANEN BAROUMI

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.”

—James Baldwin, *The Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are*

“...when pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure.”

—Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

The pain and pleasure experiences reveal the constant struggle between the individual desire for transgressing taboos and boundaries within a private-public sphere of existence. Pain and pleasure can be empowering and liberating; yet they are often depicted as extreme feelings, non-generic ones. Pain, pleasure, love, desire, and fear are generic feelings as they relate to how human experiences can alter visions of being in the world. As such, they become sites of negotiation depicting the self-other encounters in a generic approach. These generic feelings, pains, and pleasure, can unblind the fear of difference and open both the reader’s and writer’s eyes to new possibilities of experiencing life. It is in this context that Cynthia Willet posits: “[t]he failure to see is the failure to desire. The artist does not simply describe a reality that is empty. Every perception and so, too, every reading is part of desire.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Willet valorizes experiences of reading as they unveil a desire to experience pain and pleasure otherwise.

It is equally pleasurable/painful to turn pain and pleasure into ink and fill the blanks of empty places/memory by delving into new spaces where the individual writer, philosopher, and artist can create new languages, experiences, and perceptions of these feelings. Indeed, every reading/writing experience is an attempt to decipher the intended meaning and add to the complexity of human life. Thinking about the ways through which expressions

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Willet, “Tropics of Desire: Freud and Derrida,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 150.

of pain and pleasure may affect the writer/reader as experiences of other pursuits of the human imagination can place/displace, soothe/enrage and inspire/discourage the individual search for meaning. By engaging with different theories and expressions, it is possible to understand what pain and pleasure have done in the history of humanity, rather than merely looking at them as representations of others' distant experiences. To invoke pain and pleasure, then, is to trace the ways they overlap and to suspend assumptions about their representations as antipodes. It is in this context that Irwin Goldstein invites the reader to experiment with other possibilities of deciphering the idiom of pain and pleasure:

That in itself every pleasure is good and every pain, broadly conceived, bad, that there are unconditional values and so substantial exceptionless ethical principles, should appear obvious[...] Various ethical convictions cannot fully accommodate our being able to know pleasure and pain are unconditional, intrinsic values: among them are strict particularism (ethical decisions can only be made case by case; there are no sound universal normative principles), relativism (all good and bad are relative to time and place), skepticism (what is good or bad is undeterminable; any value judgment can be successfully opposed and overturned), and nihilism (nothing has value). (257)

Goldstein tends to relativize assumptions about pain and pleasure. He valorizes the ways they are related as they fail to be opposites at all times. Pleasure and pain do not entail a particular experience of good and bad in themselves, and they seem to overlap at other occurrences. Pleasure accompanies pain as they beget more experiences of a “pleasurable pain” and a “painful pleasure.” Boundaries between pleasure and pain seem to collapse in the literary and artistic creation of meaning.

*The Poetics and Hermeneutics of Pain and Pleasure* seeks to trace the different ramifications of pain and pleasure. The volume begins with the insights of the two scholars Cynthia Willett and Anne Fernald, who open the debate over the pain/pleasure dichotomy, and the project gathers researchers from different parts of the globe: India, Italy, France, Tunisia, and the U.S.A. to examine the tropes, implications, and representations of pain and pleasure through language in literature, philosophy, and history, as well as through colors and brush strokes in art.

The first part entitled “Pain and Pleasure in Arab Literature” paves the way for a debate over the silent voices of pain in the autobiographical narrative of the Tunisian activist Ezzedine Hazgui, in the autobiography of the Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri, and in the novel of the Omani



scholar Jokha Alharthi. These writers' respective protagonists developed their own defense mechanisms and made their dissident voices heard by means of painful words, witty expressions, loud stories and picky narrative techniques. The text proves to be their refuge and the land of all possibilities. Indeed, in the first chapter entitled "The Transgeneric Transcendence of Pain in Tunisian Prison Literature: Ezzedine Hazgui's *The Spectacles of My Mother*," Yosra Amaroui invites us to infiltrate the realm of prison literature and listen to the agony of an ex-prisoner, who recalls his trauma and transcends his pain with humor. So, instead of feeling pity for the protagonist and the writer, the reader enjoys the advocated satire and takes pleasure in how the writer uses humor as a "resistance mechanism". In the second chapter entitled "Sin, Pain & Pleasure in Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone*", Hanen Baroumi digs into the "precariousness of pain" and experiences of bliss. When Choukri starts emptying himself through writing, he is face to face with what Baroumi calls "Bread Politics in the Land of Excrement". He thus seeks meaning within his pain, gets lost within the process, to end up with the pleasure of being cuddled by his own words in the womb of the text. In the last chapter of this first part, in an article entitled "Veiled Pain and Muted Pleasure in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*" Rafseena M and Ajit Kumar focus on an "Arab female voice in the wake of modernity", that of the Alharthi and her three female protagonists. The scholars seek to highlight the portrayal of pain and pleasure experienced by Arab women in patriarchal societies. They aim to show how the writer succeeds in transcending the power dynamics of masculinity through the feminine strength of her three protagonists. These endured the pain and knew the pleasure of being loved, becoming a mother, and owning their own bodies.

Part two of this volume is entitled "Pain and Pleasure in Western Poetics," and it embarks on journeying through the texts of the African American writer Toni Morrison, the American novelist Philip Roth and the French writer and art critic Joris-Karl Huysmans. Pain and pleasure in the West do not have the same flavour as in the East. The texts elucidate and expose the dichotomy in a more explicit way. The language itself deviates by means of metaphors and tournures to become keener on stressing the politics of pain and pleasure. In "Individual in Pain, Community in Pleasure: Social Capital, Reinventing Bonds & Connections in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*", Leila Hejaiej focuses on the literary portrayal of painfully displaced African American bodies and on their tribal mechanisms to cope with this identity malaise. She underlines Morrison's commitment to revive past memories in an attempt to preserve identity. That connection with the dolorous past and "rememory of shared happy

moments and sorrows”, allow the shared agony to become a bond that ties African-Americans together. Recalling and remembering pain transfigure then into the pleasure of sharing and caring. Barbara Miceli in her article entitled “Escape from the *Corpus*: The Pain of Writing and Illness in Philip Roth’s *The Anatomy Lesson*” invites us into the cobweb of Roth’s novel narrating the journey of his protagonist, yet his alter-ego. The anatomy of the narrative projects the writer’s own puzzlement with pain: the pain of a dislocated body and that of a destabilised self-narrative. Miceli tracks the origin of pain in the writer’s story as he himself fails to find a cure for his own protagonist who sways between being a doctor or being a writer. Painful body organs as much as expressed feelings are dissected in an attempt to understand physical soreness and mental unease. In the chapter entitled “Pain, Pleasure and the Libertine’s Paradox in Huysmans’s *Against Nature*,” Romain Peter focuses on how the novel is “about the quest for rare, refined pleasures, sought by an obstinate individual who made his morality out of aesthetics”. The scholar highlights how an excess of pleasure might lead to its opposite, and how libertinism necessarily degenerates into obscenity. Part three is entitled “Hermeneutics of Pain and Pleasure in Art;” it focuses on the role of art in healing pain and providing pleasure. The canvas absorbs pains as much as colours and preserves traces of the past to become an ever-present presence. In “Art, Pain, Pleasure,” Bootheina Majoul puts the works of the Mexican icon Frida Kahlo and the Bangladeshi-British Sanchita Islam on the same wall. Both painters excavate their deepest suffering and project them on canvas. Their flamboyant colours are there to scream their pain and make our pleasure. In the second chapter of this third part, entitled “Pain on Canvas, Solace in Art,” Ajit Kumar approached Sanchita Islam and interviewed her about her works, her life, and how her torments and pleasures are seen in her art.

The last part of this volume is entitled “Feminist Portrayal of Pain & Pleasure”. Womanhood and feminine voices are put forth in the article of Elisabetta Marino dealing with Mona Caird’s novel and that of Maria Grazia Nicolosi analysing Jean Rhys’s work. In “From Pleasure to Pain: Marital Life in *The Wing of Azrael* (1889) by Mona Caird,” Elisabetta Marino underlines the writer’s discontent with the institution of marriage of her time, as it brings more pain than pleasure to women. Caird’s protagonist commits suicide at the end of the novel and becomes free; she thus finds pleasure in pain and leaves the pleasurable pain of her patriarchal society behind. The text stands as a painful testimony of a woman whose liberation needed the pain to happen. The last chapter of this volume is entitled “Masochism and the Aesthetics of Pain in Jean

Rhys's *Quartet: A Feminist Reading through Deleuze*". In this article, Maria Grazia Nicolosi examines the notion of submission and subjection in Rhys's *Quartet* and the contradictions they entail in terms of arousing pity and procuring pleasure to the subject. The writer entraps his protagonist within "the game" of a submissive masochistic pleasure and a painfully encaged woman.

From East to West, now and then, the experience of pain and pleasure, in real life, in stories as much on canvas, is the same; as Anne Fernandez puts it: "pain is *universal*, pleasure *transcends* boundaries". These feelings bring us back to our human fragility and make us aware of the fine line between them: pain could lead to pleasure, and pleasure could lead to pain. Though some of the articles highlighted the role of excess in leading to opposite feelings, and some others underlined psychological, political, and social contexts as the road to pain and pleasure, one lesson we learn from this academic gathering and exchange is that these human feelings are necessary to our survival. Bootheina Majoul asserts "I feel pain and pleasure, therefore I exist".

Writing is painful for these authors; Hanan Baroumi confirms: "Writing is not safe, nor intended to be pure and ordered; it radiates a desire to experience the possible and the impossible in one's journey;" but the *jouissance* of the text allows them to overcome the pain by sharing it with their readers. We, the readers are thus transported with the text and we immerse into the agonistic experience of the writer, to share his pain and feel the pleasure of the journey. As Cynthia Willett puts it: "The text that would lead us down a pit of sliding signifiers inevitably encounters the surprise of sensations that open up a source of eros--of life".

May the pleasure of the text, make readers forget the pain of narrated/lived experiences!



## **PART I:**

# **PAIN AND PLEASURE IN ARAB LITERATURE**

“We suffer more in imagination than in reality.” (Seneca)

## CHAPTER 1

# THE TRANSGENERIC TRANSCENDANCE OF PAIN IN TUNISIAN PRISON LITERATURE: EZZEDINE HAZGUI'S *THE SPECTACLES OF MY MOTHER*

YOSRA AMRAOUI

*"Facts do not at all speak for themselves, they require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them"*

—Edward Said<sup>1</sup>

Just as “facts do not speak for themselves”, pain also does not speak for itself. It has to be transmitted, felt, written, shown, performed, and perceived. It is, therefore, through Art and Literature that pain can unfold the emotions, feelings, and memories of pasts long gone. It is mostly through the act of writing that one is able to rise from the ashes of history<sup>2</sup> to tell about what happened, to heal, and build resilience. It is in this view that I write the present article about one of the most significant works pertaining to Prison Literature in Tunisia. Through the lens of the Tunisian Leftist ex-political prisoner Ezzedine Hazgui, pain seamlessly crosses genres and moves from trauma to resistance to humor. It is this transgeneric transcendence of pain that makes this type of writing a very exceptional way of transforming trauma into a historical yet comic narrative.

Prisons in Tunisia used to be considered as highly traumatizing spaces notably for opinion and political prisoners during the two long-lasting regimes of President Habib Bourguiba and his successor Zinelabidine Ben Ali (together lasting about half a century from 1956 to 2011). Out of all the trauma of torture and abuse of human rights targeting regime opponents

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<sup>1</sup> p.34 from Edward Said's article "Permission to Narrate"

<sup>2</sup> Title inspired by Cathy Caruth's *Literature in the Ashes of History*, 2013

and “dissidents” came two interesting artistic genres: comic songs and Prison Literature. The former started in the latter part of the nineteenth century with the Zendali music<sup>3</sup> expressing prisoners’ pain and longing for freedom; and continued with comic poetry with Houcine Al Jaziri then with Salah Lakhmissi’s comic songs and funny lyrics that emerged under French colonization.

This paper presents Tunisian Prison Literature not only from a revisionist historiographical perspective but looks at it as a type of witness literature providing a bottom-up reading of the period under study (the 1970s and 80s that is) and as many historical and political insights as has hardly been written in those times. All the details, the feelings, the trauma, the pain, the hopes, and the despair of opinion prisoners and their families are presented in a very original way: through humor. These writings of the self, conveying as many feelings and emotions, are characteristic of the cultural approach to reading history, which makes their exploration a very innovative way of looking at political and autobiographical writings in Tunisia.

Tunisian corrective institutions under Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes were known for being facilities of sheer oppression, torture, and denial of human rights exceptionally for opinion and political prisoners. Inmates had no right to read, scribble or write and therefore no books, papers, newspapers, or pens were allowed in the cells; but they could, nevertheless, be sneaked in there in irregular ways. Prisoners used to be transferred from one cell to another and from one prison to another during the time they served so that no friendships, acquaintances, power or social relations, or even some stability, are experienced during the incarceration period. These transfers sometimes even aimed at making family visits an impossible mission.

Tunisian Prison Literature has gained ground and audience for several reasons. It is a genre in the making in the country after decades of censorship on literature and mass media content, becoming, thus, one of the cultural products of the 2011 revolution. This type of literature is laden with historical information that has only seen the light in the self-writings of regime opponents who decided to document the circumstances of their arrest in order to lay bare all the oppressive practices of past regimes. These writings, categorized as autobiographical, also pertain to the category of Testimonial Literature and could thus be considered as primary sources that give enough materials, dates, details, and names to readers, researchers,

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<sup>3</sup> One very famous song is *Niran Jeshi* (meaning the fire in my heart)

and historians alike. Although this genre is shaped in literary form, one cannot deny the historicity of the texts that narrate details of imprisonment, torture, and trauma in a very exceptional, original, and comic way.

The work under study is Ezzedine Hazgui's autobiographical book *The Spectacles of My Mother*,<sup>4</sup> an emotional narrative tainted with political commentary yet totally devoid of grudge. The text is very plausible to the Tunisian and Arab reader as it reads smoothly thanks to its comic nature. It, nevertheless, provides real names and detailed documented facts with dates and places of occurrence together with explanations, which renders it no less than a potential historical primary source that testifies to a period in which no free historian or journalist would dare to historicize what was going on in Tunisia for over half a century. Such a work as Hazgui's is historically emplotted in the Comic Tragic mode.<sup>5</sup>

Since this book is hereby considered as a historical piece or a primary source, it is worth pausing at this level to provide a brief overview of the four historical modes of emplotment presented in Hayden White's seminal work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* first published in 1973. White outlines that the reason why historians emplot their stories in one of the four modes is to endow them with an explanation (White 143). The romantic emplotment mode, he claims, is a "*drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it and his final liberation from it*" (White 8). Hayden White believes the best example of a text written in the romantic mode would be one that is written about the legend of the Holy Grail or the resurrection of Christ, "they both are a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness" (White 9). Satire, in historical narratives, is the complete opposite; instead of man's redemption, one finds a narrative full of the drama of "*diremption*," or the recognition that man is enslaved to the world.

However, Tragedy and Comedy both offer a temporary or limited postponement, or sometimes even a cancellation of man's destiny. This, in itself, is viewed by White as a "reprieve," a "reconciliation." Comedy establishes hope as a temporary conquest over the forces of society and nature. However, there are no temporary triumphs in Tragedy, except for a false or a deceptive "illusory" one where the division among men, as

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<sup>4</sup> My translation: The title in Arabic is *Nadharatou Ommi*

<sup>5</sup> According to Northrop Frye and Hayden White, there are four historical modes of emplotment: Comedy, Tragedy, Romance and Satire.



White points out, is shown to be worse than the way it was at the beginning of the tragedy. Yet the failure of the protagonist is not a complete loss for the reader who, at least, gains an understanding of the law of existence (White 9). It is then these two last modes of emplotment that characterize the work of Hazgui the most.

It is interesting how these historical modes of emplotment do not seem to pertain only to nineteenth-century historical narratives but are as pertinent today as ever in the writings of the marginalized, resistance fighters and minorities. The scope offered by White's emplotment modes widens the angle from which we, readers and scholars, tend to perceive literary productions, especially ones that fit within testimonial narratives.

Ezzedine Hazgui's *The Spectacles of My Mother*, published in 2018, together with other literary productions, fill the gaps of the 1970s and 80s' strangled history that was not written or rather not allowed to be written. The surviving ex-political prisoners kept alive the memory of those decades and preserved their writings sometimes in folded cigarette pack covers like it was the case with Hazgui or Gilbert Naccache<sup>6</sup> who scribbled their memoirs in the interior of cigarette packs.

This rising genre in Tunisia is of two types: A type that describes in full detail the traumatizing experiences lived in Tunisian prisons, highlighting the militancy and resistance of the arbitrarily jailed opinion activists. And another type that—as described by Fethi Bel Haj Yahya in the preface of Hazgui's book—distanced itself from the self, using comedy out of the conviction that the best way to transmit emotions is through light and beautiful narratives to keep away from the inflated ego. In addition, the use of “derja”<sup>7</sup> in the casual conversations that were revived in the book makes the reading a compelling experience.

In *The Spectacles of My Mother*, Ezzedine Hazgui, one of President Bourguiba's opponents and a hardcore Tunisian Leftist and progressivist who was imprisoned with his comrades in the 1970s, narrates his days inside the most dreaded Tunisian prison, Enadhour or Borj Eroumi,<sup>8</sup> a Tunisian dungeon destined to torture and “teach a lesson” to all those who opposed the president or dared to express different opinions. However,

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<sup>6</sup> Author of *Cristal*

<sup>7</sup> Tunisian dialect

<sup>8</sup> Translated in English as “The Tower of the Roman”, this prison is in the Northern coastal city of Bizerte

contrary to what we usually expect or generally encounter in trauma narratives, Ezzedine Hazgui's text is full of hilarious jokes and anecdotes, bits and pieces of his past in prison, in which he tells us about the way his comrades and him overcame terrible situations of utter physical pain through laughter.

One of the most humorous episodes is entitled "*Shlaket Najib*" or "the Slippers of Najib". The story goes that on the third day of their imprisonment, one of the author's comrades had a tense conversation with a prison guard as a result of which all eight comrades were beaten, denuded, humiliated, insulted, and transferred to one of the coldest and darkest caves of Borj Eroumi mountain, a wet place specifically destined to torture opinion prisoners. After the first fatal moments in which the prisoners, all tied to each other, suffered from the burns of the wounds on their backs and from the cold and freezing wet floor, one of them discovered that comrade Najib was actually wearing slippers, so the author thought: "Oh my God, what a treasure, what a victory in the midst of this cold freezing weather" (22). So, four of them actually shared one slipper putting one toe each on it and the other four shared the other slipper in the same fashion, and that to them, was an act of solidarity and an opportunity to make fun of the situation and to wash away the pain with jokes. The day was described as an "unforgettable day" (Hazgui 19).

Another short episode also narrated the way political prisoners managed, against all odds, to create journalistic productions inside the prison that they secretly exchanged between cells at night: there was *Rimel*<sup>9</sup> and a daily critical, satirical and comic newspaper called *Les Camards Déchainés* (33) containing political subversive caricatures drawn by prisoners themselves depicting satirical situations in the prison. And when asked by their superiors about whether prisoners interacted inside one cell (which was actually a cave) at night, the prison guard and the catering officer (respectively named Hamma and Boutcha) reported that the detainees were actually communicating but they did not understand anything from what they said as the prisoners were using a Russian French «*الفرنساوية متع روسيا*» (35). Upon hearing this anecdote, the prisoners started composing funny songs in Arabic about the two prison guards but sang them using a French accent so that they continue to be mysteriously not understood by the latter. Prisoners were also known for composing songs about the horrible food they ate in prison mainly made of peas, beans, and a blue stew cooked with some food worms (36). The lyrics usually

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<sup>9</sup> Rimal is a region in the city of Bizerte, translated as "the sand".

exhibited happy emotions at seeing the food such as “the hearts cheered”, “delicious smell”, “the faces lit after darkness”, and “eat your food” (called *sabba* as it is usually poured in the plates denoting its liquid nature).

“Douche El Mouldi”<sup>10</sup> is indeed another very funny story exposing homosexual practices in Tunisian prisons and, this particular story, it draws on Mouldi, the shower guard, and his homosexual inclinations. This guard used to sneak a peek from a hole on the wall to look at naked male prisoners while they were taking a shower. Hazgui recounts that the prisoners had no clue as to why there were days in which there was warm water for long minutes and sometimes it was crude and cold water for a few seconds. After one of the prisoners discovered Mouldi’s practices and after studying all the possibilities and the odds behind the running warm water, the comrades concluded that Mouldi, the shower guard, particularly enjoyed watching the buttocks of comrade Hat-hout and after switching positions several times to validate this hypothesis, it turns out that this was actually the case. Since then, prisoners were competing to have a shower with comrade Hat-hout and even begged him to take his position in front of the door hole so that they could enjoy the running warm water for a few more minutes (49).

The reader of these narratives would expect that the author’s account of his own encounters with his children would at least be pitiful and painful to read, but on the contrary, one is surprised by the well-spirited kids, Jawher and Dalila, who tell funny stories to their father when they visit him and provide him with tricks and solutions to help him escape prison. The reader of this emerging genre in Tunisia would also be surprised at the amount and precision of historical details and names of people, at the attention paid to descriptive narration and to the metaphors, at the linearity of the text and the blatant realism inherent in the images depicted without falling into utter victimization or accusations or blame.

*The Spectacles of My Mother* is full of instances of resistance, hunger strikes in prison organized to improve the conditions of inmates, political Leftist slogans, and refusal to accept the presidential amnesty. The latter is considered as an act of treason but of course, these events, added to the romantic appreciation of the wife’s sacrifices, are all told in a comic way. The only instance in which one witnesses the fall of the author is the last pages of the book in which he narrates the way he heard about his

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<sup>10</sup> Meaning Mouldi’s shower, Mouldi being the prison guard.

mother's death. His mother, being an old, divorced lady with a blind eye, had always had two wishes in her life: to taste pears and to replace the right broken glass of her spectacles. Having practically nobody to care for her during her son's turbulent youth and long stays in different prisons, the woman lived in sheer poverty until she had finally witnessed the day in which her son was released and she felt the joy of seeing him employed in an insurance company (Hazgui bitterly says that he had accepted this job against his will for the sake of his mother). The author patiently waited for his first pay to realize his mother's dream: to buy her pears and replace her glasses but the woman passed away four days before he got paid, leaving him in an eternal quest for a new "fictive" pair of glasses to show him the right path.

On this tragic note, Hazgui ends his book leaving no room for trauma to devastate his torn self publicly across his narrative. He replaced the moments of lamentation with historical information about the Leftist movement in Tunisia and abroad until one is under the impression that the book is a political newspaper of the 1970s. It is, indeed, no surprise to see a Leftist Tunisian thinker engage in writing political commentary or historicizing a critical era of resistance but what is bewildering is a Trauma survivor's humor and level of resilience after experiencing a sentence in Enadhour prison. In this act of laughing out one's pain, the protagonist of these life events, the author himself, rises above the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms carrying his pain to another superhuman level. Could this be an act of rising? Or is this a protective fatherly mechanism preventing that this trauma gets transgenerationally transmitted to his offspring? By the time the book was published, Jawher and Dalila became fully grown yet, as studies show, trauma can be transmitted from one generation to the next and therefore can be genetically inherited by the second generation.

From his autobiography, one can see and read that Hazgui is not only a trauma survivor, but he is also a torture survivor. He must have gone through all the sentiments of fear, pain, anxiety, hunger, physical and moral torment, and possibly more than one can cite here. He was beaten, denuded, insulted, threatened, deprived of his job, his family, and his home. He was thus alienated, uprooted, and outcasted in his own country by his own people and by the guardians of the nation. One might ask then: what is the origin of humor in his text? It must originate from a solid source of wit and power. And that source, I must say, can be nothing but resistance. It is the element that anchors Hazgui and other fighters like him in the future, not the past. It is the air an opinion and political thinker

breathes; the raindrops on his much-awaited free and democratic future dreamland. Resistance empowers political activists and therefore transgresses all boundaries of pain and narrativization techniques. And since humor is produced during or after the process of resistance, one can confidently assert that humor stems from resistance in a cyclical pattern to empower the individual, who, in his turn, produces humor to keep going strong.

According to Paul Simpson, “humor accomplishes many things: it relieves embarrassment; it signals aggression; it displays courage in adversity; it serves as a coping mechanism; it functions as an instrument of social influence; it rehearses and redesigns the categories and concepts of serious discourse” (Simpson 2). Humor in Hazgui’s text seems to play all these roles in an intertwined manner. It reduces the level of embarrassment with regards to humiliating scenes and memories, but nonetheless exposes the forms of oppression exercised by the prison guards against Hazgui and his comrades. It denotes courage and helps the writer not only heal but also affect the readers. Approached from this perspective, Nicholas Kuiper views the “sense of humor [...] as one of the important facets of personal resiliency that an individual can draw upon when attempting to deal with high levels of adversity, trauma, or any other extremely stressful circumstance”.<sup>11</sup>

Having outlined some aspects of and motives behind the use of humor in Ezzedine Hazgui’s autobiographical narrative *The Spectacles of My Mother*, and having previously examined other narratives by Tunisian political prisoners who equally experienced torture under Ben Ali (such as Bachir Khalfi), I can posit that the trauma of Tunisian political activists who experienced torture in prisons during the rule of the country’s first two presidents is expressed in totally different ways. In these different types of writings by Tunisian political activists, resistance mechanisms greatly differ and so do the literary representations of the traumatic experience. When Hazgui used humor, other writers such as Bachir Khalfi, resorted to figural realism, symbolism, and a bitter lexicon which points to a possible comparative area of study to explore Leftist and Islamist ex-political prisoners’ writings and resilience mechanisms at a national and possibly at a Maghrebean level. Prison Literature in Tunisia is still an under-researched area and the present article aims but to contribute, be it to a small extent, to a body of knowledge in the making.

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas. A. Kuiper. “Humor and Resiliency: Towards a Process Model of Coping and Growth” published in *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* (Vol. 8, 2012).

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