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Violence in Fiction: A Semiotic and Symbolic Exploration of the Transformation of the Literary Character

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Abstract

This article explores the theme of violence through the construction of the literary character. Its aim is to analyse how protagonists, shaped by the writing of violence, manifest — through their way of being and their trajectory — a form of violence and irony that is both ontological and symbolic. The study places particular emphasis on onomastics: character names cease to be mere labels, instead emerging as true bearers of meaning and significance, and thus becoming essential markers of violence.

Furthermore, this research seeks to approach violence by intersecting two dimensions: the body and language. The objective is to show how the physicality of the characters becomes both a mirror and an extension of the violence embedded in their speech. In other words, the analysis examines how language, turning away from its primary function, transforms into an instrument of destruction — of self, of others, and, more broadly, of the world.

Keywords: Violence, Literary Character, Onomastics, Ontological and Symbolic Irony, Body and Language.

Introduction

The post-modern world today is profoundly marked by the prevalence of violence, which permeates virtually every aspect of life: political, social, religious... Politically, conflicts between states are on the rise, reflecting a constant struggle for power and hegemony. In the socio-economic sphere, the rise of liberalism continues to widen inequalities, thereby generating new clashes and reigniting tensions between different social classes. The religious sphere, for its part, is not spared, as we are witnessing a resurgence of terrorism and radicalism, the tragic consequences of which are evident in the attacks and the suffering of innocent victims. Ultimately, we live in a world where violence and barbarism sometimes seem to prevail over the human values of love and brotherhood, casting a shadow over a troubling and turbulent future.

Faced with this violent and chaotic world, literature can only, in its own way, reflect this universe in crisis. It is in this sense that Kabuya asserts that:

From its distant origins to contemporary literature, the rule has remained unchanged: violence continues to be the driving force of the imagination. All historical events laden with

violence inexorably feed into fiction. To literature, painting and theatre have now been added cinema and... the press.

(Kabuya Ngoie, Salomon Ramcy. *New Representations of Violence in Francophone African Literature: The Challenges of a Transformation since 1980*. PhD thesis, University of Lorraine, 2014).

Contemporary French-language Maghreb literature, in turn, accords a significant place to the theme of violence. This theme runs powerfully through the works of this generation of post-colonial writers, notably Mohamed Nedali, Ben Jelloun, Yasmina Khadra, Mahi Binebine, Fouad Laroui and many others. At this level, we are witnessing the emergence of this form of writing known as 'violence':

This 'terrorist' writing... as Khatibi calls it, derives its poetic quality (its power of seduction) from the violence that drives it. It is a literary space traversed by forces whose supreme provocation gives rise to an economy of excess. And violence arises from distortion taken to its extreme (Gontard, Marc. **La violence du texte**. L'Harmattan, 1981, 271).

It goes without saying that, in the portrayal of violence, the character remains a pivotal element that perfectly embodies this strategy. It is at this level that the strategy reaches, to a certain extent, its climax. Thus, we are quite often confronted with fictional characters who, live solely by and within violence? In the works of Nedali and Khadra, for example, the protagonists sometimes seem to be caught up in a sort of war of all against all. Dialogue and cooperation are giving way, more than ever, to brutality and hostility. In other words, the forces of *Thanatos* are perpetually at odds with the values of *Eros*, in a violent and almost endless struggle.

In this article, we aim to examine the theme of violence through the lens of the character. In particular, we shall attempt to answer the following question: How does the character, as a fictional entity, embody the motif of violence?

To carry out our study, we have selected, as our corpus, Maghrebi writers whose works are, in our view, emblematic of the portrayal of violence in literature. These are Mohamed Nedali, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Yasmina Khadra. Beyond their stylistic differences, these writers share a common focus on the significant prominence they each accord to the phenomenon of violence. In the course of our study, we shall draw parallels between their various works, as required by the analysis.

We have structured our study around the following themes: In the first, we shall provide some general remarks on the portrayal of violence in literature. In the second, we shall

analyse the topos of violence from the perspective of characters' names. The main aim is to examine how characters' names often become the quintessential means of expressing violence (onomastic violence). Thirdly, we intend to address the phenomenon of violence in relation to the body. We shall seek to demonstrate how the characters' bodies are transformed into a theatre of spectacular violence (physical violence). Finally, the last strand aims to examine the topos of violence through discourse (Logos). In other words, we shall attempt to study how violence is conveyed and may manifest itself through speech and language by means of verbal irony (linguistic violence).

I. Violence and onomastics: Dehumanisation

This first strand aims to explore the concept of violence from the perspective of onomastics. We shall demonstrate how the names of characters often become the site of symbolic violence reflecting their degradation. Moreover, the choice of a particular name is not arbitrary; as Nietzsche aptly put it: *'The way in which things are named matters more than the things themselves'* (Nietzsche, F. **The Gay Science**, translated by Patrick Wotling, 2020: 115). From the perspective of * — the study of violence in literature — we might paraphrase Nietzsche by saying that the way characters are named matters more than the characters themselves. In other words, onomastics ceases in this respect to be a mere system of naming aimed at identifying individuals, and instead becomes a space rife with meanings and connotations that are at times violent and negative. It is, strictly speaking, this art of naming well — so dear to classical literature — that is here reduced to its very essence in the depiction of violence.

Onomastic violence is often expressed in the depiction of violence through a process of dehumanisation. Indeed, the avid reader of the respective works of Nedali, Ben Jelloun and Khadra will, on certain occasions, come across incongruous, and often even brutal, naming conventions. Thus, we regularly encounter names that undermine the humanity and dignity of the characters. It is therefore the logic of dehumanisation and animalisation that often prevails in the onomastic aesthetic characteristic of this type of writing.

In Ben Jelloun's work, the process of dehumanisation through naming remains a prominent diegetic technique. Consequently, the violence that systematically befalls these protagonists sometimes finds its ultimate expression in the names they bear. That said, in **La prière de l'absent**, for example, we see a particularly prominent presence of this aesthetic of dehumanisation. Indeed, the author of **La nuit sacrée** seems to take a malicious pleasure in bestowing names that are at times offensive. It is particularly with the

main character, Bobby, that the process of dehumanisation and animalisation is readily apparent. At first glance, the animal origin of this name is hardly imperceptible. It should be noted that the name 'Bobby' is one usually given to dogs. It is therefore a deliberate and ironic act to give it to a human being.

Yet Ben Jelloun seems here to be mocking and flouting all literary convention by giving his hero the name Bobby. This onomastic violence manifests itself here in the clear process of the character's animalisation. Thus, bestowing such a canine name upon a human being effectively amounts to stripping him of his humanity and reducing him to the status of an animal – and, a fortiori, that of a dog. Bobby therefore appears to be condemned to live like a dog, to lead a dog's life alongside his friend Sindibad, before dying – which is indeed what happened! The death of an ordinary individual reduced to the status of an animal. However, we must take care not to misinterpret the facts or make hasty judgements.

Another character named 'Dib', the wolf who embodies the cunning and malice generally associated with that animal, leads us to conclude with conviction that Dib is a cunning and crafty man. Moreover, on closer inspection, almost all the terms and epithets used to describe him implicitly reveal an undertone of hypocrisy and treachery.

Thus, in the above description of the character, we see beyond any shadow of a doubt that Dib is a cunning and crafty man. Moreover, on closer inspection, almost all the terms and epithets used to describe him implicitly reveal an association with hypocrisy and treachery. Indeed, the verb 'to feign' (he feigns being devastated!) is in itself sufficient to reveal what sort of character we are dealing with. It suggests the enormous disconnect that exists, by definition, between Dib's 'true self' and his 'public persona', between what is 'real' and what is 'feigned'... broadly speaking, it quite simply denotes an attitude of hypocrisy and deceit.

II. Tattooed violence: Amputation and disability

Having demonstrated in the previous section how onomastic violence serves to dehumanise characters through animalisation and objectification, it is now time to turn our attention to physical violence. Whilst the heroes in works depicting violence bear humiliating and demeaning names, it is clear that they also bear weakened, mutilated bodies that bear the marks of suffering and violence. Unlike the classical hero, renowned for his moral and physical perfection, the characters portrayed in works depicting violence are powerless and disfigured. Indeed, all these wounds, scratches and mutilations that mark their bodies serve as testimonies

which, on the one hand, bear witness to a violent and painful past and, on the other, sometimes foreshadow a tragic present in which these anti-heroes find themselves grappling with an uncertain fate. In Khadra's work, the aesthetic of physical destruction is a recurring theme in his fiction. Indeed, his characters often seem to be plagued by physical afflictions. Consequently, when, by a stroke of luck, they do not suffer the loss of a limb, they are naturally afflicted by some form of disability. Deafness, short-sightedness... are, from this perspective, all physical impairments that befall the heroes of the author of **The Attack**.

Indeed, it is particularly in **L'Olympe des Infortunes** that we are clearly dealing with an entire society of the disabled. Thus, a large proportion of the characters are burdened with weakened and imperfect bodies. Each suffers from a specific physical disability that weakens and immobilises them. It is above all with the novel's protagonist, Ach the One-Eyed, that the aesthetic of disability and mutilation begins. As his name suggests, Ach appears to suffer from a visual impairment: he is one-eyed. The term 'Borgne' literally means 'one who sees with only one eye'. What seems violent here is not the visual impairment from which the character suffers, but the fact that he is constantly referred to by his disability. Thus, Ach is named after his infirmity: Ach the One-Eyed! As if the narrator were intent on perpetuating the character's suffering by constantly reminding him of his disability.

In contrast to Ach, whose physical defect is visually prominent (being one-eyed), Haroun, for his part, has a hearing impairment, namely deafness. So whilst Ach's problem lies in his inability to see clearly into people and things, Haroun, for his part, suffers from his inability to hear himself, to hear the world, and to hear others!

Indeed, the deafness afflicting Khadra's character seems to be coupled with a 'deafness of character'. In other words, Haroun is 'deaf' in a metaphorical sense than he is in a physical one. He is a stubborn, headstrong character who always does exactly as he pleases. He is, if one dares say so, the perfect embodiment of the English term 'asshole', which describes the attitude of someone who asks others for advice only to do the exact opposite of what they were advised!

Haroun is therefore a character of this ilk; he listens only to his own conscience. This is clearly conveyed by the following ironic passage: '*Haroun isn't deaf; he just doesn't listen!*' (Nedali.M., 2010: 25). Haroun's deafness must therefore be interpreted in two ways: genuine deafness and feigned deafness!

As for the character of Driss, who features in **Khalil** by the same author, he too is not spared a certain degree of physical violence and suffering. He has clearly lost some of his fingers, as the following extract clearly suggests: *'Driss excelled at carpentry, where he lost two fingers.'* (Nedali, Mohamed., **La maison de Cicine**. Éditions Le Fennec, 2010: 56). Driss, too, lives in an incomplete body. His mutilation is merely a reflection of the incomplete and tragic existence he leads. He is without family, without support, and alone before he is recruited by the radicals who subsequently enlisted him in deadly attacks.

In Ben Jelloun's work, the aesthetic of mutilation reaches its peak in his seminal novel **La Prière de l'absent**. Like Khadra, the narrative of **La Prière** gives considerable prominence to a character who bears a scar that almost becomes a source of self-consciousness for him. Consequently, he even came to harbour a certain self-loathing, refusing to look at himself in the mirror. This trace of violence left on his face ultimately gives rise to emotional suffering – in this case, self-contempt – as suggested by the following passage: *'He (Sindibad) liked to change his name rather than change his face. He had a scar on his left cheek.'* (Ben Jelloun, Tahar. **La Prière de l'absent**. Seuil, Collection Cadre Rouge, 1981, p. 54). Sindibad does indeed seem to dream of a metamorphosis that would free him from his undesirable appearance. Moreover, the expression 'failing to change his face' is highly revealing in this regard. It suggests, amongst other things, the hero's contempt and hatred for his own appearance. Failing, therefore, to realise his dream of metamorphosis, Sindibad changes his name at will, in the hope of eventually escaping his undesirable physical appearance.

A little further on in their long journey to the south of Morocco, Sindibad and his companions came upon a village that was incongruous to say the least. This was the village of the 'Ahl Nif' – a physical deformity resulting from their having lost their noses: *'They are called Ahl Nif because of the men with their noses cut off. You'll see, it's a village where everything is surprising'*. (Ben Jelloun, Tahar. **La Prière de l'absent**. Seuil, Collection Cadre Rouge, 1981, p. 119). From this, we can clearly see that we are moving here from physical violence on an individual scale to mass physical violence. We are no longer dealing with individual people suffering from certain physical deformities, but rather with an entire community afflicted by the same misfortune: the loss of a nose! Given all these examples, we could well assert that physical violence appears to be a common feature of the aesthetic of writing about violence. Thus, we are consistently dealing with beings confronted by violence. So many damaged and mutilated bodies that leave their owners in a

state of weakness or even suffering. Now, what of the discourse of all those overwhelmed by violence? Are their words, in turn, synonymous with violence?

III. The language of violence and the violence of language

Having reviewed the manifestations of violence through the lens of onomastics (reification and animalisation) and the physical (mutilation and amputation), it is now time to focus on the study of violence in relation to language. Indeed, it remains the case that the discourse characteristic of Nedali's and Ben Jelloun's characters proves to be an inexhaustible source of violence. In this context, dialogue is no longer a means of communication and understanding between the protagonists; rather, it becomes a space that generates pure verbal violence. Speech definitively loses its meaning and function, becoming a means of annihilating and destroying others.

That said, in this section we propose to examine more closely the manifestations of this linguistic violence, whilst also attempting to assess the extent to which it contributes to the enrichment of the topos of violence as a whole. It goes without saying that language functions within the discourse on violence as the quintessential vehicle for the topos of violence. Thus, strictly speaking, we are faced with a crisis of language and communication. Healthy dialogue is clearly giving way to insults and invective. As for respect and kindness, they are supplanted by vulgarity and coarseness. The reader is quite often confronted with an eschatological, sexual and cavalier vocabulary... which shatters all forms of propriety and linguistic ethics.

Nedali's novels are highly revealing in this regard. Thus, Nedalian characters tend to draw their vocabulary from the most violent registers. Unable to find common ground, they indulge in every form of vulgarity and obscenity.

It is in **Morceaux de Choix**, published in 2003, that the sacred bond of fatherhood is desecrated and trampled upon. This sacred relationship, which is supposed to bind a father to a son, is in fact transformed into a battleground for the most vulgar insults and invective. Adel, whose pride as a father has been wounded by a rebellious and defiant son, will stop at nothing to condemn his offspring, Thami. After expressing his firm refusal to continue his studies, the young Thami was taken by his father, Adel, to a village butcher, so that he might learn the trade. Upon arriving at the butcher's, Adel made the following remarks to the butcher: *'I am entrusting this boy to you. Meskhout, Wal Ifassda, no longer wants to do anything with his ten fingers!'* (Nedali.M., *Morceaux de choix: les amours d'un apprenti boucher*. Éditions Le Fennec, 2003. :

18). There is no need to prove the vulgar violence here. Adèle shamelessly shatters and violates any relationship of respect and politeness between himself and his son. Thus, calling his son ‘Meskhout, Weld fassda’ is ultimately to relegate him to the status of a bastard, an illegitimate child. Moreover, it is by treating his son as such that Adel goes so far as to curse him and disown him for good: ‘*Bastard!... I curse you as many times as there are stars in the firmament!*’ (Nedali.M, **Morceaux de choix: les amours d’un apprenti boucher**. Éditions Le Fennec, 2003, 251) Not only does Adèle regard her son as a bastard here, but she also curses him and disowns him once and for all.

Furthermore, **La Maison de Cicine** is by no means far removed from this verbal and linguistic vulgarity. Indeed, the characters in the story indulge in the worst insults and invectives. Words with sexual connotations are commonplace. The herons never miss a single opportunity to hurl the crudest of terms at one another.

As in **Morceaux de Choix**, it is always people supposed to possess dignity who display obscenity and insolence in this subversive tale. It is through the character of Fakir that we encounter language rife with sexual references. The Fakir, as his name suggests, is an elderly religious man who knows the Book of Allah perfectly and by heart. His job was to recite, during funeral services, a few verses from the Qur’an for the souls of the deceased. However, it was during the burial of young Idar’s body at the end of the novel that the unexpected occurred involving the character of Fakir. As was his custom, he took the initiative to chant a few verses for the soul of the late Idar, but once the task was completed and the burial ritual carried out, the funeral procession slipped away without paying the Fakir a single penny, whilst he shouted himself hoarse in vain in the middle of the cemetery. Seized by unspeakable fury, the Fakir lashed out at the indifferent crowd in the most violent manner imaginable:

‘You bunch of arseholes! Muslims, my arse! You lot who can’t think.

‘No, Louriki, my wife is not the only one under this celestial vault who’s got a cunt!’” (Nedali.M, **La maison de Cicine**. Éditions Le Fennec. 2010: 262).

The harshness of the language is here emphasised and accentuated by the word referring to a woman’s private parts, in this case ‘pussy’. The Imam shows himself to be indifferent to all faiths and laws. Thus, his response, as well as being shocking, borders on the taboo and the forbidden; the ethics of communication are here clearly reduced to zero!

At the end of the novel, it is once again a police officer who takes charge of the vulgar and crude language. It is whilst investigating the deaths of Idar and Leila in a fire at Dar Louriki that the policeman lashes out not only at the whole city of Marrakesh but, above all, at its founder, Youssef Benou Tachafine: ‘*Shit! May heaven curse the idiot who designed this shite medina! That filthy Youssef... may the devil spit up his arse!*’ (Nedali.M, **La maison de Cicine**. Éditions Le Fennec 2010: 235). The scatological and vulgar language (shit – arse) is here reinforced by a recurring pattern of insults that reflects blatant verbal abuse.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we can finally assert that the writing of violence is, par excellence, a writing of ‘excess’, as Marc Gontard put it. Excess in speech, which turns into insults and invective. Excess in action, which produces weakened beings dragging their mutilated and scarred, bodies. Finally, excess in onomastics, which gives rise to names that reduce heroes to the status of animals and insignificant objects.

In many respects, we are faced with a literature of terror that elevates the theme of violence to its highest degree. This violence permeates virtually every aspect of the writing. Thematic violence inevitably leads to a style of writing that is itself violent, shattering the entire traditional aesthetic of the novel.

This omnipresence of violence in these writers’ work merely reflects, in truth, a violent and degenerating world. A world where the principles of humanity and brotherhood give way to savagery and the law of the jungle. And in this war of all against all, anything goes – including violence – to assert one’s authority and satisfy one’s death drive; this is indeed the central issue addressed in writing about violence, namely the problem of humanity overrun by thanatophilic forces.

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