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THE EMBODIMENT OF TRAUMA: KAFKA IN TANGIER

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In recent decades, Arab authors have explored traumatic events and the consequences of collective trauma on people, underscoring how these provoke imperceptible or ignored disturbances and changes in behaviour and attitudes, as well as analysing how repressive political systems concur in undermining identity. A special side of this mechanism is the effects of trauma on the body, the only concrete thing people possess. Therefore, alienation and transformation of the body have become more prevalent in the literature as symbols of individual and collective disturbances, whereas the act of writing functions as a remedy.

It is not strange, therefore, that Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*, 1915) has attracted the interest of Arab writers, as it represents how the body responds in a society where an individual does not find its place.

From this perspective, I discuss the novel *Kāfkā fī Tanġa* (2019) by Moroccan writer Muḥammad Sa'īd Ḥġīwġ exploring how themes of transformation, alienation and power have transitioned from *The Metamorphosis* to a contemporary Arab novel, positioning these themes as the current expression in Moroccan literature.

Key words: *Kāfkā fī Tanġa*, *Kafka in Tangier*, Muḥammad Sa'īd Ḥġīwġ, Muhamad S. Hjioui, Arabic literature, Moroccan literature, trauma

Interest in Kafka's work and *Weltanschauung* by Arabs is usually discussed in relation to his text *Schakale und Araber* (Kafka 1917), a work which opened a debate on whether the Czech author was a Zionist. Nevertheless, Kafka is a writer who is extolled by Arabs far beyond this text (Hansenn 2012): writers, intellectuals and filmmakers were inspired by his work, and the graphic novel *The Trial*—taken from his well-known novel—has recently been translated into Arabic.¹ His novels *Amerika*, *Das Prozess* and *Der Schloss* were all translated into Arabic by the beginning of the 1970s (Kafka 1970a, 1970b, 1971).

In his book *Kāfkā 'arabyyan. Īqūna taḥtariq* (2019), 'Aṭīf Buṭrus al-'Aṭṭār affirms that two Egyptian authors were important in spreading knowledge of Kafka in the Arab

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¹ Kāfkā, F. (2010). *Al-muḥākama*. Al-qāhira. Dār al-šurūq. The graphic novel is a translation from Montellier, Chantal & Mairowitz, D. Z. (2008). *Franz Kafka's The Trial*. New York/London: Sterling.

In his book *Kāfkā 'arabyyan. Īqūna taḥtariq* (2019), 'Aṭīf Buṭrus al-'Aṭṭār affirms that two Egyptian authors were important in spreading knowledge of Kafka in the Arab cultural scene: Georges Henein (1914–1973) and Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889–1973). Henein was a French writer from the Bréton circle and used Kafka's work as a bridge to approach Arab culture, finding parallelisms between Kafka's worldview and Arabic literature (Wāzin 2024); Ḥusayn was probably the first Arab intellectual to critically examine the work of Kafka. In 1946, Henein published in the journal *Al-kātib al-miṣrī* (*The Egyptian Writer*)—of which he was editor-in-chief—an article titled *Al-adab al-muḥlim* (*The Obscure Literature*, Ḥusayn 1946) addressing Kafka's works. His goal was to reply to the attacks on Kafka by the French Communist intellectuals who labelled Kafka's works as 'degenerate literature', a debate he was aware of because of his long stay in France. Ḥusayn, on the contrary, paralleled Kafka's *Weltanschauung* with that of the great Arab poet Al-Ma'arri—a poet Kafka knew in translation—and after some time, he published in the same journal the first translation of Kafka in Arabic by Ramsīs Yūnān—the short story *Ein Landarzt* (*A Country Doctor*, Kafka 1947). Ḥusayn wrote a second article on Kafka (Ḥusayn 1947) which was published in the same journal. In this article, he presented some of the Czech author's novels to Egyptian readers, especially *Der Schloss* (1926) and *Amerika* (1938). Kafka's literature helped him to translate his life into an active one through the autonomy of thinking and the act of writing.

It is not surprising then that some authors were influenced by Kafka (Basma 2014: 57), be it by his style or by his worldview, as expressed in his novels. In fact, let aside the well-known novel by Ṣun' Allah Ibrāhīm *Al-laġna* (1981), in which the reference to *Das Prozess* is self-evident, one can find echoes of Kafka in the work of Bahā' Ṭāhir and others. As al-Ghitani said, "Kafka was a sacred figure who fascinated us a lot, we the generation of the Sixties" (al-'Aṭṭār 2019: 234). The literature of the 1970s was known as *al-kitāba al-kāfkāwiyya* (Kafkianan writing, al-'Aṭṭār 2019: 234) not only because of its style but also because the characters struggled with power and political issues. Interest in the Czech author faded with time, only to return in the last two decades, especially because of the tension between civil society and power in Arab countries.

Kāfkā fī Ṭanġa finds itself in this new interest insofar as today's Moroccan novel in Arabic is experiencing much development, especially in using new and hybrid forms of narrative, which have been read differently by scholars. This trend is not a novelty *per se*, as it developed over time in order to build a post-independence cultural

environment, which was interrupted by violence more than once. That's why Moroccan authors found ways to criticise the government, society and family through literature without censorship or violent confrontation, in what I elsewhere called the aesthetic of resistance (Guardi 2010).

In an interview with Fernanda Fischione, Muḥammad Saʿīd Ḥġīwiġ² said:

My novels feature some post-modern elements I have purposely planned to use, while others, such as metafiction and the intertwining of reality, fantasy and different levels of consciousness, appear unintentionally and effortlessly. [...] In the last two years, I discovered Arabic novels from the 1960s and 1970s displaying many post-modern features. I found them mind-blowing. How is it possible that such experimental novels have been there for decades and, nonetheless, the Arabic novel has not developed yet, remaining frozen in a quite classical style? How is it possible that readers and writers still consider Naġīb Maḥfūz the emblem of the Arabic novel?

(Fischione 2023)

Hjiouiġ's statement seems to be too trenchant because the Moroccan novel is well and sound; nonetheless, it highlights a case in point: Maghrebi literature in Arabic in general and Moroccan literature in particular is neither appreciated nor studied outside the country with a couple of remarkable exceptions (Férnandez-Parilla 2006; Campbell 2013). Moroccan scholars, on the way to shaping a national literary canon, rightly refuse the theory that affirms that the contemporary Moroccan novel has developed only by contact with Western literature and challenge this attitude in order to investigate Moroccan literature within a framework which also considers inter-Arab relations, either by classical Arabic literature or by the literature of other Arab countries (Karina Laachir 2023). Moreover, this trend considers the novel a hybrid form par excellence, in which different literary forms converge. The interest and influence of Western literature are therefore present, but at the same level of pre-modern sources, such as sagas like Banu Hilāl, Bayabār and Al-Amīra Dhāt al-Himma, the *maqāma*, *One Thousand and One Nights* and the *riḥla*, which are studied for their interconnections with modern prose writing (Achaari 2016).

² Muḥammad Saʿīd Ḥġīwiġ Sāḥilī, born in 1982, is author of short stories, novels, poetry and essays. He has published five novels (2019). *Layl Tanġa*. Al-riwāya a-aḥ īra. Al-Qāhira: Dār al-ʿayn which won the Fahd Ismail Prize; (2019). *Kāfkā fī Tanġa*. Al-Qāhira: Dār al-ʿayn; (2020). *Aḥġiyyat Idmūn 'Amrān Al-Māliḥ*. Bayrūt: Nawfal; (2023). *Mutāḥat al-awḥām*. Bayrūt: Nawfal; and (2024). *Kahf al-alwāḥ*. Bayrūt: Nawfal, and two short stories collections (*Ašyā' taḥduṭ*, 2004 and *Intiḥār marġā*, 2006).

In recent decades, Arab authors have explored traumatic events and the consequences of collective trauma on people, underscoring how these provoke imperceptible or ignored disturbances and changes in behaviour and attitudes, as well as analysing how repressive political systems concur in undermining identity. A special side of this mechanism is the effects trauma has on the body, as it is the only concrete thing people possess. Therefore, alienation and transformation of the body have become more prevalent in the literature as symbols of individual and collective disturbances, whereas the act of writing functions as a remedy. It is not strange, therefore, that Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (1915) has attracted the interest of Arab writers as it represents how the body responds in a society where the individual does not find its place. Trauma can be seen as an indicator of social injustice and oppression and as the ultimate cost of sociocultural institutions (Laurie Vickroy 2015: 1). Literature then can be considered as a way to heal the trauma and to help survive it.

Kafka in Tangier by Moroccan writer Muḥammad Saʿīd Ḥġīwiġ inserts itself into this framework. The novel follows the steps of *The Metamorphosis* insofar as Jawad, the main character, finds himself transformed into 'a hairy monkey-like dwarf' (Ḥġīwiġ 2019: 62) who is abandoned by his family and dies in the end. In an interview with a Greek journal on the occasion of the publication of the novel in that language, on answering a question about how and when Jawad met Kafka, the author replies he had no intention of relying on Kafka's novel *The Metamorphosis*; he only liked the idea of a short novel.³ Nonetheless, there are several similarities between the two texts, and the reference is explicit: Jawad meets the Czech writer at the beginning of the novel, he finds himself transformed into a 'monster' out of the blue, his family rejects him and he dies in the end. What is different is the setting. The narrator warns us that we are in Tangier but not the Tangier that we know. It is a parallel Tangier, the one not usually on display. In this way, we are introduced to a Tangier of the margins, a town different from the glossy one we find shown on the covers of tourism brochures, so as to say to the reader, do not believe everything that is shown to you. As the narrator says:

Let the setting be Tangier. But not, of course, the city of Tangier that you know. This is another one, which merely resembles it. A Tangier parallel to the one you consider real. But mind you, being parallel, doesn't mean it is made up. Let us agree

³ The interview was published by the author on his facebook wall, with no reference.

from the outset that the binary of reality and fiction depends entirely on where you're looking from (Hjioui 2023: 7).

This means Tangier is another character in the novel, and it is the Tangier without a mask, which is in a strong relationship with Jawad. In fact, just before his transformation, he has a dream in which he falls into the town's sewer, and when he succeeds in coming out of the water—always in dream—he spits 'the city's shit from his face' (Hjioui 2023: 9), a vivid anticipation of what will happen.

As said, at the beginning of the novel, Jawad meets Kafka, and his transformation begins just after this encounter, as he reads a report from the Medical and Reproductive Testing Laboratory. At this point in the novel, readers do not know what is written in the report, although they can figure it out. The news has a destructive effect on Jawad, and all his world falls apart. Until this moment, Jawad has the life he was expected to live: he wanted to be a literary critic but, as his father stopped working, he took responsibility and became a teacher in order to provide for his parents and his wife, whom he married because she was pregnant and not for love; and he encouraged his sister to study, providing for the university expenses.

In a word, until the transformation, he has lived with his persona in the fore. According to Jung, the persona archetype is the one through which we present ourselves to others, actively and continuously modelling the idea built on ourselves. It is a mask, a habitus or a role we play in society. The persona is the result of a mediation between the individual and society, and is an obligatory step in personality formation: it protects and orients the individual and pushes us to conform to a model we consider valuable. Jung believes that people have an identity or persona which they want to project to others. People's personas are different from their inner selves. Jung purposely used the Latin word 'persona' for the mask of an actor or an individual's personality, because the persona can be influenced by social roles or created from the collective unconscious archetypes. Because the persona is an idealised image and not a real reflection of one's consciousness, associating excessively with a persona may result in the repression of a person's individuality (Jung 2007: 182-188). And that's how we meet Jawad at the beginning of the novel.

On the opposite side is found the shadow, which is everything we refuse to recognise: our personality, instincts, drives and negative feelings, which are usually removed. These two sides are always in a relationship, and we should integrate them to develop a unitarian personality in which our negative aspects—or the ones we

consider as such—can be accepted and managed without the need of hiding, squashing ourselves into a cage or wearing a mask. However, a shadow archetype can also include positive attributes; for example, perceived weaknesses (such as empathy which Jawad continues to feel after the transformation), which is opposite to 'toughness', which people wish to show to others in their persona (Jung 2007: 177).

Jawad's transformation happens the night after he reads the medical report results: He sheds the mask—his persona—and is transformed into a monster, which is his shadow taking the upper hand. Or, better said, this is how he perceives himself and how his relatives see him. As the mask is put off, all of the novel's characters are shown with their shadows, everything changes in their relationships, and even Tangier sheds its mask.

After the metamorphosis, the novel's characters see each other as they are: Jawad understands that he has an anger that has been repressed for too long. By alternating between past and present events in Jawad's life, the reader witnesses the unravelling of the story of an apparently ordinary family. It is not by chance that his transformation has something of a monkey, because willing or not, it reminds us of the monkey of two Western authors: 'the monkey on the back' in William Burroughs's *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict* (1953), in which the monkey represents pain (and Jawad suffers a lot), and *The Naked Ape* (1962), where Desmond Morris affirms that the greatest difference between humans and animals is the fact that the first do not have hair (and Jawad wakes up covered with hair). In both books, there is a strong parallelism between humans and animals, and the boundaries between the two are blurred in Hǧiouiǧ's novel.

Kafka in Tangier is divided into fifteen short chapters, each bearing the title of a well-known book written by either an Arab or non-Arab author. These are *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell (1943); *Yūtūbiyā (Utopia)* by Aḥmad Ḥalid Tawfīq (2010); *Mawt ṣaǧīr (A Small Death)* by Ḥasan 'Alwān (2016); *The Dead Zone* by Stephen King (1979); *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip Dick (1962); *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis (1955); *Al-ayyām (The Days)* by Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1992);⁴ *A Thousand and One Nights*; *Ḍākirat al-ǧasad (Memory in the Flesh,* 2010), *Fawḍā al-ḥawās (Chaos of Senses,* 2003), *'Ābir al-sirīr (Bed Hopper,* 2003), all by Aḥlām Mustagānmī; *Eleven Minutes* by Paulo Coelho and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. The titles are chosen because of their plot, or their structure, as is the

⁴ The book was first published in three volumes between 1926 and 1967.

case of *The Days*, and they interact in some way with the plot of *Kafka in Tangier*, conferring to the text different levels of interpretation depending on the reader. Chapter 8, for instance, bears the title *One Thousand and One Nights* and has the structure of a tale. In Chapter 9, titled *Memory in the Flesh*, the reader is told the story of Jawad's father in light of the historical background of the French and Spanish colonisation of Morocco, just as the background of Mosteghanemi's novel is the French rule in Algeria. Other chapters refer to dystopian novels that describe Jawad's condition. Step by step, the reader is taken deeper into the story, paralleling personal history with collective history. Hjiouiġ unveils what is behind the mask: superstitious beliefs (followed by Jawad's mother), religion only as a façade (exemplified by Jawad's father and his behaviour towards his family), institutional violence (shown by the principal of the school where Jawad used to teach) and the nightlife of Tangier. In Chapter 14, the last veil drops: the reader is finally informed about what happened and can figure out what was written in the medical report quoted at the beginning of the novel. This chapter is titled *Brave New World*, referring to Aldous Huxley's well-known novel, but especially and in an ironic way, to the words said by Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, from which Huxley took the title of his novel:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is!
O brave new world,
That has such people in 't

(Shakespeare 2022: V, 2023-206).

First, this quote can be ascribed to Jawad's family members: When they learn of his transformation, their view of him shifts: previously their provider and carer, he is now a pest and a burden to be rid of. In a word Jawad is disregarded and, as previously said, recognition is based upon relations. As Axel Honneth maintains, failed recognition is a trauma which deprives the person of his/her identity (Honneth 2019). Second, it highlights how *Kafka in Tangier* is a well-structured novel, even in the details, in which Hjiouiġ explores the hypocrisy of contemporary Moroccan society. Torn between traditional values and a longing for a free possibility to engage in relationships based on respect, the Moroccan novel denounces a society which lives behind a mask in order to appear to the Westerner as a modern one in line with its values; nevertheless, this transition is neither accomplished nor has to be accomplished. *Kafka in Tangier*

reminds the reader that no transformation is harmless and that we as individuals and a society have to confront our fears and shadows. Otherwise, we will all become 'monsters'.

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⁵ In the References I intentionally quote the female authors' first name.

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