CHAPTER NINE

ODE TO HUMAN RESILIENCE: BEARING WITNESS TO SURVIVING TAZMAMART

MARIA SUZETTE FERNANDES DIAS

It was the 29th of October 1991. I had just been reborn. My rebirth was an ordeal. I bore the allure of a little old man who had just seen the light of day. I had lost 14 cm and developed a hump on my back. My ribcage was so drastically deformed that it had diminished my capacity to breathe. Although my hair had stubbornly resisted degradation, my skin had creased. I walked dragging my right leg. I chose carefully every word that I uttered. I spoke little, but my mind would not cease to work. I was a newborn who had to get rid of his past. I decided not to remember any longer. I had not lived for twenty years, and the person who existed before 10th July 1971 was dead and buried somewhere in a mountain or a green plain. How could I make people around me understand that I was a completely new being, battered in transition, a reinvented self, far removed from the person that they were waiting for, the one who had left one day, long ago, never to return?[1]

No words can express, nobody can grasp the horror of what we endured. I cannot describe my pain, my angst on having lost the flower of my youth. Although I was fortunate to leave Tazmamart alive, I was devastated to leave behind my comrades, victims of undignified deaths but epitomes of courage and dignity!!! I wanted to bear witness, honour the memory of my companions who perished in this hell. By writing this book, I also wanted to prevent other Tazmamarts from sprouting.[2]

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[1] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière*, 244-245.

[2] Ahmed Marzouki in an interview with Younes Benkirane at the launch of his book, *Tazmamart Cellule 10*.

Hence these survivors chose to speak. To recount his moving story of survival in the subterranean concentration camp of Tazmamart, amidst the abject brutality of state-sanctioned yet "unofficial" incarceration; ruthless public oblivion and stony official denial; and, to articulate his discourse of forgiveness and his inherent belief in the strength of the human spirit to transcend victimisation, humiliation and debasement; Aziz Binebine chose a narrator in the person of a celebrated compatriot, Tahar Ben Jelloun, renowned internationally for his literary talent and his commitment to the cause of the marginalised and the voiceless. His survivor testimony and celebration of the human spirit is embodied in *Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière*.[3] Ahmed Marzouki wrote *Tazmamart Cellule 10*,[4] a poignantly graphic first direct testimony account of the horrors of 6550 days that he spent at Tazmamart. Juxtaposing his own observations with those of his companions, he worked patiently and painfully to piece together, an image of life irremediably torn between the extremes of human condition. To illustrate the cover of his book, he selected a pencil sketch executed by a fellow inmate, Rachdi Benaïsi, who like twenty-nine others, did not live to see the day of liberation.

By analysing these two Tazmamart survivor accounts, I will explore the problematics of transmitting direct and indirect concentration camp survivor experience. I will also examine the potency of testimonies and testimonial fiction to celebrate human dignity, move consciences mobilize public opinion, disrupt hegemonic ideological negation of atrocities and induce collective healing.

Problematics of communicating survivor experience

One sweltering August night in 1973, fifty-eight defence personnel incarcerated at Morocco's notorious Kenitra prison on charges of sedition for attempts on King Hassan's life in 1971 and 1972, were forcibly woken in the middle of the night, blindfolded and herded into military trucks. Many of these imprisoned dissidents were unwitting participants of the 1971 failed coup d'état—officers in training in the Ahermoumou Royal Military College, they had been supposedly led to believe by their charismatic leader, Lieutenant Colonel M'hamed Ababou, that they were participating in an anti-subversion exercise. Following orders, they invaded the king's birthday party at Skhirat and opened fire on the gathering, killing ninety-eight invitees. The king escaped unharmed. While

[3] Published in 2001, translated in English as *This Blinding Absence of Light*.
[4] Published in 2000.

the leaders of the putsch were sentenced to death, the officers, some of who had not even fired a single shot, were condemned to serve three to ten years of imprisonment at Kenitra. They were later joined by aviators serving similar prison terms for their involvement in an aborted military attack on the king's aircraft, allegedly orchestrated by the then Minister of Defence, Mohamed Oufkir. Ahmed Marzouki narrates: "The favouritism, the regionalism, the completely arbitrary character (of the sentences handed down), was again in evidence. Nevertheless, I could not have imagined then, that for those who had been given sentences of three years or more, these would come to mean absolute horror."[5]

The fifty-eight men were clandestinely escorted to an isolated subterranean concentration camp concealed in the Atlas Mountains of the Southern Moroccan desert, 500 km south-east of Rabat. Custom-made to serve as an example of the abysmal fate that awaited any member of the defence personnel who dared to launch or to participate in another attempt to overthrow the monarchy, Tazmamart was designed to kill by inches. Described as a "twin of the Nazi concentration camp,"[6] a prison morgue and a home of death, the detention colony consisted of two large cell blocks, each consisting of 29 individual completely walled up cells, measuring three metres in length and two and a half metres in width, with ceilings so low that no fully grown man could ever stand erect. Seventeen holes allowed indirect aeration and eventually, served as channels of communication among the inmates. An orifice connected to an underlying common cesspool was provided in each cell for sanitation. Imprisoned in these tiny concrete cells reminiscent of the dungeon tombs of the reign of Louis XI, deprived of light, time, change of clothes, facilities for hygiene and human contact, fed on a meagre diet of stale bread, vermicelli and lentils, exposed to the cruelty of the freezing winters and hot, stifling summers and denied any medical attention, only six survivors from cell block 1 and twenty-two from cell block 2, that is, only less than half the number of detainees would see the light of day ...eighteen years later, when pressure from international human rights organisations would force Morocco into accepting the existence of Tazmamart and releasing its inmates. The others would have already succumbed to hunger, insanity, suicide, tuberculosis, skin diseases, gangrene, syphilis, paralysis and other osteo-muscular maladies resulting from continuous cramping of the body and extreme temperatures! Johannes Wier Foundation for Health and Human Rights would report in April 1993, that each of the twenty-eight

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[5] Ahmed Marzouki quoted by David Tresilian in "That Blinding Absence of Light."

[6] Mahi Binebine in "La part de l'absent," *Littera—La trame des jours.*

survivors, in their mid-40s at the time of their release, weighed about 40 kg and had lost almost a foot in height. Most suffered from continuing physical ailments, almost all had lost their teeth, and six had osteomalacia. Even after two years of freedom, they still experienced disturbed sleep, nightmares, irritability, and impaired concentration.[7]

In "Bare Life from Auschwitz to Guantánamo Bay," one of the two other essays in this section, Milo Sweedler, in his Agambenian analysis of Nazi Lager and its modern day parallel in Guantánamo Bay, underlines how detainees in both these locales exist in "legal void," in "a space beyond the reach of the law that strips a class of people of their rights to exist as political and ultimately human beings." However, unlike both these cases, individuals incarcerated at Tazmamart had already been condemned by the normal penal system to judicially sanctioned sentences to be spent at the rigorous imprisonment facility of Kenitra. Unlike Guantánamo Bay which by virtue of its location in Cuban territory (away from what Sweedler calls "the squeamishness of US citizens or the laws of the country") presents itself as an ideal "outsource" for State sanctioned torture, dehumanisation and deprivation of dignity of those perceived as enemies of the Nation, the Tazmamart detention facility existed on Moroccan soil, located near the city of Er-Rich, between Errachida and Midelt. The *makhzen* or the governing elite in Morocco succeeded in perpetuating its terror by exemplifying Tazmamart as an embodiment of the destiny that befell dissidents, thus subjugating any inkling of public outcry. Although the detention facility became an incarnation of State endorsed atrocities in the popular imaginary, fear induced public denial corroborated the official line of refutation of its existence.

According to Agamben, "*the camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule.*"[8] To understand how the State could make 58 men "disappear" into oblivion, it is essential to revisit the political and social context which made the existence of this penal colony possible. The reign of King Hassan II (1960-1999), widely known as the "Years of Lead," was characterised by harassment of dissidents, arbitrary arrests and incarceration of outspoken anti-government activists (like Abraham Serfaty who had espoused the cause of democracy in Morocco), and, state sanctioned disappearances and deaths (well known among which are those of socialist dissident, Mehdi Ben Barka in 1965 and of thousands of members of the Saharawi resistance by organised death squads after the Moroccan invasion and annexation of Western Sahara in 1975). Politicised demonstrations and labour strikes were

[7] See E. Van Ginneken, *Tazmamart: Fort-Militaire-Secret du Maroc.*
[8] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 168.

violently repressed. In December 1984, on obtaining information from human rights organisations that her husband, Lieutenant M'baraek Touil who had mysteriously "vanished" while serving a prison term at Kenitra, was in fact imprisoned at Tazmamart, American Nancy Touil pleaded with the US Government to intercede to protect her husband. Following the discreet intervention of the US government, conditions of captivity improved for Touil but not for the other prisoners. Arguably, the Cold War had created two distinct ideological dichotomies and Morocco had clearly expressed its allegiance to the West by fiercely repressing socialism and by embracing its role of the gendarme of the West in North Africa. Any international intervention in the name of human rights could not even be envisaged out of fear of upsetting the status quo and violations by the "soft dictatorship" continued to remain unquestioned.

Following mounting pressure from human rights organisations like Amnesty International and persistent campaigning by French journalists like Christine Daure-Serfaty[9] and Gilles Perrault,[10] the detainees of Tazmamart were ultimately released in 1991. They were forbidden to speak publicly about Tazmamart. For daring to recount the agony of his unjust detention to journalist Ignace Dalle in 1995, former detainee, Ahmed Marzouki was abducted, threatened, placed under surveillance and refused authorisation to practise as a lawyer.

Literature of concentration camps has seldom found comfortable reception even in milieus unaffected by the rigid control that state controlled ideological apparatuses exercise over official historiography and the politics of memory. Our tendency to consider concentration camp experiences as a *tremendum horrendum* and thus too traumatic to be narrated, persuades us to regard direct survivor testimonies with suspicion, shock and rejection. Theorists like Alvarez[11] and Des Pres[12] opine that the image of the concentration camp is repressed in our consciousness and any attempt of engaging with concentration camp literature, rouses our dormant nihilism and self-destructiveness. Refusing to acknowledge extremity, we indulge in an operation of denial. As Des Pres contends "as a witness, the survivor is both sought and shunned; the desire to hear his truth is countered by the need to ignore him. Insofar as we feel compelled

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[9] Author of *Tazmamart: une prison de la mort au Maroc* (Paris: Stock, 1992).

[10] Perrault's investigative journalism would later compel him to write *Notre Ami, Le Roi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), denouncing the tyrannical rule of Hassan II and the complicity of the West in perpetuating it.

[11] Alvarez, *Beyond all this Fiddle*, 28.

[12] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 170-171.

to defend a comforting view of life, we tend to deny the survivor's voice. We join in a 'conspiracy of silence.'"[13]

Yet the will to make the truth known and to integrate his testimony into public consciousness, a mission that Lifton attributes to "the survivor's concern with historical record"[14] in a bid to expunge his "survivor guilt,"[15] is what motivates survivors to overcome extreme situations and to live to bear witness. Ahmed Marzouki states: "I am against vengeance, against cutting off heads; all I want is to make truth known. If authorities turn the page on the problem of political prisoners without disclosure of past violations, the torture will continue."[16]

However, clinical representations of concentration camps by survivors, albeit out of a desire to ensure the objectivity of collective experience, lack the power to translate an experience of *tremendum horrendum* into emotionally meaningful language.[17] Marzouki's book suffers from this inadequacy—the author's impassioned will to bear witness to History has resulted in detailed accounts about frugal meals (described to the precision of the estimated weight in grams and the number of chickpeas served at each meal), chronological narratives of the daily routine put in place by the detainees, accurate portraits of prisoners and guards, constantly denied requests for water and medicine, brutally realistic depictions of the deaths of his comrades and desperate attempts by survivors to reintegrate into society after their release. Although laudable for its articulation of what would have otherwise been unspeakable, Marzouki's book is devoid of an intellectually engaging style, for, it is a testimony given by memory and told in pain, cautiously avoiding the tendency to fictionalise which inevitably shapes most remembering. With its explicit descriptions of the debasement and disintegration of the human being and parallels drawn with similar detention camps worldwide, the book corresponds to the benevolent but dehumanising conventions of human rights horror journalism:

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[13] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 41.

[14] Robert Lifton, *History and Human Survival*, 197.

[15] Term used by Lifton to describe the "process of identification which creates guilt over what one has done to, or not done for, the dying while oneself surviving." Lifton, *Death in Life*, 496.

[16] Ahmed Marzouki quoted by Marvine Howe in "Under a New Regime," 32.

[17] I would however like to add that Primo Levi's *Survival In Auschwitz* may be considered as an exception to this generalisation—despite being clinical in his descriptions, Levi's evocative style and fluidity renders the work emotionally moving.

> We bore the icy winters in our freezer-cells, bare feet and clothed lightly in our tattered summer clothes. We asphyxiated in summer—the soaring temperatures exacerbated by the absence of air circulation and of sufficient quantities of water. Hunger seared our stomachs, year after year; it compelled some of the detainees to masticate continually their food to delude themselves into believing that they had eaten a little more. Some of us bore the agony of being bitten by scorpions who kept us company in the penumbra. Diseased, deprived, filthy, humiliated and derided, we became the most dismal creatures on this earth. Our bodies emitted such a disgusting stench that even a decomposing corpse became easy to tolerate.[18]

As Colman Hogan, following Scarry, has articulated it, "bringing a halt to torture necessitates communicating—without alienating—the fact of an unbearable pain to those whose aid you would enlist."[19]

To communicate a harrowing story of living death without any self censorship, Tazmamart survivors had to find an appropriate means to circumvent official bowdlerization. Several ethical and cultural concerns also plagued them, paramount among which were, the spiritual belief in the sacredness of the human being; the traditional Moroccan deference to authority; and above all, the danger of blaspheming by indicting the king who is considered the direct descendent of the Prophet and whose judgement is therefore sacrosanct. After his release, former detainee Aziz Binebine chose to distance himself from his past at Tazmamart. Although he was determined to tell his story, he doubted his ability to face the demons of the past and to communicate facts effectively in order to produce an acceptable image of his ordeal. Nor could he rely on someone close to him to do so objectively (the obvious choice for a third person testimony would have been his painter-writer brother, Mahi Binebine). Tahar Ben Jelloun accepted the challenge and delivered a moving third person testimony using the detour of fiction: "Fiction possesses an overwhelming capacity, a force to move consciences. It touches people by addressing their emotions, their lives and their imagination."[20] As a Bakhtinian, I too believe in the capacity of fiction to extricate the past from a closed spatio-temporal frame and to induce us to reconsider and re-evaluate it without epic distance; to reflect a multitude of voices in a dialogic relationship (heteroglossia); and, to foreclose the pre-dominance

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[18] Marzouki, Tazmamart Cellule 10, 2.

[19] Colman Hogan, "'The Actual Murder with Words': A Discussion of Violence in the Enlightenment, Romanticism...and After," diss., University of Toronto, 1998, 13. See also Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 3-23, particularly 9.

[20] Ben Jelloun in an interview with Mylène Tremblay, 21st Feb, 2001.

of a single ideological discourse through the articulation of ideological positions of different characters (polyphony).

Instead of writing a *J'accuse*, Ben Jelloun decided to write a tale of universal appeal—an ode to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of barbarous illicit detention and a commemoration of a *lieu de mémoire*, through narratives recounted by a first person narrator. To enter the mind of the prisoner in tenebrous detention, he placed himself mentally in the dark. By way of his professional experience and knowledge as a social psychologist, he endeavoured to relive the trauma of his subject—an identification that became so intense that he actually slipped into the skin of the narrator, comfortably using the first person "je" ("I") to communicate Binebine's testimony. Analysing Holocaust survivor testimonies and their rendition, Des Pres suggests that the neutrality of tone and lack of subjectivity displayed by Hemingway or Tolstoy while describing the terrible, or, the domination of feeling and hysteria in narrating atrocity, reduces the agony of survivors to a moment of self indulgence. As language of ultimate concern, he recommends the use of "a kind of archaic, quasi-religious vocabulary."[21] Instead of dramatizing conditions of inhuman detention, Ben Jelloun, using the language of Sufi mysticism, combines reality with the imaginary and explores the effectiveness of spirituality and of detachment from materiality, emotions, memory and the past, as tools of deliverance and resistance. Despite the poetic but sombre lyricism of the narrative, the readers can grasp the vigour of the collective struggle of inmates to transcend physical and psychological trauma, to preserve an identity apart from the one imposed by their situation, to surmount the strategic choice of death, and, to survive, for, death would only contribute to the triumph of the injustice. The authorial note "This novel is inspired by true facts and the testimony of a former detainee of the Tazmamart concentration camp. It is dedicated to Aziz and also Réda, his young son, light of his third life"[22] reminds the reader that the heart-rending tale is one of survival.

At Tazmamart, Binebine inhabited cell 7 of block 1 and Marzouki occupied cell 10 of block two. Juxtaposing Marzouki's direct testimony and Binebine's indirect testimony, we can acquire a holistic understanding of life and survival at Tazmamart.

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[21] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, vi.

[22] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 7.

Power versus bare life: Preserving human dignity at Tazmamart

Agamben defines concentration camps as the *nomos* of the modern and the most absolute biopolitical space "of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and judicial protection no longer made any sense.... In so far as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realised, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation."[23] When the dissidents were surreptitiously boarded into army trucks, they were conscious of their status as "bare life": "Could the army get rid of fifty-eight men and make them disappear into a mass grave? Who would stand up for us to reclaim justice? We were living a state of exception. Anything was possible."[24]

The abruptness of dislocation, the uncertainty of the fate that awaited them and the inhuman conditions of detention at Tazmamart triggered what Des Pres describes as the first phase of survival—*the initial collapse*—wherein, confronted by the otherness of the camp, the horror and chaos, the self disintegrates. Marzouki records vividly this stage by way of a group snapshot in the chapter, *L'arrivée à Tazmamart* (Arrival at Tazmamart):

> With the heavy iron door closing behind us, we experienced immense anguish in the obscurity and isolation of our cells. During those first atrocious minutes, most of us were seized by panic or overcome by incommensurable despair which refused to be mitigated. Some imagined that they had been thrown into an abyss while others thought that their cell resembled "Habs-Kara," the infamous prison built at Meknès by Moulay Ismail, where all those who entered could never hope to leave. Still other believed that they had just been interred alive. A profound silence reigned in the two blocks. We were literally stoned. For a long time, we remained prostrated, incapable of measuring the extent of our misfortune but convinced intuitively that the worst was yet to come, indubitably for a long time.[25]

This is a phase characterised by the loss of desire to live. However, the three suicides (all of which were the result of prolonged insanity) at Tazmamart did not occur during this stage. The refusal to yield to

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[23] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 170-171.
[24] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 35.
[25] Marzouki, *Tazmamart Cellule 10*, chapter 3.

dominant suicidal thoughts can be retraced to the strength of character of the prisoners and their profound faith in religion, as Binebine's spokesperson, Ben Jelloun's protagonist, Salim articulates:

> I thought of God and of what the Koran said about suicide: Everything rests in the hands of God. Do not hate an evil that could bring good. He who kills himself will go to hell and will continue to die indefinitely in the manner that he chose to end his life. He who hangs himself will hang eternally. He who burns himself will forever be condemned to the flames. He who throws himself into the sea will drown ceaselessly.[26]

The second phase is characterised by reintegration and recovery of stable selfhood. Survivors go from withdrawal to engagement and from passivity to resistance, by accepting the reality of their predicament and by recognising that "maintaining one's dignity is an absolute imperative, that dignity is all they have. Each one does his best to keep his dignity intact."[27] Dignity stands for a constituent of humaneness and one of the irreducible elements of selfhood, "an inward resistance to determination by external forces," "a sense of innocence and worth, something felt to be inviolate, autonomous and untouchable, and which is most vigorous when most threatened," a self conscious and self determining faculty whose function is to insist upon the recognition of itself as such.[28] The consorted effort to preserve one's dignity enables detainees to transcend victimisation by refusing self pity.

As Sweedler has pointed out in his chapter in this volume, dehumanising detainees by divesting them of their human dignity facilitates the discourse that "the 'other,' by virtue of his lack of humanity, is no longer entitled to human rights." In Tazmamart, defilement served as a means of inducing dehumanisation. The feeling of defilement poses, according to Paul Ricoeur, "a threat which, beyond the threat of suffering and death, aims at a diminution of existence, a loss of the personal core of one's being."[29] The inmates had to learn to detach their minds from their debased and dirty bodies and thus overcome the dread of the impure that assailed them in the filthy cells. With their daily supply of just five litres of water, assuring basic cleanliness of the body, the essential ritualistic ablutions before prayers and hygiene in the cell, became a major challenge: "It was a learning curve, a self-imposed psychosis, a test that

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[26] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 33-34.
[27] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 37.
[28] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 65.
[29] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 41.

one had to pass. Be there without being there. Shut your senses, divert them elsewhere, give them another life, as if I was thrown in this trench without my five senses."[30] Marzouki speaks about how insects "transformed the body into a huge wound"; unable to cut their hair or beards or nails, the prisoners were transformed into "ghosts wandering in prehistoric caves."[31] Even so, necessity obliged prisoners to invent. In cell block 1, the guards with fear of being infected by the prisoners, assigned a prisoner each day to sweep the corridor. One of the inmates, Lhoucine unfastened the metal handle of the broom and sharpened it into a blade which enabled the fellow prisoners to cut their hair. Another inmate, Abdallah, during his turn, secured another broom handle and fashioned it into a razor and five needles with which the prisoners could mend the only clothes that they possessed—the ones that they wore when they were moved from Kenitra to Tazmamart—now in tatters.

Both Marzouki and Binebine assert that obliteration of memories of life before detention was indispensable to preserve their sanity. The first casualty of Tazmamart succumbed to his memories—nostalgia had driven Mohamed Chemski from cell block 2 to insanity—he began beating his head against the iron door of his cell, calling out desperately to his favourite child, Meriem. The guards found him a few days later, dead and stiff, his head and hands planted against the door. Strategic oblivion of the past would therefore require the inmate to "resist absolutely the stimulus to remember. Harden himself. Forget. Empty his soul of the past. Never look behind. Learn not to remember. Latch all the doors leading to memories of life before 10th July 1971. Forget what is hidden behind these doors."[32] It was also equally necessary to cleanse the soul of anger, hatred and self pity before these negative emotions attacked one's reasoning and immune system. Dwelling upon the unfairness of his fate, nurturing hatred and voicing thoughts of revenge, Ruchdi from cell 3, block 1, lost his sanity and died, "screaming and howling like a wounded animal."[33]

"The death of time destroys the sense of growth and purpose, and thereby undermines faith in the possibility that any good can come from merely staying alive."[34] In answer to the torture of deprivation of the sense of time and in an attempt to prevail over the emptiness and vacuum of their existence, inmates had to invent their own notion of time. In cell block 1, prisoner 15, Karim, with his ability to tell time to the exactness of

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[30] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 12.
[31] Marzouki, *Tazmamart Cellule 10*, chapter 5.
[32] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 30.
[33] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 59.
[34] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 12.

the minute, took on the role of the time-keeper. In Binebine's indirect testimony, stages of imprisonment are symbolically differentiated by the appearance of animals: scorpions teem the cells in block 1 during the early stages of incarceration; the next phase is marked by the imprisonment of a dog in the cell block for committing the "crime" of biting a visiting general (an emblematic reminder of the warped reasoning behind the condemnation of prisoners to Tazmamart); a dove named Hourria (Liberty) by the inmates, rekindles faith and hope when morale was at its lowest; during the final years of incarceration, the narrator becomes adept at interpreting Tebebt the sparrow's cooing and singing and is thus able to tell accurately the weather conditions and the movement of guards outside. The memory of the bird's song enables him to alleviate and even forget his physical pain.

Both testimonial accounts celebrate the bonds of solidarity forged by the inmates, each trying to encourage the other to live. Marzouki elaborates how his cell block mates pleaded and succeeded in obtaining permission to look after Lghalou whose paralysis had reduced him to a "rotting heap of blood, sweat, urine and dirt."[35] Touil, whose status of spouse of an American citizen assured him certain privileges, did not hesitate to share his soap with Sefrioui. When denied permission to leave the cell to verify the state of health of a demented and dying inmate, the prisoners from cell block 1 embarked on a total silence strike. When retribution followed with guards releasing scorpions in the cell block, Wakhrine used to seek permission to visit the cells of those stung by the creatures, suck out the poison from the wounds of the victims and treat them. To end the scourge of the scorpions, the inmates of cell block 1, began a frenzied chanting which finally resulted in the guards killing all the scorpions they could see: "We demanded to see the Kmandar (commander). It was imperative to purge the trench of the scorpions. Tapping our feet and our hands, we intoned: 'The Kmandar, the Kmandar, the Kmandar... .' The Kmandar did not come but the guards took the initiative of killing the scorpions while we were preparing the corpse for burial."[36] Baba, the Saharawi insurgent willingly tears his long tunic to supply Binebine with cloth to cover his freezing groin.

In the spatio-temporal void of Tazmamart, survival meant creating a sense of organisation and rhythm which was only feasible through the establishment of a collective schedule. Periods of silence and conversation had to be agreed upon, for, as Marzouki reports, in the cell blocks, "the slightest sound could reverberate into a deafening cacophony. But it was

[35] Marzouki, *Tazmamart Cellule 10*, chapter 12.
[36] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 79.

also essential to speak in the dark. If we remained silent, abominable thoughts invaded us."[37] The inmates could communicate through their aeration holes. After breakfast, all inmates participated in the recitation and learning of the Scriptures. Each afternoon was marked by a session of story-telling. A similar routine was also in place in cell block 1. Each prisoner was entrusted a particular role and when the incumbent had passed on, others took on his responsibilities—Karim was the official time-keeper; Gharbi (Ustad) taught the inmates to recite the Koran; Wakhrine treated scorpion bites; Mostafa amused the group with his jokes; Bourras conceptualised a game of imaginary cards that the inmates played in groups of four; Binebine gave lessons in history and geography and was like Marzouki, the official story-teller. In their respective cell blocks, these two men sustained the group morale by recounting stories from the Arabian nights and plots of American films, reciting passages memorized from French classics and often composing original stories. Everyone adhered to the periods of silence, particularly during the phase designated as the time for rest. Laughter too was central to morale. Marzouki confesses that he has never laughed as much in his life as he did at Tazmamart. Garnishing each story with hilarious details, devoting time and patience to appreciate the humour no matter how anodyne and laughing wholeheartedly, facilitated detainees to exorcise their sorrow. In cell block 1, unfortunately, the group morale was so low, that "despair always emanated from the forced laughter."[38]

Ordeal of survival often becomes an experience of growth and purification. The inmates of Tazmamart had learnt to accept that their fate was irreconcilable. Their only hope was to submit to the will of God, derive consolation from Koranic teaching that the unjust would be punished and thus, garner moral strength to overcome their inhuman experience. Through daily sessions of reciting the Scriptures consisting of a Koranic expert in cell block 1 and an inmate who had succeeded in procuring matches, a candle and a copy of the Koran in cell block 2, transmitting verses to the person in the neighbouring cell and with the neighbour transmitting to his neighbour in the same manner, the inmates of Tazmamart has learnt the entire Holy Book in a record year and a half. Marzouki confesses: "My faith in God was what saved me from the hell that was Tazmamart. It convinced me that someday, I would see the rays

[37] Ahmed Marzouki quoted by Véronique Badets in "Dieu aide-t-il à résister à la barbarie?"

[38] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 85.

of the sun and the azure sky, once again."[39] Ben Jelloun is poetic, even mystical in his treatment of Binebine's quest of spirituality. For Salim, prayer generated a state of peaceful resignation, an art learnt from his mother who used to unburden herself to the seven saints of Marrakech, protectors of the deprived, the dead and the surviving: "Seven men. Seven stages. Seven prayers. Faces turned towards eternity, a lesson of renunciation, an apprenticeship of solitude and transcendentalism."[40] Detaching his soul from his tormented body through the art of meditation that he had mastered over the years, he would make imaginary spiritual pilgrimages to the Kaaba in Mecca, "the black stone which purifies the soul of the dead."[41]

Spiritual resilience fortified the mind against disintegration when faced by the horrendous deaths of fellow-inmates. Marzouki has consecrated the entire chapter 13 of his book to the seven fatalities of cell block 2 (Chemsi, Lghalou, Kinate, Meziane, Dik, Betty and Douro), evoking the agony suffered by each person. Only six prisoners from cell block 1 survived. Ben Jelloun's lyrical rendition can barely conceal the horror of Binebine's testimony—prolonged insanity; paralytic induced starvation; continuous exposure to the rigours of winter; suicides by starvation, swallowing something sharp or by hanging; untreated constipation, syphilis, gangrene, tuberculosis, gastro-enteritis and scorpion stings; thwarted attempts to escape during the burial ceremony of a fellow inmate; and, ironically, the death of twenty-three inmates caused by inability to cope with improved nourishment towards the end of the incarceration period.

Marzouki explores the logistics responsible for the disparate rates of survival in the two cell blocks. While cell block 2 was sheltered, cell block 1 was exposed to the seasonal extremes of temperature and tended to get sodden with ground water, thus becoming a fertile breeding ground for insects, rats and scorpions. Very few officers ventured into this building out of fear of getting contaminated. "Secondary adjustments" (Erving Goffman term for "any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organisation employs unauthorised means, or obtains unauthorised ends, or both, thus getting around his organisation's assumptions as to what he should get and hence what he should be"[42]) were not uncommon in cell block 2. For instance, a guard, Larbi Louize, recognised for his kindness to

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[39] Ahmed Marzouki in an interview with Taieb Chadi, "Un miraculé du caveau de l'au-delà."
[40] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 33.
[41] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 9.
[42] Goffman, *Asylums*, 188.

the prisoners, offered the inmates a transistor radio and batteries, thanks to which, they listened to the news on radio, twice a week. Marzouki managed to procure a pencil and paper and persuaded inmate Belkbir to write the memoirs of life at Tazmamart, capturing some of the most agonising scenes. Unfortunately, the scribe known for his fluid and captivating writing style, fell sick and was bedridden in 1983 until his release in 1991. Bribed prison officials carried letters for the detainees and thanks to these, humanitarian intervention was finally possible.

Circumstances inevitably provided occasions for "secondary adjustments" that permitted inmates to get around systematic deprivation of light and human contact and leave their cells, take in the sun and communicate among themselves directly and indirectly, and commune with nature. Death prevailed in cell block 1 and for the first few years, the tasks of checking on the terminally ill, performing the last rites and burying the dead were imposed upon the prisoners. These morbid arrangements furnished the prisoners with an occasion to leave their cells and occasionally see the light of day: "During the short while outdoors, I opened wide my eyes, even my mouth, to absorb as much as light as possible. To inhale daylight, to stock it within me, to preserve it like a refuge, and to remember it each time darkness weighed heavily on my eyelids."[43] Both Marzouki and Binebine speak about sparrows that kept them company in their days of loneliness. Marzouki had tended a bird that had fallen through an indirect air vent in the ceiling. Days after its release into the outdoors by the guards, the bird returned to his cell through the same opening. The bird's "homecoming" stimulated psychotherapeutic relief to prisoners, by forcing them to give vent to their repressed emotions and to shed tears:

> One evening, a prisoner who had lost his capacity to speak for a long time, suddenly shouted: "Faraj is here!" All those who could still stand up, approached the opening of their cell, holding their breath, ready to help this strange and stubborn pigeon who refused to admit that his place was among the living and wanted to return to us, the living dead. None of us could do anything for the bird who was struggling to enter, but our hearts were choked with emotion.... Extenuated by his attempts to enter, he finally managed to perch on my outstretched arm. Inmates in cells close to mine, could hear me shed tears bitterly.[44]

To outmanoeuvre the code of conduct, inmates also devised a secret language to communicate among themselves and refused to call one

[43] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 22.
[44] Marzouki, *Tazmamart Cellule 10*, chapter 14.

another by the cell number, as they were instructed to do. In cell block 1 which was perpetually haunted by the spectre of death, observing prolonged periods of silence became the inmates' strategy to terrify the guards:

> We observed complete silence in the trench. Not a word, not a gesture. We controlled even our respiration. A few minutes of profound silence, heavy and unusual, drove the guards crazy. We were pretending to be dead. Silence and darkness create conditions propitious for the apparition of ghosts. One of the guards cried: "Come on, let's get out of here. This place is haunted. I swear that I saw a demon with glowing eyes. Let's leave these bastards with the demons, they belong to the same race, they are the same scum. Hurry up, let's go."[45]

Given that survival and preservation of dignity had become the raison d'être of the inmates, it is not surprising that the news of imminent release and the apprehension of facing a world that they had left twenty years ago, caused considerable psychological imbalance manifested through the deterioration of existing illnesses, nightmares and negative thoughts, extreme survivor's guilt, and, even death among the inmates. For the survivors, the battle of survival would continue even outside Tazmamart where they would have to reckon with a realistic image of their broken selves, the challenge of rebuilding their lives and after a brief program of psychotherapy, reintegrating into society. They were warned against speaking to journalists about Tazmamart. As a price for their silence, they were promised a modest monthly stipend of 5000 dirhams, assurances of employment and aid with reintegration.

Reckoning with the past and collective healing

As early as 1993, undaunted by official repression, Ahmed Marzouki published parts of his camp memoirs in the French review *Les temps modernes*, with the objective of bearing witness to the suffering that he and his fellows inmates endured during their eighteen years in darkness, and of paying tribute to the humanitarian activists who had coerced the Moroccan authorities to admit the existence of Tazmamart and ensure the prisoners' release. With the death of Hassan II in 1999 and the ascension to the Moroccan throne by his son, Mohammed VI, a monarch respected by the people for his sense of modesty, social justice and distance from the arbitrariness of his father's rule, the long silence maintained by former

[45] Ben Jelloun, *Cette Aveuglante*, 59.

Tazmamart victims, was finally broken. In 2000, socialist Moroccan daily *Al-Ittihad al-Ichtiraki* increased its sales three-fold by publishing as a serial, *De Skhirat à Tazmamart: Retour du bout de l'enfer* (From Skhirat to Tazmamart: Return to the entrails of hell), the testimony of a Tazmamart survivor, Mohammed Raïs which featured the portraits of each of the inmates of the concentration camp. Ahmed Marzouki published his entire memoir, *Tazmamart Cellule 10* in 2000. Aziz Binebine's survival story became the subject matter of Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière* in 2001. Translated into English as *This Blinding Absence of Light* by Linda Coverdale, this book won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2004, thus opening to the Anglophone readership, a human tragedy hitherto little known. In 2004, another survivor, Ahmed El Ouafi wrote *Opération Boraq F5 16 août: l'attaque du Boeing royal* (Operation Boraq F5: Attack on the royal Boeing on 16th August 1972). At the launch of his book, El Ouafi solemnly declared: "I decided to write this book in memory of all my companions who had lost their lives after braving inhuman conditions in the insidious prison of Tazmamart."[46] Almost simultaneously, Salah Hachad published *Kabazal, les emmurés de Tazmamart* [Kabazal: Within the walls of Tazmamart]. "Kabazal" was the code word used by the inmates to denote Hachad's technique of using the cover of a sardine tin that he had preserved since 1973 to catch and reflect the almost invisible light penetrating through a tiny hole in the ceiling, to obtain "a patch of light, 20 cm in diameter, into the cell." In March 2006, Davy Zylberfajn's documentary *Vivre à Tazmamart* (Living in Tazmamart) (2005) was selected for screening at the International Festival of Films on Human Rights. Inspired by the story of survival, the young French producer projects against a background of scenes inundated by sunlight, the voices of five former detainees who testify how they resisted the horrors of Tazmamart and built a semblance of life for themselves. Sequences alternate between testimonies and landscape. Driss Chberreq, like a few of the other surviving inmates, pursued higher education after his release. Encouraged by his teacher, he has written two collections of poems about the emptiness and disorientation that he experienced after his release, and, a book, *Le Train Fou* (The Mad Train), describing the unreal manner in which the young officers were deceived into participating in the coup and the reprisal that followed. As a preamble to his manuscript, he writes: "Several times, I was tempted to burn these pages but I quickly changed my mind,

[46] Ahmed El Ouafi in "Maroc: découverte de 32 tombes dans le célèbre bagne de Tazmamart," *MarocInfoCom*.

convincing myself that it was not fair to reduce half of my life into ashes."[47] His book and poems will be published later this year.

On January 7, 2004, King Mohammed VI established a seventeen member Equity and Reconciliation Commission (IER) headed by Driss Benzikri, a former political prisoner and human rights activist. Its mandate was to establish the truth about enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions that occurred between 1956 and 1999, to identify institutional responsibilities for such abuses through public hearings, to provide reparations to victims, to return the victims' bodies to their families, to build public memorials to victims, to issue recommendations for reforms to prevent the repetition of such violations, and to promote reconciliation. Televised public hearings of victims continued until 30 November 2005.

Long before the official reconciliation process commenced, testimonies of Tazmamart survivors had already entered public consciousness. Thanks to these survivor accounts, the public began to accept as truth, stories of a terrifying concentration camp called Tazmamart, until then, a popular myth, and, to comprehend the gravity of the atrocities and human rights abuses committed during the Years of Lead, thus being in a position to make a moral judgement. Tazmamart survivor accounts had thus performed the essential act of moving consciences. Furthermore, this concentration camp literature initiated a process of collective healing—those affected by the existence of the Tazmamart penal colony (families of inmates, former prison guards and inhabitants of Tazmamart village who had led a life of marginalisation and isolation, under constant army surveillance for eighteen years) discovered that it was now safe to recall the memories and to express the emotions that they had repressed for years. They thus mustered the courage to perform the vital act of articulating their own testimonies alongside those of survivors who had lived through and triumphed over Tazmamart. Nevertheless, for those who had lost their loved ones at Tazmamart, reconciliation was not easy. Fatéma Dik, daughter of Jilali Dik who died during his incarceration at Tazmamart, recounts: "When the first survivor accounts about Tazmamart were published, I was shattered. When *Al Ittihad Al Ichtiraki* began publishing portraits of Tazmamart inmates, I lost my mind. The day when my father's portrait was published, I felt that I was attending my own funeral."[48] As part of the healing process, in October 2001, former political prisoners and families of those deceased at Tazmamart, organized a ceremonial march to the former penal colony,

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[47] Driss Chberreq quoted by Karim Bhoukari in "Portrait: Le poète de Tazmamart."

[48] Fatéma Dik quoted in "Les noms-dits: Le pardon difficile, l'oubli impossible."

now a military base. The event received publicity from the international press (which was not particularly flattering to the Moroccan authorities). Barred from entering Tazmamart to look for the graves of the dead inmates, the demonstrators lit candles and placed roses in memory of the dead outside the gates. Finally, with aid from former jailers and military archival records, thirty graves were finally located and their existence, which had until then been the subject matter of former inmates' testimonies, was made public on 9th December, 2005.

Elie Wiesel's comment on the popularisation of survivor experience—"At first, the testimony of survivors inspired awe and humility. At first, the question was treated with a sort of sacred reverence. It was considered taboo, reserved exclusively for the initiated ... but popularisation and exploitation followed. As the subject became popularised, so it ceased to be sacrosanct, or rather stripped of its mystery"[49]—bears particular relevance to my last question: can survivors alone claim "ownership" of their experience and the exclusive right to speak about it? On the publication of *Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière*, based on the indirect testimony of Aziz Binebine, Ben Jelloun found himself embroiled in controversy. Critics felt that it was unethical on part of Ben Jelloun to assume the identity of a man who had suffered (by employing the first person singular), and to exploit his testimony for profit. Mahi Binebine accused Ben Jelloun of "harassing" his brother to revisit his life at Tazmamart, at a time when he was trying to detach himself from the agony of the lost years and to integrate into the present, and of manipulating a victim's testimony to enhance Ben Jelloun's reputation as a humanitarian.

In his analysis of *La Ville sans Femmes*, Henry Veggian, the other contributor to this section has adroitly demonstrated the ambiguity of Mario Duliani's political affiliations and scrutinized the debate surrounding the writer's representation of the "state of exception" of Fascist Pre World War II Italy. Veggian suggests reading Duliani within proper historical context instead of a "penitent, apologetic chronicle of internment." In the wake of the upheaval over *Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière*, Ben Jelloun's political and ethical convictions were similarly brought under the radar. Some Tazmamart survivors pointed out that although Ben Jelloun had always been vocal about the political crises and human rights violations in Palestine and Algeria and had taken up the cudgels for the marginalised in France and in the Maghreb, he had deliberately chosen to remain silent about the atrocities inflicted upon the Moroccan people during the Years of Lead and had decided to speak about these only when it was safe to do so. In May 2001, *Le Monde* quoted

[49] Wiesl, "For Some Measure of Humility," 315.

Ignace Dalle, who has written the preface to Marzouki's book, saying that the long negated existence of Tazmamart is now "the rage, a leading Moroccan writer having woken up and used it as a framework for his latest work after having 'debriefed' one of the survivors." In the same article, Marzouki himself claimed: "Tahar Ben Jelloun did not write a thing on behalf of the detainees at Tazmamart. He always remained so silent. Why is he so bothered about it today?" Ben Jelloun's *mea culpa* of his non-engagement out of fear of persecution of his family back home was grudgingly accepted as a genuine excuse. As for allegations of coercing Binebine to speak about his years at Tazmamart, Ben Jelloun furnished a chronology of the key facts (request from Mahi Binebine to write a book based on Aziz Binebine's testimony; meeting with Aziz Binebine; letters from latter praising the book; meeting with the publisher to decide Binebine's share of royalties; and the advance paid to him). Although the controversy was finally dismissed as a misunderstanding between the author and the survivor and Binebine was paid his rightful share, the polemic added a *succès de scandale* value to the humanitarian content of the book and boosted its sales. By finally breaking their silence over Tazmamart, both Binebine and Ben Jelloun earned their ultimate liberty—Binebine from the angst of his memories of torture, detention and years wasted and Ben Jelloun from the culpability of perceived indifference towards the problems of his own people.

In an age in which we are sceptical about propaganda, ideologically embellished "official" versions of History, and, what Baudrillard has called the neutralisation of reality (in the sense that our conception of the real depends not on how the "real" has been described but rather by how it is interpreted and integrated in discourse), testimonies of survivors possess the power to bear witness to the truth, to a collective human engagement in the process of surviving extreme situations, and to the moral resistance of each survivor. The determination to testify notwithstanding political pressure, the distress of revisiting the past, and the disbelief and indifference of the public, is further evidence of the survivors' will to disrupt the tacit conspiracy of silence and denial. Bearing witness does not always entail healing, as evidenced by the refusal of some former Tazmamart inmates to participate in the commemorative march in 2001 or in the subsequent IER trials. The IER commission was not mandated to prosecute individual perpetrators and plaintiffs were asked to refrain from giving out names of abusers because no legal or criminal trials would ensue. Nevertheless, The Moroccan case is enlightening because the testimonial literature of Tazmamart, whether embodied in brutally precise

testimonial narratives or mytho-poetic works of fiction, suggests that all forms of concentration camp literature possess the power to move consciences, mobilise public opinion and compel the State to reckon with the atrocities of the past, and, this in itself, is an enormous social achievement.

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