

Between Literary Commitment and Ecological Consciousness in Rachid Mimouni's Trilogy

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Abstract

Rewriting real historical facts in a fictional framework was the clear objective of Maghrebian Francophone writers. Making writing a means of revolt and combat was largely asserted in their writings and productions, following the example of Rachid Mimouni, who, using factual material and through an unconventional writing style, depicts Algerian reality and reveals the deepest wounds of a society in full disorder once independence was acquired. In fact, the latter, known as the writer of disenchantment, aligns himself with the trend of nationalist authors, who are never inclined to bow before the falsifiers of historical truth. The ultimate objective of this paper will be to demonstrate that the author's sense of commitment transcends the sociopolitical lens to invest in the environmental field, driven by a discourse of awakening and safe guarding the natural world.

Key-words: Commitment- environmental field- disenchantment- historical facts.

Introduction

For several decades, the environmental crisis has remained a crucial issue in societal debates. Given that the planet is threatened by various changes and symptoms; such as climate change, the destruction of the ozone layer, soil and water pollution, as well as the depletion of natural resources; a significant number of ecologists have attempted to raise global awareness about the severity of the problem.

Faced with the urgency of the situation, they have focused on a major challenge in order to act collectively to preserve the planet for future generations. Understanding the causes and consequences was therefore their main concern. From there, an interesting question arises: Beyond ecologists, do writers have the ability to engage in an ecological cause? How and by what means do they do so?

From this questioning, and particularly from an ecological perspective, we propose to develop an eco-poetic reading of Rachid Mimouni's Trilogy, "Le Fleuve détourné, Tombéza and L'Honneur de la tribu ", with the intention of proving that Rachid Mimouni's commitment is not limited only to a socio-political denunciation of the atrocities of power after the independence of the state, but can also manifest itself in the form of a discourse of awareness about nature.

1. Commitment beyond the political: Aesthetics of protest and ecological consciousness in Rachid Mimouni

It is undeniable that literature holds the power to lay bare the deepest truths and disappointments, while also acting as a mirror of its bitterness and disillusionments. In this sense, through his pen, the writer also expresses his revolt and communicates his militant stance; writing thus becomes a powerful vector for awakening consciousness, essential for the dynamics of social transformation and

the denunciation of injustice. This subversive and ethical function of art echoes the foundations laid by Jean-Paul Sartre in his seminal essay where he theorizes the imperatives of engaged literature.

Sartre explains:

"Speaking is acting: everything that is named is no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence. If you name an individual's behavior, you reveal it to him: he sees himself. And as you name it, at the same time, to others, he knows he is seen at the very moment he sees himself; his furtive gesture
"i

It is within this aesthetics of engagement that Rachid Mimouni finds his true affiliation. For him, silence is a betrayal; the writer makes his work the mirror of the fractures of his time, erecting the denunciation of injustice and the abuses of power. His narratives openly and brutally expose the inequalities and violence of a corrupt system. In order to grasp the complexity of this militant aim, it is appropriate to refer to this quotation, which highlights the tensions inherent in this writing of struggle:

"Rachid Mimouni's interpretative key is almost always that of the rebellious nationalist, whereas his literary personality is much more complex, and often contradictory. His first two novels, *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau* (1978) and *Une paix à vivre* (published belatedly in 1983), both published in Algeria, have a somewhat clumsy, elaborate, didactic, heavy tone, reminiscent of Camus the humanist and the euphoria of the 'tomorrow that sings' after the achievement of Algerian independence. "²

Thus, it is clearly understood that Mimouni's voice resonates directly with the Sartrean word, according to which the role of the intellectual consists in exercising his engagement to confront the crises of his society. Faced with an authoritarian and traditional power, and within such a climate of decay and oppression, the writer refuses the compromise of silence in order to fully immerse himself in the social arena. This posture makes him an emblematic figure of contestation in post-independence Algeria.

Through a cutting and corrosive form of writing, he targets the excesses of a decaying and corrupt system. His aim is therefore to unsettle the reader's comfort, to provoke their ethical discomfort, and ultimately to elevate them into a true unhappy consciousness.

Moreover, the etymology of the term "rebellion" reveals that it comes from the Latin verb *rebellare*, meaning "to take up arms again" or "to go back to war." Transposed into the field of creation, this act goes beyond simple physical confrontation to invest the space of artistic and literary revolt, thus becoming the manifesto of an aesthetic insubordination.

In Mimouni's work, this desire for contestation and claim-making is embodied in the exploration of unprecedented themes and subjects such as sexuality, social taboos, shortages induced by administrative incompetence, and the injustices of a system. The author thus lays bare the absurdities of a political order that has betrayed the freedoms and hopes of a frustrated society, kept under the yoke of constraint. The author of *Tombéza* states it in his own words:

"Contestation, it seems to me, is first and foremost political; it so happens that we live in systems where politicians govern us, but contestation is not only political. It is also social; we live together realities, some of which are very critical. My role as an intellectual would consist in pointing out what is wrong, in showing the defects of society. I think this is an essential role for intellectuals, regardless of their countries or origins; it is, in a way, a role of lookout "³

For Emmanuel Bouju as well, engagement is defined as interacting with one's socio-political environment. It is a cathartic process allowing authors to sublimate their intimate experience, to give substance to the denunciation of inequalities, and to actively advocate for the rights of minorities:

"To engage is to act with the instruments that exist instead of inventing others (...) to engage is always to speak and think with the common language (...) to engage is to act without waiting to be freed from one's passions (...) to engage is, in a way, to give up what is perhaps a fantasy, from the point of view of human existence: that one must first free oneself from certain constraints before beginning to act. "⁴

In the same vein, it should be said that the meaning of engagement in Mimouni's work cannot be understood without resorting to a denunciatory discourse conveying the oppression and injustice of the socialist regime adopted by the state.

It should also be noted that the sense of engagement in this writer goes beyond the socio-political framework, and is also expressed within an ecological framework. The representation of nature in his work appears both symbolic and meaningful; it reveals an ecological discourse that perfectly reflects the writer's environmental concern regarding the degradation of nature. In this case, denunciation is not limited to political criticism, but can also extend to ecological denunciation through raising awareness about the degradation of natural elements:

"Mimouni's work is thus nourished by descriptions adorned with elements of nature, but this is to bring the reader closer to nature. His environment, nowadays, is neglected, abandoned, and destroyed. Human inattention threatens fauna and flora [...] Did Mimouni have a premonition of this in the 'black decade', whose struggle lies elsewhere? "⁵

2. Commitment Tested by Eco-Poetics in *Le Fleuve détourné*

Studies devoted to the relationship between ecology and literature have shown that literary production also has the function of promoting a more environmentally respectful reflection through a relatively new, more refined and more literary approach called eco-poetics. This movement developed from the 1990s onwards, in response to growing concerns about the environmental crisis. By way of illustration, let us note this explanation given by Sara Buekens, which reveals the ultimate aim of this current:

"Eco-poetics emphasizes the work of writing; it consists, for example, in analyzing the meaning of metaphors and the way they add an additional meaning to descriptions of the natural world; in examining how authors express the relationship between humans and the environment through the use of anthropomorphism, personification and zoomorphism. Very often, these processes make it possible to give a voice to both the animal and vegetal world and to question the place of humans within ecosystems "⁶

From this definition, we retain that this approach is not limited solely to studying the links between literature and the environment, but it also addresses how literary texts represent nature. It also illustrates how authors express the relationship between humans and the environment.

It should also be added that this approach differs from ecocriticism by its literary refinement. Marjolaine Deneault clarifies this distinction when she states:

"Ecocriticism gives texts a very great power, since it grants them the ability to awaken consciousness and raise readers' awareness of ecological problems. Literature is thus perceived as a

dynamic actor by leading its readership to re-question the relationship they individually and collectively maintain with their environment and the world that surrounds them "⁷

This eco-poetic approach therefore does not merely analyze environmental themes in texts, but studies the way these themes are expressed through literary techniques, style, and language. In this sense, it is an aesthetic field of study linking literature and nature, allowing for a new perspective on literary texts.

Following these ideas, an eco-poetic reading of Mimouni's texts appears interesting, since our novelist was and remains a committed writer; we will focus on a more specific form of his engagement, that of ecological commitment. As already mentioned above, the meaning of engagement in Mimouni goes beyond the socio-political framework and is also manifested through a discourse of environmental awareness.

In his novels, our author paints a true landscape of natural elements. He introduces into the narrative fabric both ecological and socio-political concerns through the description of natural elements and the fusion he creates between animals and the human species.

By way of illustration, in the first volume of the Trilogy *Le Fleuve détourné*, we clearly see, from the very choice of the title, the evocation of a natural element, that of the river. This river, which has lost its original course in the aftermath of independence, appears to be meaningful. This metaphor is by no means accidental; it brings the reader closer to nature, which appears neglected and destroyed during this period.

Beyond this element, in the opening pages the presence of natural elements is clearly visible. Let us consider this example in which the narrator finds himself imprisoned in a camp where the heat persists:

"To speak frankly, there is not much reason to complain about our situation. Our material installation remains rudimentary. Our barracks are furnished only with simple canvas camp beds and shaky metal wardrobes... There is no air conditioning, despite the severity of the climate. The thin plywood of our shacks calmly lets the cold and the heat pass through "⁸

In this sense, we can argue that this heat fulfills a symbolic function of confinement and broadly expresses a critical vision regarding environmental concerns on the part of the writer.

Similarly, on the following page, the narrator evokes another important element, namely water. He carefully describes the process of water distribution. It seems that the representation of water and everything related to it river, stream, sea is not accidental; it clarifies the author's intention to preserve nature:

"Water is distributed to us by tanker trucks once a day. It must be stored somehow. Rachid the Saharan has not yet recovered from the departure of the mobile water treatment plant "⁹

In addition to this element, earth is also added. The narrator, in a return to his ancestral origins, describes vast lands exploited under joint ownership. This description reveals the writer's talent in seeking to raise the reader's ecological awareness:

"Formerly, we lived united and prosperous on vast lands exploited in undivided ownership. But a neighboring colonist, who planned to expand his vineyards, bribed a member of the tribe who went to request the division of the land "¹⁰

Further on in the novel, the use of zoomorphism is explicitly identified. This device, consisting in presenting humans as beasts, finds its expression in the following example, which reveals the anger and satire of the character Old Twenty-Five toward those in power. Here, he compares them to bulls:

"In my country, young bulls never remain calm. They keep running in all directions, pushing everyone around, leaving no cow in peace, because in the illusion of their youthful strength they want to mate without stopping, otherwise they return to fighting, forget to graze, and spread unrest among the herd "¹¹

In addition to bulls, references to animals abound in this novel. Let us take this example where the narrator uses a series of animals to convey his cynical message regarding the closure of brothels:

"First there is the shameless goat, with its little raised tail exposing its sex; as if in a constant invitation, it is a very convenient animal because of its small size... The cow is a calmer animal, but very large. One often has to build a small scaffold to reach it... The best is undoubtedly the she-donkey. She is at the right height..."¹²

3. Aesthetics of Chaos and Environmental Consciousness in Tombéza

Tombéza is also enriched with descriptions adorned by elements of nature. It seems that our author is deeply engaged in ecological awareness. We clearly see that, through this novel, he continues his struggle and fully commits himself to defending the natural world and denouncing catastrophes and human negligence. We note a remarkable presence of several elements referring to nature within the narrative structure, revealing a symbolism aimed at highlighting the importance of the environment in human daily life.

An element of nature appears from the very first chapter: the prickly pear cactus, which brings back memories of Tombéza's childhood, the child of prohibition. He repeatedly evokes this element throughout the narrative; let us note this description:

"When I think of my childhood, the image of prickly pear cacti immediately comes to my mind. They are seen everywhere. They form natural hedges in the fields, but also block all horizons, breaking the gusts of wind that scatter the microscopic thorns of their fruits. What horrible plants! All covered with spikes "¹³

In addition to this example, another element appears later in the text. This time, it is the lands of Biget, where Tombéza worked as a stable boy:

"We entered the stable where about twenty huge and fat cows were lined up in two rows. I expressed my admiration, and my companion could not suppress a smile 'Eh! These are Dutch cows' "¹⁴

Furthermore, zoomorphism appears in the second chapter, where the narrator merges humans with animals to ridicule the children of the douar, who constantly mock his physical appearance. We thus observe the repetition of the lexeme "hyenas, " which suggests that this recurrence is symbolic and serves an emphatic function:

"Never, never will the image of this pack of children chasing me fade from my memory, shouting at each other with hyena cries, encouraged by the gestures of the taleb and the silent approval of the men who came to watch the spectacle. I ran with my back hunched and my head buried between my shoulders... It is well known that, apart from carcasses, hyenas attack only wounded animals... Hyenas are the most cowardly beasts, and therefore also the most ferocious... Hyenas have fear in their bellies "¹⁵

4. Eco-poetics of Territory and Collective Memory in L'Honneur de la tribu

An evident and unquestionably symbolic presence of nature is also perceptible in the final volume. L'Honneur de la tribu is likewise built upon an ecological concern. We have been able to observe the consideration that Mimouni shows toward the environment. The spirit of revolt against pollution emerges from his writings through the representation of the sun, the villagers' nostalgia for the "happy valley" of pomegranate and jasmine, as well as the fusion of man with nature.

We particularly retain, through the following example, the unconditional attachment of the inhabitants of Zitouna to their lands and vineyards. The "happy valley" here appears to be a kind of paradise for them:

"The nostalgia helping them, our ancestors believed they could, through relentless labor, recreate a second happy valley where primroses and warblers would abound, along with all those things that made it an earthly rival of paradise" ¹⁶

This paradisiacal space is lost and deeply missed by the members of the tribe:

"Where are the seas of wheat, the almond orchards, the hedges of oleander, the elegant fir trees, the immense and leafy ash trees, the generous pomegranate trees, the wooded coats of the hills where hares and wild boars roamed?" ¹⁷

Indeed, in this novel, several excerpts highlight the relationship between the human species and animals. Let us take livestock farming as an example: "The delicate cows and the idle sheep who refused to graze on thorny bushes gave way to goats so skilled at finding their food" ¹⁸

We also note a laudatory description of the protagonist's sister, who bears the Arabic name Ourida, meaning "flower." Thus, the evocation of the flower refers to an unartificial nature:

"One wondered who Ourida could take after, she being blonder than a wheat ear at harvest time, her face shining like a full moon. Her gentle gestures and honeyed words made her even more attractive. The girl seemed to have been endowed with an extraordinary helpfulness and exquisite politeness" ¹⁹

This attempt at reconciling literature with ecology thus appears to be foregrounded in the writings of our author. It reveals his desire to protect the natural world.

Conclusion

It follows that our eco-poetic reading of Mimouni's texts appears to be an interesting one. It has allowed us to demonstrate that our novelist was and remains a committed writer, sometimes in the socio-political cause of the state, and sometimes in the ecological cause. As already mentioned above, the meaning of engagement in Mimouni goes beyond the socio-political framework and is also manifested through a discourse of environmental awareness.

Mimouni's writing thus becomes an example of resistance, of unveiling malaise, and of self-affirmation. It goes beyond the scope of a literature of disenchantment to inscribe itself within a literature of struggle and of combat against the falsifiers of historical truth.

The combination of the fictional and the factual clearly indicates this author's persistent desire to illustrate profound bitterness and to transpose, through paper beings, what is taking place in the arenas of Algerian society in the 1980s.

In fact, he no longer hesitates to take risks; he embodies the entire tragedy of Algeria and strongly denounces the flaws of the post-colonial regime, which in no way responded to the people's expectations. Hence, putting the textual at the service of the contextual was his ultimate objective.

There is no doubt that his novelistic production is a concentration of disillusionment, fully revealing the malaise and the social and historical lived experience.

At the end of this analytical reading of his Trilogy *Le Fleuve détourné*, *Tombéza* and *L'Honneur de la Tribu*, it is possible to argue that the sense of engagement in Mimouni transcends the simple socio-political prism to invest the environmental field. Far from being a mere backdrop, the representation of nature in Mimouni's work carries a highly symbolic charge. It unfolds an eco-poetic discourse that reflects the author's deep concern regarding the alteration of the living world.

From this point on, Mimouni's contestation is no longer limited to the partisan or state sphere; it expands into a major ecological critique aimed at awakening consciousness regarding ecosystem degradation.

In short, *Le Fleuve détourné* plunges us into both the post-independence and colonial period and reveals situations of injustice and inequality, subjugation, corruption, and the devastation of an oppressive political system.

Tombéza also encompasses both historical and environmental events, which lead us into a bleak world largely summarizing the shortcomings and deviations of a society in chaos.

L'Honneur de la tribu situates its fiction within both an ecological and socio-political context, clearly illustrating disorder and wandering under the grip of an oppressive power that uproots in order to implant other values.

It should also be noted that although Mimouni's narratives recount tragic events, his writing generates a blend of several humorous techniques, namely the burlesque, satire, sarcasm, and irony, etc. The identification of these devices reveals the author's intention to make the reader complicit through amusing portraits, scenes, and caricatures. This stylistic choice of irony and comic elements thus serves only to lift the veil on the deviations and upheavals of Algerian society.

It also follows that this contestatory dimension of Mimouni's writing cannot be achieved without the choice of atypical characters, drawn from the margins, wandering, alienated, and condemned to ignorance and rejection, who take the floor to tell their stories. One clearly detects the inclusion of marginal heroes, with deformed traits, victims of a betrayed revolution. The image of marginality is clearly present in the three narratives; it reveals the truth of Algerian society, ensures the revolution of the novelistic aesthetic, and strengthens the break with the classical model.

From this perspective, the reader is confronted with a particular form of writing, which beyond its rootedness in History, becomes a space of scriptural revolt, perfectly constructed from elements of incoherence, transgression, and rupture within fiction.

The intrusion of ecology and eco-poetics thus transforms this scriptural revolt. Textual subversion no longer serves only to contest History but expands to denounce and rethink the relationship between Man and nature.

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