

**Errant Souls : The Quest for the Self in
Emna Belhaj Yahia's *Tasharej***

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Emna Belhaj Yahia's most recent novel, *Tasharej*, explores the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship in the rapidly evolving world of contemporary Tunisia, the most avant-garde of the Maghrebian countries. In this work, Yahia focuses on the individual woman's struggle to come to grips with the old traditions, fusing them with more modern values in this post-independence era. The new world allows women to pursue careers outside the home, to educate themselves in universities and even to open businesses. They are free to leave the confines of the conventional "feminine" space, the home, to penetrate the exterior, urban spaces, traditionally frequented only by men. In her character, Tasharej, Yahia portrays the mother figure as the embodiment of the successful, professional woman, a true believer in the opportunities provided by higher education. Even though Tasharej's daughter is also educated and shares many of her mother's modern values, she holds different opinions on the subject of careers and personal goals. In sharp contrast to her focused mother, the narrator searches for a sense of purpose in her life. Her lack of fulfillment and direction is represented by an abyss within her soul, a symbolic prison in which she must become the architect who constructs her own exit out of this labyrinth of emptiness.

This quest to define the narrator's existence reveals an interesting structural framework in the novel, consisting of the creation of a parallel narrative within the overall circular shape of the text. Yahia constructs the secondary story around the plight of a student, Yarfell, who pursues university studies in order to free himself from the poverty of his village. He, too, is searching for a way to shake the stifling immobility of his life

to establish a sense of personal meaning. The intersection of these two stories, revolving around their vacant characters, unveils a literary universe filled with images evoking travel and evasion.

This study will initially discuss the mother-daughter relationship between Tasharej and the narrator to see how their dissenting attitudes on love and marriage form the locus of the narrator's sense of isolation. Secondly, the narrator's quest to break the cycle of immobility will be compared to Yarfell's journey in the parallel narrative, the story of the other wanderer, who seeks liberation from the atmosphere of hopelessness in his village. To chart the course of the search for freedom, it is useful to look at the notion of time and space to see how it affects all three characters. In tracing their respective journeys to find purpose in their lives, this analysis will look at Yahia's poetic language of symbolism, which is most notably represented by the the Mediterranean sea, an image highlighting the spiritual dimension of the novel.

From the opening pages of the text, Yahia positions the daughter as the first person narrator who first strikes the reader as a silent observer, mainly of her mother's actions and attitudes. The two women are driving to visit the narrator's friend, Nosrit, who is in the hospital. On the way to the hospital, the story unwinds retrospectively from the narrator's point of view, thus forming the circular structure of the text. In the first chapter, Yahia underlines the sharp contrast between the narrator and her mother through the use of actual clothing. As they ride along in the car in the sweltering heat of May, the narrator places the emphasis on her own odd attire for summer, a duffel-coat. In contrast to her mother, who is perspiring from the relentless sun, the narrator is freezing. From the outset, the author associates Tasharej with warmth whereas the narrator is perpetually suffering from the cold ; her body is akin to a cadaver. But it is the heavy garment that sets up the initial barrier between them and also anticipates the subtle rebellious nature of the narrator :

Elle en est arrivée à penser que le duffle-coat que je porte désormais jour et nuit augmente sa sensation d'étouffement, l'enferme dans une véritable étuve. Ainsi dispose-t-elle d'un argument supplémentaire pour me le faire quitter (p. 10).

In this first chapter, there are several allusions to the coat which highlight the tense relationship between Tasharej and her daughter. As her mother attempts to find a route that will offer them respite from the heat while driving, the daughter silently disagrees with her : "J'ai froid quant à moi, mais cela, elle n'arrive pas à le comprendre et ça m'est égal au fond. Je dois me rendre à l'évidence que la route que cherche ma mère n'est pas la mienne" (p. 12). Indeed, the gap is already constructed between them, as each woman chooses a different road in life. Tasharej, a prisoner of the grueling pace of modern life, is steadfast in her determination to realize her professional goals. However, the narrator does not share her mother's frenetic career drive. In fact, her sense of time underlines the division between them. If Tasharej is a victim of time, represented by her obsession with her watch, the narrator lives within a timeless reality, "mon horloge intérieure s'est arrêtée. J'ai envie de savoir l'heure réelle et je n'ai pas de montre" (p. 8). The narrator's inertia seems to solidify her identification with death whereas her mother radiates vitality. Therefore, the coat is a marker of their fundamental difference and even has a communicative function. Without words, the daughter appears to reject her mother's different values by merely retreating within the coat, a rebellious gesture. Moreover, the ritual of wearing the coat annoys Tasharej, thus her resistance is silently yet effectively expressed. The communication gap between them is associated with the theme of coldness, which enhances the narrator's isolation. The narrator is not only separated from her mother, but from everyone around her, "Moi, je ne sais ni ne veux décrire aux autres la glace qui m'habite et qui m'entoure" (p. 13). On a symbolic level, the ice forms the walls of her prison and seems to lock her into silent passivity.

Resisting maternal values

In addition to seeking refuge from the world within the protective layers of the coat, the narrator elaborates in the third chapter on other fundamental disparities between herself and her mother. Tasharej has

noticed her daughter's difference from other young women. At nearly 30 years old, the narrator is neither engaged nor married. To Tasharej's way of thinking, her daughter simply refuses to conform to acceptable social practices. However, the narrator is silently questioning the values imparted to her by an ambitious mother who always emphasized the importance of education, work, and direction in life. For Béchir Garbouj, this tension between the older and younger generations is so salient that it constitutes the core of the novel's structure. Once again, the generational gap separates them, creating a communication barrier. The narrator, who has the advantages of many modern opportunities for women, does not understand the battle her mother had to wage against the enslavement of women by the patriarchal hegemony. In Tasharej's youth, women were thought of as inferior : "Tasharej avait gardé cette image jaunie du spectacle de l'infériorité féminine pareille à une infirmité contre laquelle le flux du temps vient s'épuiser" (p. 116). Like a man, Tasharej stoically engaged herself in a fight against laziness and discrimination in her effort to carve out her own independent space in this male-dominated society. For Tasharej, the pursuit of a career constitutes a political stance. The narrator describes her mother's position: "elle ne trouvait pas de mots assez péjoratifs désignant les femmes dépendantes, ni d'expressions assez chargées pour rappeler le souvenir du temps où elles n'avaient ni instruction, ni diplôme, ni métier" (p. 27). Despite the access to education, the daughter struggles to find the motivation to choose a career. Although she goes through the motions of obtaining a loan to open a pharmacy, the plan never advances, but she does meet a young banker, Nosrit, who intrigues her. Although the narrator recognizes the accomplishments of her mother, she lacks the drive to realize her professional aspirations and resists conforming to her mother's ideals as well as societal norms by choosing a fiancé.

The narrator's encounters with Nosrit allow the reader to explore the heroine's attitudes towards marriage. At first, she launches another battle of resistance towards her mother by willfully opposing Tasharej's wishes : "je ne suis pas le terrain sur lequel elle vérifie ses hypothèses et achève ses enquêtes. Et puis voilà !, je n'irai pas vers le mariage comme ma mère vers son travail !" (p. 28). The choice of Nosrit as a potential

fiancé shows her defiance to Tasharej. In a visit with her family, Nosrit is not only embarrassingly opinionated on topics like education and art, but shows that he believes in traditional practices in which women are subjugated to men. For instance, Nosrit is visibly shocked to see her cousin's wife walking ahead of her husband. The narrator's modern family is struck by his outdated reaction. Nosrit ostensibly subscribes to the Moslem custom, whereby the woman walks behind her husband. Here, Yahia points to another gap, one highlighting the difference in traditional beliefs between Nosrit and the narrator's family. But the narrator's painful recollection of Nosrit's disastrous meeting with her family only deepens her sense of isolation, as she gradually discovers other disparities between herself and Nosrit, pertaining to social subjects such as marriage within their peer group.

Searching for an exit out of the abyss

In portraying the developing relationship between Nosrit and the narrator, Yahia initially creates an uplifting atmosphere, suggesting a glimmer of hope for the narrator's search for a way out of the dark abyss. For the narrator, this positive prospect is represented by the complicity of laughter : "Le rire devait avoir une âme" (p. 62). It is the cathartic power of sharing a laugh that penetrates into the narrator's inner void, stripping away the sense of isolation. However, the laughter creates but an illusion of healing, for it cannot purge her of the original memory, the one that imprisoned her. The narrator sheds light on her solitude by revealing the origin of her retreat from the world. Interestingly, it is described in architectural terms :

C'est qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une petite cicatrice sur la joue qu'un cosmétique peut recouvrir, mais d'un gouffre dans lequel j'avais plongé et dont j'avais fait ma demeure secrète. Aucun éclat de rire ne pourra m'en extirper. Ses murs sont là (p. 63).

The heroine confesses that at the heart of this void lies the childhood memory of unrequited love for a neighbor named Layl. Even

though the narrator never knew Layl, she is unable to erase the painful recollection of seeing him drive off in a car with his new bride. But the joy of laughing with Nosrit and his friends represents the possibility of liberating herself from the thick walls of her interior prison. The heroine describes the transformation in metaphysical terms : “Avec Nosrit et ses amis, la terre que je foulais se dépoussiérait, le ciel s’incrustait d’étoiles. J’étais en bonne intelligence avec le monde et l’existence devenait un jeu d’enfant” (p. 63). The passage points to a vertical movement from the isolating depths of the earth toward the light, a more social space.

In her interactions with Nosrit’s friends, the narrator develops a particular affinity for a young woman named Maward. Once again, the narrator’s keen sense of observation manifests itself, revealing another key gap between her attitudes and those of Nosrit’s. The narrator admires the expression of genuine love between Maward and a friend of Nosrit’s until one day when Maward no longer is a part of the group’s social gatherings. The young girl’s absence indicates that her boyfriend has chosen to become engaged to someone else. Nosrit informs the narrator by simply stating that marriage is a complicated situation. The painful reality of the situation anticipates another abrupt change in the tone of the text, as the narrator steps out of the symbolic light, the social space of Nosrit’s friends, to re-enter the solitude of darkness. The author reconstructs the gap between Nosrit, his friends and the narrator, as represented by the narrator’s comment that she can no longer feel that her sense of emptiness is fulfilled by laughter and the joy of being with others. Since the narrator is the daughter of a modern, independent woman, she challenges Nosrit, making it clear that his cowardly answer on the subject of marriage is unacceptable. From the narrator’s perspective, matrimony appears to be a calculating game between the sexes. Interestingly, she formulates a conclusion that reflects Tasharej’s views, whereby women are forced to fight to defend themselves as well as to assert their presence in a maledominated society. This is one instance where the two women’s opinions mirror one another, as modern life’s values collide with old traditional ideas, especially those that oppressed women. Despite the narrator’s social retreat to the confines of her inner abyss, this disturbing experience about love and marriage enables her to observe the difference between the sexes.

She concludes that it is plausible to assume that men categorize women in two groups : those who are appropriate to wed, and those who are merely suitable as social companions. Here, Yahia explores the paradoxical opposition between traditional and modern society. In this episode, it seems that not much has changed over time, since the young couple is forced to sacrifice their love for the choice of the family’s bride. Moreover, the female voice is squelched, which points to the conventional silent role of women in a Moslem society. Despite Nosrit’s disturbing allegiance to traditional attitudes, the narrator still clings to the hope that he can fulfill her lonely existence. However, it is the strange encounter with Nosrit’s mother that causes the narrator to reconsider her choice of him as a potential fiancé.

Strange encounters

The visit to Nosrit’s mother’s house highlights the motif of magic and clairvoyance permeating the novel. When Nosrit’s mother meets the narrator, the older woman attempts to form a bond with her because she admires the narrator’s educated background. Nosrit’s mother confesses to the narrator that she once was a voracious reader, especially of novels. Here, Yahia adds another dimension to the opposition between traditional values and modern life. As a young girl, Nosrit’s mother had to read clandestinely and even hide her novels, as they were perceived as a subversive activity, a distraction from time spent acquiring the domestic skills necessary to perform her designated role as a wife and mother. Refusing to succumb to female role expectations as a young girl, she invented ways to pursue her passion for books. When she married, she was forced to become more creative. For instance, the pleasure of reading was replaced by that of embroidery : “je brodais moi-même les histoires que je ne lis plus” (p. 88). Although she could no longer enjoy fictional stories, the intellectual activity of reading is transferred to the hands, enabling her to seek evasion by inventing with her deft fingers. As the narrator puts it, “son récit a pour but de renouer, devant le témoin que je suis, les deux fils d’une vie se déroulant toute entière entre histoires lues et histoires brodées” (p. 88).

The strange visit to Nosrit's house also reveals that his mother has other creative gifts such as an ability to predict the future. The conversation about reading serves as a preface to a more mysterious discussion. Nosrit's mother forewarns the narrator that in her dreams she sees another woman with her son : "ce n'est pas vous que j'ai vue accompagnant Nosrit, mais une jeune femme aux ongles vernis, à la coiffure laquée et la silhouette en abat-jour tournoyant sur le pied d'une lampe" (p. 99). She promises the narrator that if she does not marry Nosrit she will offer her a gift in a year's time. Although the predictions are enigmatic and bizarre, the narrator senses that Nosrit's mother speaks the truth, for she is the embodiment of an indecipherable oracle. The narrator interprets the vision described by Nosrit's mother as a sign, indicating an impasse in the relationship with Nosrit. The heroine recognizes she has been blinded by the illusion that Nosrit could lead her out of her dark prison by creating a lasting bond between their souls. It is his mother's uncanny power to predict the future that enables the narrator to open her eyes, relinquishing the misconception that Nosrit can liberate her from her solitude. The uncertainty of her future is described in dark, magical terms :

Maintenant c'est comme si j'étais à l'entrée d'une forêt. Derrière chaque arbre se cache un être effrayant. Voici le spectre de Maward que j'ai perdu de vue. . . Et puis voici le spectre de la mère de Nosrit, tel un sphinx dans la nuit me posant une série d'énigmes : pourquoi semble-t-elle vouloir m'éloigner de son fils (p. 90) ?

As she ponders these haunting questions, she retreats into the protective folds of the coat again. Although the encounter with Nosrit's mother has enabled her to examine her own ideas about love and marriage, the narrator is nonetheless jaded by her disappointing experience with Nosrit. She eventually formulates the conclusion that love is doomed to fail. According to her philosophy, "l'amour, c'est donner ce qu'on n'a pas à quelqu'un qui n'en veut pas" (p. 109). Her search to fill the emptiness within her continues on an aimless course where she will encounter another lost soul.

Enchanting travels

Yahia widens the thematics of wandering by constructing a parallel narrative around another character, Yarfell, who comes from Soukrino, a small village near the Mediterranean sea. Like the narrator, he, too, embarks on a pursuit to liberate himself from the emptiness of his life. In his case, he yearns to leave the oppressiveness of his poor village and even dreams of crossing the sea to travel to Europe. Abdellaziz Chébil has observed that the theme of wandering in Tunisian literature has a lyrical as well as an existential dimension. Although the narrator and Yarfell remain strangers until the end of the novel, they share a preoccupation with the need to find fulfillment and meaning in their lives. Most of all, the narrator and Yarfell resemble one another as spiritual travelers, searching for their individual identities. As Hedia Khadhar puts it, "pour le voyageur, l'espace devient un espace intérieur, le voyage devient exploration de soi, introspection" (p. 14). For Yarfell, the quest begins when he obtains a scholarship and comes to Tunis to attend the university. However, the most interesting of his educational experiences in the capital city is not academic, but rather an illuminating, human friendship that he fosters with a semi-senile neighbor, Khalate.

In his encounters with Khalate, he enters into an "other", imaginative world by creating a bond with an old woman whom others have dismissed as demented. But from the first glimpse of Yarfell, Khalate is enchanted by his magnetic presence, which has a transformational effect on her. With Yarfell as her chosen, secret interlocuter, she is able to regain her reason in order to articulate her thoughts in a more cohesive manner : "Elle parlait à voix basse. Nul autre que Yarfell ne distinguait ses paroles" (p. 72). Similar to the "griotte" in African literature, Khalate plays the role of the elderly storyteller, the preserver of the traditions of her culture. Together, the two embark on a fictional voyage driven by the magical force of Khalate's words. For Yarfell, their conversations seem to surpass the notion of time, thus allowing him to partake in a liberating exercise in evasion : "Ainsi la rencontre de leurs histoires leur permit-elle, des mois durant, de voguer sur la même mer. Mais chacun avait sa barque" (p. 73).

At the heart of their conversations is Khalate's recollection of her personal past history. In particular, she recounts a seemingly implausible story of her daughter's birth. Khalate's child is supposedly the illicit daughter of a prince. According to the tale, Khalate had spent the night with a prince in a grand palace where she conceived her child. As a young unwed girl, her illegitimate child was a scandal, thus the baby was removed from Khalate's care and put up for adoption. At a mature age, Khalate's daughter ran off to France to escape an arranged marriage. Subsequently, Khalate was forced to marry a sickly, old man and spend the rest of her life in search of her long lost child and her granddaughter. On a stylistic level, Yahia weaves the voyage theme into the text through the creation of water imagery. This artistic aspect is fused to a key element in the plot, the departure of Khalate's daughter to the promised land across the sea. The author creates a lyrical comparison between Khalate's remembrances and the gentle rhythm of water, whereby the fluidity of Khalate's words is analogous to the current of a river. The stream of the old woman's memories unwinds smoothly like the constant ebb of flowing water, enabling Yarfell to set sail on this imaginary voyage in which he is transported into another time and space. It is through her mesmerizing release of memories that Yarfell observes the metamorphosis of Khalate from a wizened old woman to a majestic queen. As she tells her tale, he is captivated by the brightness in her eyes, the clarity of her gaze, and the vitality of her spirit. Yarfell genuinely believes in her story, but her words also have a profound effect on him.

Kindred souls

This surreal trip into the past enables him to escape from his present concerns, since his studies are in jeopardy. If Yarfell fails his exams again, he will be destined to a life of unemployment and misery. Like the narrator's relationship with Nosrit, Yarfell is temporarily uplifted, liberated from the prison of his personal void. It is through the creation of this human bond with Khalate that Yarfell finds hope for the future,

represented by the image of the harmonious dance of two partners upon the waves of the sea :

C'était une chorégraphie où les pas esquissés par les partenaires obéissaient à une belle symétrie. La fantaisie y était, la complicité aussi. Bien sûr qu'une fois parti de l'autre côté de la mer, Yarfell ira chercher la petite-fille de Khalate (p. 80).

For the two companions, the sea not only represents evasion, but facilitates Yarfell's dream to someday cross the Mediterranean to search for Khalate's supposed granddaughter. As Pierrette Renard posits, the Mediterranean sea, situated in this space beyond the material world, is comparable to a paradise where harmony and tranquility reside within the waves. Khalate's evocation of the boat and water images suggests that she finds solace in embarking on this fantastic, yet nostalgic trip with Yarfell. Indeed, Yarfell's imaginary trip through time enables him to discover his own humanity through his emotional interactions with Khalate. The inner vitality of her soul touches the emptiness within him, leaving an indelible impression upon the young man. Khalate has succeeded in temporarily freeing his spirit : "Alors son esprit a foncé du côté de la mer qui sait s'ouvrir devant les vaisseaux qui fendent ses vagues" (p. 94). However, his academic failure abruptly sets him on an aimless search, since he must leave the capital city. Like the narrator's disillusion with Nosrit that causes her to seek refuge within her duffel-coat, Yarfell decides to retreat into himself, distancing himself from others. Interestingly, Khalate's evocation of the past drifts into Yarfell's spirit as he retraces his steps back to his past in Soukrino, devoid of any hope for the future in Tunis.

Yahia solidifies the parallel development of the narrative by switching the focus to the narrator as she, like Yarfell, decides to detach herself from others. This retreat is also a way of demonstrating her resistance to Tasharej's insistence that she discuss her problems as well as contemplate her future plans. Just as Yarfell resolves to remain mute in the presence of others, the narrator explains that she has become "un robot de silence, étrangère à moi-même, comme si on déroulait devant moi le

film d'une vie antérieure qu'on dit être la mienne mais que je ne reconnais pas" (p. 109). To further infuriate Tasharej, the narrator wears the duffel-coat night and day, displays an overt intolerance for her mother's food, leading her to refuse to eat, which, in turn, increases her discomfort from the cold permeating her fragile body. Here, the narrator and Yarfell share a common predicament ; they suffer misery in their respective stories of despair, but Yahia creates a variation in the narrative. Although Yarfell attempts to secretly flee the country on a truck, he is caught and forced to travel back to Soukrino. Thus, he is destined to resume his meaningless life of immobility. The narrator is trapped within the folds of her duffel-coat, an exterior symbol of her inner emptiness. It is this prison deep within her which threatens to consume her cadaverous body until she has a fortuitous encounter with her kindred wandering spirit, Yarfell.

The quest for liberation

It is in the final two chapters that the reader becomes particularly aware of the circular structure of the novel, an effective means of fusing the plight of the narrator, Yarfell and Tasharej together. To interweave the three characters' tales, the author utilizes a cinematographic technique in which the reader can easily imagine the roving eye of the camera as it moves smoothly from Tasharej to Yarfell and then to the narrator. Once again, Tasharej and the narrator are in the car as they were in the opening pages, but here the focus is directed to Tasharej as she leaves her daughter in the car to buy bread. While walking to the bakery, Tasharej resolves to adopt an indifferent attitude towards her daughter's silent resistance to formulating a plan for her life. For Tasharej, this freedom from worry is further highlighted by her decision to disassociate herself from the enslaving, frenetic rhythm of her life. It is the removal of her watch that delivers her from the constant struggle to race against the clock to meet all of her professional obligations. The symbolic act of replacing her watch with one that doesn't function places her in another space and time where she can abandon the present to analyze her past life. As Tasharej nostalgically recalls the days when her husband offered her support and companionship, she vows to step out of the consuming clutches of

society, "Elle n'est plus la proie exposée au regard mangeur. Ce sont là les ailes qu'apporte la cinquantaine" (p. 119-120).

From Tasharej, the cinematographic focus shifts to Yarfell, who is reclining against a wall in the street by Tasharej's parked car. He yearns to break the oppressive immobility of his life by finding a means to flee the city. His motionless stance suggests that he is waiting for something to happen. Similar to Tasharej, he, too, has no idea of the present time, "Il a perdu la notion du temps. Il est étranger aux autres et à lui-même" (p. 121). The third character, the narrator, mirrors them as she, too, has plunged into a timeless reality by sleeping under the coat in the back seat of the car. Her sleeping body suggest that she, too, is waiting to break the cycle of immobility. Here, Yahia develops the poetic image of wings which creates a bridge in the text, uniting Yarfell's empty plight in life with the narrator's vacant sense of being. When he spots the parked car, he believes he has found the wings that will take him back to his village : "il n'a pas le sentiment d'avoir volé une voiture dont le conducteur a oublié la clé dans la serrure, mais d'avoir trouvé des ailes" (p. 123). Like his imaginary voyage with Khalate, he embarks this time on a more material journey as he starts the stolen car and heads towards the sea, a place which offers him the hope for a spiritual rebirth :

Mais voir soudain la mer surgir là en face de lui comme un immense morceau de verre qu'un grand maître souffleur a réussi à placer entre ciel et terre, c'est autre chose. C'est se sentir revivre après sa mort annoncée (p. 123-124).

Mesmerized by the beauty of the Mediterranean sea, he yearns to revel in the seductive experience of touching and feeling the water wash over his body. For him, the sea holds a divine message, one that might deliver him from the void which has trapped his soul in despair. As Pierrette Renard observes, the Mediterranean is also a place of passage where one can travel towards the discovery of the self. Yarfell, seduced by the sea, appears transported into the space of another time. In a parallel scene, Yahia sustains the magical ambiance, replacing the sea with another liquid image, a mystical elixir, the perfume that Tasharej has just

purchased on her way back from the bakery. Since it is the same perfume her husband had bought her many years ago, its enchanting essence has the power to bridge the distance between her and her deceased husband. The fragrance diffused from the bottle conjures up the memories of her husband, rendering him ever present in her mind. It is because Tasharej has sworn to free herself from the constraints of time that she can partake in this imaginary encounter with her husband. She engages in a fantasy conversation with her husband, leading Tasharej to the conclusion that she must forgive her daughter. The aromatic liquid of Tasharej's perfume is transformed into sea imagery in the anticipated scene where Yarfell and the narrator meet.

As noted above, Tasharej had left her daughter asleep in the car to buy bread. When the narrator wakes up from sleeping, she finds herself at the beach, but is unaware that the car has been stolen by Yarfell. As she crawls out from under her heavy coat on the seat, Yarfell emerges from the water and approaches her. For the first time, she is not aware of her trembling bones ; her fragile body is infused with light, its warmth radiating from the reflection of the sun's rays upon the sand. The narrator is ostensibly liberated from the oppressiveness of her dark prison, abandoning the coat to walk out on the beach. But it is her interaction with Yarfell that produces a radical change to her habitual indifferent demeanor. When the two meet and the narrator learns he has stolen Tasharej's car to return to Soukrino, Yarfell asks her if he can continue his trip in her car to die in his village. Unexpectedly, he attempts to situate the narrator's identity by inquiring if she might be Khalate's granddaughter or descendant. The unforgettable presence of the old woman creates an odd link between their lives, since the narrator admits she knew the old woman, but she informs Yarfell that Khalate has recently died. However, Khalate's magical presence seems to resurface in this scene by the sea. It is as if Khalate invisibly casts her life-affirming magic on the heroine's character, enabling her to form an affective bond with Yarfell.

In this strange encounter with Yarfell, the transformation in the narrator's attitudes is shown by her emotional reaction to him. Above all, the narrator wishes to prevent him from taking his own life. Interestingly, the author reverses the roles of the two characters. Yarfell loses his faith

in life ; it is his academic failure that triggers his resigned attitude. He wishes to die in his native town of Soukrino, whereas the narrator's meaningful contact with Yarfell rekindles her faith in life. His gentle soul touches the emptiness within her, which frees her from the dark isolation of her inner prison : "Je crois que le voyage improvisé que ce garçon m'a fait faire pendant mon sommeil m'a sortie de je ne sais quel trou" (p. 134). Moreover, Yarfell's body exudes vitality for the narrator : "Son corps est un concentré de vie" (p. 131). It is possible that the narrator associates Yarfell with life because his body reflects the water and the light, the natural elements sustaining human existence. With this renewed hope, the narrator suddenly realizes that she is ravenously hungry and invites Yarfell to eat with her to save him from contemplating death through the healing power of human dialogue. Curiously, the narrator changes roles with Yarfell. In his encounters with Khalate, Yarfell tried to save the old woman from death by fostering a friendship with her, but this time the narrator plays Yarfell's role. It is she who wishes to extend her companionship to him. For the narrator, Yarfell embodies a savior figure because he has delivered her from the dark prison of her despair. The heroine invents a plan to return the favor by asking Yarfell to assist her in opening the pharmacy, thus attempting to deliver him from the hopelessness of his life. She wishes to place the two of them on a path with a purpose. It is the liberating power of the sea, the sun, and the beach that succeed in finally freeing her from the interior hole which threatened to consume her body and soul, "ce fut la gueule qui s'ouvre dans la terre, le trou dans lequel on glisse et auquel rien ne peut plus vous arracher... C'était ma demeure secrète" (p. 137). At last, she becomes the architect who has found the exit out of her abyss : "j'ai l'impression d'avoir enfin quitté ma demeure obscure et d'habiter un autre temps, un autre espace. À mes pieds, le sable chaud est sans cassure et sans fin" (p. 137).

Rediscovering life

In the concluding pages of the text, the narrator drives the car while reflecting on the meaning of Yarfell's name. His name means the lily of the valley, originating from the the extreme south of the Iberian penin-

sula. The flower signifies a blessed state of bliss as well as the ability to forget. Indeed, these mystical qualities attributed to the origin of Yarfell's name free the narrator from the painful memory of Layl that locked her deep within the walls of her interior prison. She can forget her professional failure, her lack of communication with Tasharej and she can finally leave the duffel-coat behind. For the first time, she finds a sense of meaning and order in her existence by cultivating a human bond with Yarfell. For Yarfell, his reconnection with life that he has found with the narrator will lead him in another direction, a path towards liberation. Once again, he dreams of wandering across the sea, "Poisson migrateur, il ira sur les traces de La Reine centenaire ou de son arrière petite-fille. Et le muguet d'Andalousie fondra comme en pays chaud une fleur de neige" (p. 140). His adventurous spirit leaves its mark upon the narrator's soul as she, too, contemplates exploring the space beyond the sea. After she drops Yarfell off in Soukrino, the lingering odor of jasmine and seaweed fills the car with life, infusing her body and soul with the hope of defining her own self.

This quest for the self is relevant to all three characters who attempt to navigate the complex road of life in modern Tunisia. To illustrate the difficulty of choosing a professional field in an evolving society, Yahia explores the tense relationship between the narrator and her mother, highlighting the gap between two generations. Tasharej life's experiences reflect the struggle for women to educate themselves, secure a job, and raise a family in unstable times. The fight to succeed is evident in her belief in communicating the importance of ambition, education and goals to her daughter. Yet, the narrator distances herself from these modern concerns, choosing to search for a deeper, more philosophical meaning for her empty existence. Yahia probes these existential questions plaguing young people in a rapidly changing society where there is often confusion between traditional and modern values. But in the unexpected encounter, Yarfell and the narrator are able to surpass the barriers between the old world and the new one to conquer their individual isolation and absence. Like the magical bond between Yarfell and Khalate, the narrator and Yarfell share a powerful human interaction, enabling them to save one another from the immobility and oppressiveness that threatens to

consume their lives. For the two errant souls, it is the hope of crossing the Mediterranean sea, which may ultimately set them on the course of finding the path that leads to the discovery of the true self.

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