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CHANGING TIMES, MOBILE LANDSCAPES

A novella

He stands in front of a small group of students, who are dispersed in a classroom which has not been repaired since the creation of the university two decades ago. Decay, in fact, takes various forms, both physical, moral and metaphorical. The invisible is as important as the visible. The small gestures which have lost their meanings through repetition, repetition for the sake of preserving the species, yet without passion. Even in the courtyard, a few wild weeds are left uncultivated; dust settles undisturbed in a few corners of the inhospitable classrooms. For some strange reasons, students find it more comfortable when the space of study is divided into territories of the sexes: young men, on one side, young women on the other. Tamed by some unidentified forces, both the professor and his students lack that vital enthusiasm, that flame, that desire to pursue knowledge for the sake of truth. One gets the impression that what they do, they do it out of an obligation, which seems like a heavy burden. This obligation is betrayed by their bodies, by an omnipresent, omnipotent sluggishness. For those who are familiar with TV, it is like a football match in slow motion.

The pages of books have lost their magic; perhaps it has been replaced by the excitement of computers, gadgets, surfing and chatting on the web, and a great deal of TV viewing. These are mere speculations, for students remain a sophisticated equation, and their world as mysterious as exotic islands on some distant continents. He teaches and they learn. That is it; or at least that is what appears on the surface. Clear and convenient for both of them. The materiality of the outside world has become too powerful to be dismissed by moral judgements. No one is to be blamed. He has to teach extra hours in private institutions to make both ends meet and to preserve some kind of dignity in a society whose sole measurement of success is how much you possess: the length of your veranda, the brand of your car, and the logo on your shirt. It is strange the way advertisement has penetrated the very fabric of habits and customs of a community that still claims to be authentic and pious. It is also curious this progressive sliding from having some extra finances to the desire of power and wealth...unquenched desire, unlimited power, to live the life of some young men and women he teaches, who have the fortune of birth. The other students, on the other hand, have to get by all means a piece of paper called pompously “a diploma” in order to have access to the *marché du travail*. The expression is used in managerial schools; but the real world looks like a souk: a significant quantity of dust, some confusion and a few pickpockets waiting like vultures for their prey.

Placed ambiguously and paradoxically between the managerial style and the souk, he resumes his sense of responsibility and dismisses these gloomy thoughts about not only the future of his students, but also that of his two daughters, who have reached the stage of puberty, and whose main hobby is zapping countless channels, sometimes joyfully, but often joylessly.

A few inviting questions, answers are encouraged, a sense of warmth is being established, tongues are untied, debate is animated. That is true: youth is a state of mind, since he feels now invigorated by their contagious curiosity and freshness, though in some cases he gets the impression that some youthful members of the class are being too serious and dogmatic for their age, in particular when discussion swerves to address questions of religion, politics and sexuality. Similar to the world of Stephen in Ireland, life is divided into hell and heaven, sin and salvation.

When he was a student like them, life took different proportions. The sense of adventure and the infinite possibilities, here and now, of life, liberated extraordinary energies. The university was a space of special attraction for students, for it allowed all forms of transgressions, one of them is to cut off the umbilical cord with their families, namely the father, who stood for a certain form of archaic authority. In his imagination, he portrayed the father as a solemn figure with a long stick like a severe shepherd. Now, in his forties, this figure of punishment revisits him without warning in the form of nightmares of snakes and hairy monsters which try to stifle him. Their fathers, the local political authorities, the chikh and the moukaddam, bureaucracy, corruption, class stratification, and old-fashioned teachers. Their utopia found embodiment in radical slogans in the main hall of the Faculty of Letters. No one was safe from their acerbic criticism. In parallel with courses in the classroom, there were the more interesting courses of life, political practice and confrontation with unseen enemies.

One of the leaders, in light jeans and a leather jacket, with long hair and a thick beard, similar to Che's in his mythical picture, produced an uninterrupted flow of words. He wondered at the time how much this young man full of passion knew, and how much he personally ignored. Just words, but no one was tired of them. Perhaps there was something more archeological in the depth of culture that invited all these young men to

speaking...endlessly. Do they listen? These words were majestic, rhetorical, cadenced into rhythm, but also philosophical, or at least that was what they seemed to be. He must confess that in many cases they were too deep and complex for him. These leaders were trained in solid argumentation in departments of philosophy, a place of intellect and prestige. By contrast, as a member of the department of English, he was considered to be superficial, if not effeminate. That is why in the big crowds of demonstrators, he was on the periphery, or even in the cafeteria sipping guiltily a cup of mint tea, and pondering on the beauty of style of some English novelists or poets. He felt he was connected to some deep personal life. He was judged by the others as disconnected from real life and the problems of the nation. But what is reality? What is the nation? In a strange change, or rather a sense of cyclical repetition without change, the bearded men who defended the thickly bearded Marx were replaced by a new generation of bearded young men who devoted themselves to some mystically bearded men of wisdom and prophecy. The war of hair styles and the distribution of hair on the body continues.

He could not explain his attachment to language, as many languages as possible, all languages, even the one of graffiti; and also his attachment to teaching. Up to now, he could not solve the mystery of having many members of his family in the profession of teaching and education: Arabic, geography, economics, English. Is it this fascination with words? In a strange passage of time, it is a profession that was overestimated then, and that it is underestimated now. In a statement of wisdom, his mother summed up the family situation: "Teaching is in the blood, by boy; it is inherited from father to son". He was surprised that she did not include any female members of the family, though it was largely feminine, with three sisters, three aunts and a grandmother, who supervised the minute details of daily life in a queenly manner. Both the grandfather and the father died, leaving their widows with little resources and the vastness of the outside world. When he was asked as a university student to write an essay on someone whom he admired, he found ready-made material in his own biography. He entitled his essay "A Day in the Life of a Teacher" and embarked on some exploration of his childhood:

I still look back, and with pleasure, on the way my father, a teacher who had devoted his life to his noble job, invited me to have a glance at what was happening there, in his class.

First of all he gave me a brief idea of what he had done the day before: a collection of various objects which would be used to make the lessons more concrete and attractive, and a written presentation where all details were carefully noted. Nothing was left to chance. Moreover, and for many hours, he had been in a kind of dialogue with himself: many attempts had been made to make the lesson a part of himself.

Before making his way to school, he had made sure that his appearance was compatible with his respectable occupation. In fact, he kept that severe control of his behaviour, even though the streets were less crowded than usual. More than once, he insisted that the teacher had to be a perfect model for the still immature children.

As soon as he arrived, he went with measured paces to his classroom where a few sketches were drawn up so as not to waste valuable time and fall into confusion during the lessons. Afterwards, some colleagues dropped in and exchanged a few words about what was going on in their environment as well as in the world. What he had just read in the newspapers proved to be most helpful, since he directed the conversation with great ease and confidence.

As time passed, my wonder as well as my admiration for my father increased. The lesson began in earnest and the children, who were used to his iron discipline, were eager to give the best of themselves, although his praise for their industry and diligence was occasional. While questions and answers went with astonishing speed, he began to show signs of exhaustion, which he never complained about. His sole reward and relief was expressed in those happy children's eyes. Furthermore, when the lesson was over, he kept warning them against the consequences of laziness and wickedness, and emphasized the importance of continuous hard work and perseverance.

Before leaving school, a chat with the headmaster proved to be useful. The latter provided him with information about recent research in pedagogy and in culture in general. More wonder was still in store: on his way home he got in touch with the common people and gave them advice on how to bring up their children properly and to what extent they had gone ahead.

At home, he did his best to share his family's life and at the same time he stimulated his mind by reading and listening to the latest news. While I was extremely exhausted, he relaxed only

for a few minutes and devoted himself to busy work by going over and over again the errors made by his pupils. In spite of his intense activity; only half of his duty was done, as the other group was looking forward to a fresh teacher with lively manners, which morally he could not deprive them of.

After this short but unforgettable visit, I began to realize my father's qualities and look up to him admiringly. In fact, it has enhanced his image as an honest citizen, a good father and above all, a competent and compassionate teacher.

At that time, teachers stood for all ideal qualities of discipline and honesty. Yet within the small town where he lived, there were all kinds of funny stories about physical torture and techniques of punishment. Ezallat, for example, was notorious for coming across some of his pupils in the street, or worse in the hammam, and trying to test their faithful memorization of the Koran or of grammatical rules by asking them to make instant recitations. A heartless teacher requiring a perfect learning by heart. Pupils took revenge by making narratives where he lost his majestic prestige. A man of all ancient knowledge brought from his grandeur down to mud by the ruses of naughty children brought up on gossip and verbal raids. But for Said, the hero of our story, his personal experience of punishment was not funny at all. Even today, he could not find words to describe its inhumanity in a place where youth is supposed to learn about humanism, good manners of living, and tolerance. One teacher, whose name he could not remember, placed a ruler within his fragile fingers and turned it around; the trick was so cruel that his whole body was shivering and his whole hand covered with blood. Confused feelings of injustice, fear, resentment and humiliation tortured his small body and soul. A sense of horror in silence took over the whole class, interrupted only by the cries of pain and suffering which could be heard by other pupils in the whole school. This was the final triumph of adults' reason over the boundless energy of children. The visionary mission of teachers of that time was to show pupils the right path, teach them the hardship of life, and impose on them a military discipline. To his shock, even today many people express nostalgia for this discipline that stands as a barrier against chaos and excessive liberty. Perhaps that there are some deep roots in the geography and history of the nation for this fascination with authoritarianism and enjoyment of power. The headmaster, in a very formal manner, like a priest in a funeral procession, would say: "We want you to be reliable men, not restless kids in a state of sin". In fact, all pupils had stocks of images and memories, like those in a horror film, from which they selected the most picturesque scenes and formed stories that

made them laugh, that made them cry, in the form of a collective therapy in their fragile intimacy as misunderstood young children, on the margin of the world of adults. For some unknown reasons, when he tried to remember his school days, only complicated fragments of humiliation invaded his mind and sight. Once, because he could not respond adequately to a complicated mathematical question, which for him was a real puzzle, he received from the teacher of French a sharp slap on the face, swift and brutal like in cowboy or action films. The effect was instant: urine coming down his legs and wetting his trousers, and forming a puddle where he stood, helpless, a poor spectacle for the whole class, who could not utter a single word, let alone censored laughter. The slap was so harsh that from that day on something profoundly inimical happened between him as a pupil and calculus, mathematical figures as well as geometrical forms. Later, he blamed himself for being dumb, less intelligent than normal students. Instead of hard figures, he preferred imaginative words and pleasant colours, on pages or in nature. What he could not understand then and now is the general agreement on the necessity of violence and force, both physical and verbal. Backs have to be broken, fists to be bruised; these traces will be everlasting reminders of the fate of those who take schooling lightheartedly, who try to break away from the community. Some tough guys, through repeated punishment, were immune from the sensation of pain. Their bodies had roughened somewhere; thus they became adults before exhausting all the possibilities of childhood. I imagine that their daily bread was a slap on the face, an insult, some pushing and pulling.

The only moment of real happiness was not learning in the classroom, but break time in the play-yard, *récréation*. This was such a beautiful word in French that he made all kinds of semantic combinations and transmutations: *créer, récréer, creation, aeration, satisfaction, liberation...* It was also very beautiful in Arabic “*istiraha*”, *raha, allah ala raha allah*. Repressed energies found an outlet in running, shouting, game-making, teachers-parodying, trick-playing. Life offered itself in endless possibilities. This was also the moment to exchange biscuits and some tasty good food cooked by gentle mothers, with affection and care. He hoped that this moment would last infinitely. Sometimes, he even imagined that one of the teachers died, and as a result, they would have no class. No class, that was what he desired in the depth of his heart. Most of what he learnt, and the force behind the act of learning, made him feel some kind of continuous nausea. It is like passing near rubbish bins. Some fresh air got into the class and made him feel less depressed when he had a brief sight of the beautiful sky, so vast and so peaceful, with just a few clouds creating a choreography of their own. Here and there; such a huge gap; so close, yet so far.

Can you enjoy eating under the threat of a gun? The huge quantity of words, notions, homework, recitations and repetitions required some superhuman efforts to digest. L'école buissonnière became a horizon for dreaming and alternative learning; brooks of water, real water, wild fruits, and some friendly swallows. The sensuality of an orange or some grapefruit stolen from nearby fields produced immense joy. Running after some real butterflies was much more exciting and meaningful than listening to a teacher producing a monologue in a class of science where butterflies are never seen . If school became the parody of life, why not embrace life itself.

Youthful children pursuing a magical soccer-ball in an
Open space of freedom
Scorpion hunting as a hobby for the unemployed
An endless race behind seductive butterflies led us
To beautiful streams, fields without frontiers and
Unforeseen beauty
Of nature
Wild nature
Before its conquest by blocks of buildings
And caterpillars of all forms

Even today, he can see the dark side of nutritional forcing exercised on the mind and the body. Said pays careful attention to the way people argue; the argument is easily lost in gesticulations, each one almost trying to force the other physically to adhere to his point of view, not through persuasion and argumentation, but rather through the strength of the voice and its capacity to intimidate. Listening as a civil art, an art of civilization, becomes a symbol of weakness. In parliament itself, the honourable speakers and representatives of the nation transform this space of debate into a cock fight, to the pleasure of the common people who take revenge on their elite by laughing heartily, so heartily that their faces are covered with tears. Gabriel Marquez will find exciting material for another *One Hundred*.

Figures of power, like stiff-stoned, unaesthetic sculptures obsessed him, interfered with the act of imagining , and made him lose his temper. He felt some peace in the intimate contact with words, words written beautifully, in some gentle rhythm in a romantic story,

where, as if by magic, the hero defeats some evil aggressors in order to escape with his beloved to a dream-like landscape:

Once upon a time
There was a Disney Land
And a land of Peter Cottontail
A wonderful space of fairytale
Of Ali Baba and Sinbad
Of the Little Mermaid and other tales

In that distant place of marvel
There was a sleeping beauty,
Surrounded by butterflies,
Who enjoyed honey and fruits of all kinds

That was his strategy: to combat the violence of the world through the intricate patterns of the Word, a language uncontaminated by the daily monotony of newspapers and TV programs. He strives for something fresh, as fresh as dew at dawn before it evaporates under the heat of the morning sun. As a very young child, when he went stealthily into his father's room, he was fascinated by the shapes and forms of Arabic writing, a beautiful calligraphy, with letters majestically intertwining like agile dancers, in and out, up and down; curbing, relaxing, and then stretching towards something mystical. He imagined his home in this architecture, with big doors and small windows and a patio where he can get the air, the sun, and the fragrance of trees and flowers.

Even today, standing in front of his students in that atmosphere of decay, he tries to share language and beauty of the world with them. English, a foreign language, which used to be a tool of the empire and expansion, can be tamed, appropriated and explored to tell stories and sing songs. At this very moment he becomes aware that he cannot escape politics, politics in parliament and political parties, but also language as politics and the politics of language; is language shared and distributed equally among men and women, classes, ethnic groups, cities and villages, countries in the north, countries in the south? His head swells under the effect of the pressing need to respond to the proliferation of these questions, to which he cannot have an answer. He feels that individuals are free to select any of the

languages that they have at their disposal; yet, a gap is created between him and his audience. He was lucky enough to travel to the place where this language was born; they have to remain within the boundaries of this land. A sense of frustration interrupts their effort to express themselves in a tongue acquired at school through imitation. Outside the class, both of them resort to their mothers and their tongues. Ideas are exchanged, jokes are made, metaphors and images are conveyed with an extraordinary fluency. The flow of words makes them unaware of the acquisition of this language, which has become part of their bodies and of the smallest details of their daily lives. He, too, finds some difficulties to have a complete mastery over the language of that land; it seduces, but resists him. His English is too formal, too bookish, too remote from the language of vegetables and fruit, bread and butter, and obscenities. A gap is also created between himself and its native speakers, for he can never be like them, speaking with casual ease and insouciance. Parts of his body stiffen in the effort to make words uttered. As for writing, it becomes hard labor in a prison camp. He wishes he could write pages after pages in Moroccan Arabic, that forgotten language, the language of beggars, the poor, the homeless and all those living on the margin of writing. That is the language they and he breathe and in which they find companionship in solitude. At this very moment, he remembers his grandmother and her silent language, reserved only for very rare occasions and for some intimate people; those who have not betrayed the language; who have not become too urbanized. He does not know why he associates his grandmother with olive oil, home bread, some honey and a few oranges. The Souss region extends beautiful in front of his eyes; her narratives are too nice and wise to be forgotten, though now in the family there is no one to preserve her unique language, her Amazigh. He has a feeling of guilt for not making the effort to learn that language and preserve that continuity between her and his children who are immersed in all languages, except hers. Has something been mutilated through carelessness? He wonders if there has been some collective responsibility for not connecting past, present and future. He still cherishes that moment, when unexpectedly, one of the children came suddenly into the room while adult members of the family were discussing some serious subjects related to marriage, divorce and some grave problems. In a quick move, she changed from Moroccan Arabic to Amazigh by signally the presence of an intrusion: “Anni farkhan ama”. Years later, as children we managed to guess at the key of the code. Because of this mystery, the Amazigh communities remained for him a mystery connected to distant mountains, snow, beautiful women and colourful clothes. Apart from a few words, his contact with that language is conveyed only through the gestures, stories and imagination of

Lalla Manna. Dead many years ago, yet still living in his memory. Her Moroccan Arabic imbued by her Amazigh accent, full of experience and wisdom.

Despite extraordinary difficulties, students and professor share the joy of coming to terms with foreignness, of making it part of their own culture. Step by step, they produce small miracles by articulating and writing, sometimes foolishly competing with Shakespeare. He took the challenge literally and went to Great Britain to be close to the original roots of the language and to be inspired by its masters. So a significant part of his biography, though not long in real time, is closely related to his stay in Wales, where Shakespeare and his English were having a rough time.

When he landed in London, Said could not believe that he was really in England. It was his first trip by plane. In the past he used to travel in some overcrowded, dirty and gasoline-smelling busses, which relayed Casablanca to Rabat, from Garage Bin Jdia to Bab El Had. The two stations were notoriously popular, since it was there that you would find all sorts of thieves and pickpockets. On the other side of the two cities there were nice train stations and nicer airports. They were not meant for him. The only memory he had of airports was when he travelled with his family to Casablanca to see some relatives. They would go the Anfa airport to gaze with wonder at those extraordinary flying machines. What a spectacle! Up and down! Off they disappeared in the sky! This sight was so beautiful yet ephemeral, for they had to go back to their slum to spend the rest of the holiday. And even when he later visited England, it was in Spanish trains that dated back to the Second World War or the Civil War. These trains, in a gesture of hospitality, were reserved especially for Moroccan migrants. To this day, he can still hear their monotonous music and their horrendous noise.

He would have a very positive idea of the host country, since everything was secured, from the plane ticket and accommodation to the financing of his studies. He appreciated this scholarship at its just value only when he met a few Moroccan students, who suffered a great deal from a meager grant, which was inferior to that of the poorest countries in time of starvation. It was in these words that one of them expressed his sense of bitterness and frustration. Worse, this insignificant grant was usually and unreasonably two or three months late, and on the way to Wales weakened further by its original weakness vis à vis the strong pound. He knew later that most of his countrymen students worked in restaurants to survive, and the most daring of them did not hesitate to place an important book under his coat, for he

could not offer to purchase it. One of them defended morally his act as an act of class struggle, between classes, and also between countries. He quoted something vague from Mao and Marx. When asked about the limit of stealing, he answered: “a book from the bookshop; stealing for the sake of knowledge is ethically acceptable”. When another student argued that we were supposed to be good ambassadors for our country, he counterattacked by saying violently: ” Our bourgeois ambassadors should be ashamed of themselves; excessive wealth and luxury in an under-developed country!” .

Said thanked sincerely The British Council for this generous gift. From the purely theoretical point view, we might criticize the hegemonic West and its imperialism.....but from an individual and pragmatic point of view, if this very West made this good offer, the critic would fall into a division between ideology and personal interest. He thanked God that he had no fixed ideologies, and that they never reached the state of extremism and nihilism. Perhaps his ideology was summed up beautifully by Hussley, whom he met recently in a conference: “I like novels and people, not abstract ideas and principles”. His mother would tell him with a big hug: “ Bear in mind Said that your name suggests happiness, Saada, and Good omen, Saad, and that both of them will accompany you, wherever you go”. He accepted his mother’s over optimism , if not superstition, with a gentle laugh.

He spent the first night in the capital then he moved to the west, not the west of England, but the west of the United Kingdom, that is Wales. It was strange why in French it was called le pays de Galles. Perhaps somewhere there were some intertwining histories. He learnt later that the confusion of England with Great Britain was an offense to the Welsh who have a strong sense of independence and national pride. He was not culturally prepared to understand the depth of this conflict between two peoples who lived in almost the same geographical space.

He came to England before, but for adventure and the learning of English through contact with the common people in their daily lives, and not through some bookish English. This adventure took place when he found a temporary manual job picking fruit in some agricultural fields reserved for international youth. This was an essential stage in his life, for it was the first time that he had a first-hand experience of that strange puzzle that was called Europe. Later, this physical Europe is represented subjectively by Stephen, and for Said both experiences are part of his initiation into foreign lands and the languages of strangers:

Disheartened, he raised his eyes towards the slow drifting clouds, dappled and seaborne. They were voyaging across the deserts of the sky, a host of nomads on the march, voyaging high over Ireland, westwards bound. The Europe they had come from lay out there beyond the Irish Sea, Europe of strange tongues and valleyed and woodbegirt and citadelled and of entrenched and marshalled races.....

He managed to reach Europe and to know in the camp young people from all over the world. He was also lucky to come across and befriend a Scandinavian young girl. Despite their different colours and races and despite the huge distance separating the freezing north from the warm south , they were passionately in love with each other. The mere accent she used when she pronounced his name, transformed something prosaic in his country to something seductive and erotic here. A simple name became a gentle melody in her soft lips. While he was fascinated by her voice, she was attracted by his eyes, so dark and deep that she found some mystical peace. So concentrated was her gaze that he became uneasy. “You are my Ali Baba and my Andalousian knight”. She made him feel proud of being an Arab, and also an African with his brown skin, so different from her snow whiteness, yet so complementary. Her attachment also grew when she realized that these people too could be very cultivated, with good taste and good manners, who had a long history as old and rich as hers.

He loved so much Sarah that he almost forced her to visit Morocco with him. His intention was to make her see for herself the multitude of landscapes, peoples, and colours; the various tribes and ethnicities , with their specific languages and living conditions; the contrast between the Spanish North , and the south of the desert; between Casablanca the metropolis and Ifran the Swiss skiing resort; as for Marrakech and Fes, they were a feast for the eyes, a sublimation for the senses; colours and shapes, perfumes and fragrances. As he traveled with her, he travelled within himself and within his own culture that he discovered anew; so many possibilities left on the margin, unexplored. His love for Sarah and for his native land intertwined in some universal love; love regardless of all geographical and historical differences. Her beaming face moved him and affected some deep and unconscious side of himself, kept without representation. He summed up the ephemeral beauty of his, their situation in a short poetic fragment that became part of his diary, his history:

The fragrance of your smile
Has helped me
To survive desolate solitude;
Please do smile to halt
The irreversible process of Time
And tame the terrifying strangeness of those vast empty lands.

In Morocco she was fascinated by its sun and its people. In spite of its brevity, her sojourn allowed him to liberate himself and, thus, it remained a memorable moment to be cherished for ever. Sadly, Happy ends happen only in Hollywoodian films on TV screens. The romance ended as abruptly as it took form. Is it a cultural divide or merely an individual divide related to personal biographies and temperaments. The question is left open to this day. Perhaps it is a question of perspectives; over there they try to enjoy to the full the ephemeral moment; here, we tend to establish something more solid and communal in the form of a social contract, with its obligations and responsibilities. As Si Hassan, his late father, used to say: “passion is a short term flame, marriage is feeling guided by reason”.

Today, matters are different. He has to get through sweating and hard labor to get his Master degree in English literature. It is ironic that he came all the way from Morocco to study academic English in a city like Cardiff, famous for its rebellion against London English and its institutions, with its assumptions and norms of clarity in pronunciation, fluency in speech, correctness in accent, and formality in attitudes. In this environment that is dominated by unemployment, heavy drinking and working classes, it is hard for him to state with certainty whether people in this spot of the globe, so close to London yet so far from it, utter something that is called English. From the point of view of the foreign learner of English like himself, this is the language of the vulgar and the mob, broken and deformed. However, with the passage of time, and through experience and contact with the natives, he came to the conclusion that this way of using the language is an integral part of the Welsh identity, which defiantly refuses any mimicry of a pure form of speaking. Disrupting the language of the master becomes a political act that reflects the general yet diffused cultural tension between London as the center and Wales as its margin. He was elated to discover that all the cultural theories he was reading, are not mere abstractions, for today, he can feel their relevance. Epiphanies. He has even insight into the situation in his own country in the hidden conflict

between the various languages and dialects: Moroccan Arabic, Classical Arabic, Median Arabic, Amazigh, with its various varieties, French, Spanish, and English. A real Tower of Babel .

He was impressed by the violent and rebellious use of the language in Cardiff; this is seen the way young people graft fu..ing, that is love making from a masculine point of view, on all other words, whether they refer to a thing, a person , an action or a space...And this aggressive form of expression takes forceful intensity when it addresses anything Made in England. And this term finds vast circulation at the weekend, when pubs are overcrowded with the young who celebrate their bodies, but also try to smear the pure body of that other language that they both use and hate, for it reminds them of its power in the globe and at the same time its capacity to humiliate them.

He overheard this word everywhere but gave it little attention though it scratched his ears, for he was brought up on the good principles of Islam that forbids the use of dirty words, and also because his dreams were invested in the exploration of refined literature, where the imagination is stimulated by rich words and their associations, whose meaning is ambiguous, full of nuances and ruses. The harsh directness of language in Cardiff fits well into some realistic literature, but this trend does not change his relation to language and the world for it merely corroborates their presence. He prefers trends that introduce freshness into his life and the life of others, his relations to the Other.

He felt that he was outside these problems of society and politics; his obsession was to master a third language, that is still slippery, evasive, resisting, yet erotic and seductive; that is his siren; perhaps a powerful substitute for the chaotic character of the world and the irreversibility of death; perhaps a poor means to mourn the loss of Sarah and her horizon of promises. For her sake, ha has abandoned and betrayed the tongues of friendship and communal life, of brothers and sisters, the language of his own mother and her eternal breast, his origin, the origin of birth and life itself. He also disobeyed the father, who from early childhood initiated him into the mystery of the Arabic sign. His obsession with that distant language, whose speakers are totally indifferent to him and to his fate, not aware of his very existence, now imbues his dreams of being elsewhere. This seduction of the language, and the striving to make it his, in spite of its radical strangeness, sharpened his resolution and gave him new impetus to articulate it, learn it, acquire it, solve its mysteries, discover its histories,

enjoy its signs and symbolism. No doubt it will open for him vast possibilities in literature, from Shakespeare to Joyce, from Dickens to Woolf. By being initiated into the marvelous world of men and women of genius he will have his place among the great, and the West will acknowledge his presence.

It is in this high spirit of hope and optimism that he attended his first class on Modernist literature. He shivered. Maybe out of intimidation by the highly fluent and articulate English professor. Maybe out of envy of these young men and women who made little effort to learn the English language since it was taken for granted as their certificate of birth. At that same time, he had a strange feeling that urged him to defy them in their native land and use with originality their own language. He felt obscurely a certain confidence in himself and a voice that told him that Shakespeare could also be Moroccan, though this Moroccan Elizabethan babbled his first English sounds only at the age of twenty.

If he could do it then, why cannot they do it now? It is with a sense of guilt that he told them that English was a passport to the world. On the very same day, news on TV suggested that Spain had set up an infallible system of surveillance and that Europe thought of more efficient measures of combating illegal immigrants. To get a visa became like finding gold in the hellish desert of Nevada, or the desolated spaces of Siberia. Some of them think, perhaps naively, that the whole universe is at their feet. With their English, Arabic and French, they can cross boundaries and find all kinds of jobs. But with the shrinking of opportunities and the misfortune of birth in some points of the globe, in addition to the misfortune of being born without a spoon, let alone a silver spoon, in their mouths, immediately, the image of the other students came to his mind and displaced other images. These promising words fell on skeptical ears. Perhaps some young male students will find it easier to connect with the global mobility of travel and adventure....Perhaps some of the girls will settle for a comfortable marriage in the best Moroccan tradition with spectacles, rituals and a husband not so young, but with enough means to protect them from the unforeseeable evil and hardships of the world, marked in many houses and workshops in the form of a defensive hand, beautifully drawn, preferably in henna. Perhaps, one or two girls, not necessarily bright, but superb in their femininity as it is framed by the norm, will be bold enough to stretch the net of seduction and marriage and thus claim victory over both the professor and the other girls. It will also be big news throughout the campus, with students knitting the various fragments into a good story,

almost equal in its suspense to *One Thousand and One nights* or to action films at their best. The university reflects society in power relations and the priority of men to select and choose.

“What do you think of the main character in the story?”, he asked, waiting for a quick reply, as the beginning of an animated debate; being imbued by modern pedagogical theories, he hated lectures and the imposition of knowledge. He genuinely, perhaps naively, believed that students should be active in shaping their own critical perspectives on the syllabus, the university, as place of knowledge but also as an institution, their immediate environment, but also the politics of the country and events in the world at large.

An embarrassing silence covered the whole classroom. He deliberately remained silent to remind them of their responsibilities and of one of their missions that consists of reading carefully, personally, the text, and of trying to be original in their responses. Events outside the classroom had made this patient and caring reading a form of labor, intolerable in its boredom. Life now is imaginatively caught in superb advertisement, nice video clips, various channels, and the prospect of crossing to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea or the Atlantic; the classroom, like society, has become claustrophobic rather than liberating; an obligation rather than a vocation.

Which story? Which character? He felt the increasingly despairing side of his job, he who firmly believed in the interactive method. That was the buzz word at the school that trained high-school teachers. All kinds of nice words were used then with a certain lightness of the soul: individualized learning, self autonomy, freedom of the subject, creative writing, etc,... These at least were nice words that soothed his harsh reality in Rabat. He imagined the vast abyss between this urban, capital-oriented language, highly elevated, yet totally disconnected, and its comfortably-seated professors on the one hand, and the misery of some real human beings who tried to survive in invisible villages that you could not locate on maps, somewhere in the high atlas, or on the border of the desert. Is he also implicated in this teaching machinery?

But what can he do to change the harshness of the material world, with its crowded classrooms and an environment with limited means and students, like characters in a novel of the absurd, lost in the chaos of the universe? Some of them try to recover some parts of their

selves in the fragmentation of society by praying, diligently, continuously, with a great sense of hope that there is light somewhere. In opposition to the obscure global, they embrace the familiar local, which is threatened by some mysterious forces that they are unable to locate with precision. Perhaps their hope of a homely place is too idealized to save them from the ferocity of competition and change. At least, they feel the warmth of their families, and those who are part of their tribes. In a strange way, he has changed too, as if contaminated by this insidious fragmentation. The rapidity, the incoherence, if not the absurdity of events in the world have made him feel at times, like them, helpless and hopeless, a small child who lost his mother's care. Yet, life being a *mise en scene*, he has to present that ideal image that fits his students' idealization of him; a leader with a torch to show the way; like those combatants at a time of war, ready to spill their blood for the great cause. After a great deal of groping, he has come to the sad realization that the collective cause has recently become vague and hazy, as if driving at high speed in a dangerously foggy motorway. The cause or some of its traces are still present, but in the form of hollow sounds, which brought to his mind a fragment of a poem:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men

Maybe it is beyond his good will, intention and possibilities to restore that profound interaction between teacher and learners. Some values are collapsing, other are emerging. Sure they will emerge, but what are they? The teacher as entrepreneur, as a businessman, as a provider of extra hours, as an administrator, as a bricoleur? As an opportunity seeker, changing with the seasons and with his position in the space of the chess game? Where is the vision, the prophecy, the ideal? It is this aspect of the job that makes some resisting individuals cross deserts and empty, harsh lands to face shipwrecking storms, and confront fires... with the desire to save souls and bless the world with goodness like in some apocalyptic scenes. Perhaps it was merely a dream, an illusion. But are not illusions necessary to survive the desolation of adulthood?

To break away from the confusion of these infinite thoughts, complicated thoughts, he invites his two daughters for a walk; at least with them he will address the real world, some concrete problems that immerse him in his environment and in people's lives. Yet as if possessed by the ghosts of the past, his mind starts his mechanism of retrieving fragments of

memories that he assumes were lost in the desert or in a hard iceberg; that is lost in fire or frozen in the cold; evaporated for ever.

In fact, it was in a cold place that he met warmth. In his second year as a postgraduate student in Wales, he came across a snow-white girl and a culture that he knew about only on the radio waves or in the form of a few lines in a marginal newspaper printed in the UK. His memory, through its curious detours and ruses, repressed his first year, a year of hardship, ill-health and the effort to come to terms with university work in a foreign land, an extremely unfriendly weather, and people busy with their lives, whose tongue was different from the standard voice of the BBC, which produced clear, limpid sounds. Here in Cardiff, English became something fragile to be negotiated with care; otherwise, he might fall in a depressive sense of despair. It was in these situations that his being foreign was glaringly exposed to the eyes of the local people, who were surprised to see a young man covering all these distances to learn English within a community which tried to revive its own native tongue. His contact had turned away from human beings in the flesh to images on the TV screen, full of laughter and spectacular scenes....It had been the case until he was reconciled with the human race when he met her at a party organized on campus:

- Hi!
- Hi!
- What is your name?
- Diana
- Anything to do with the princess?
- Pure coincidence of names. And yours?
- Said
- Say it again
- Sa..iid
- It is hard for me to pronounce the Arabic “i”. My phonetic organs should be readjusted to make room for this new sound
- What do you study?
- English and American literature
- You must be a bright guy!
- Not at all. Just hard-working, resilient, and with a passion for words.
- Any preference?
- Modernist and postmodernist stuff

- Anything specific?
- Virginia Woolf and Joyce
- They are superb. But you must read some contemporary writings from Wales. They are very social and political. They might be of interest to you. Good change from your obsession with revolution in language
- Even these texts are highly political. You have to read between the lines. At the moment I am very busy writing my thesis, but I promise to purchase one or two Welsh novels written or translated into English. I would have liked to tackle some original texts in that beautiful language of yours.

What he meant , in fact, is her beauty. He was just preparing the ground, paving the way for the transition.

- What is about you? What is your field of study?
- Feminist theory and cultural studies
- You want to change the world, I guess
- But also the self. The two are interrelated

The warmth of coffee and conversation made them feel relaxed as if they knew each other for a long time. Words transfigured the banality of life into cultural exchange. No boundaries of race, religion or geography could stop the flow of language, feelings and impressions. Their bodies came closer and touch each other like gentle movements in dancing, drawn by some invisible forces, like in a hypnotic scene. Fallen into oblivion, their environment had faded from their view. At that magic moment, he drew her white hand softly and kissed it gently. He remembered the Arabic knight and his chivalry and courtesy. He also remembered this scene in some classical film whose title he could not recall, but he was deeply sincere. As she blushed, he drew her nearer him and kissed her in the mouth. Both of them felt clumsy, for at the beginning the gap between their cultures was thought to be unbridgeable. Now, however, they were liberated from the weight of history, of the history of their peoples, with their claims for nations, boundaries and identities. She explored his humanity by caressing his hair. He felt asleep in her care; perhaps only his mother could surpass this uncalculating tenderness that cured his bones. The wetness of her lips tasted like pure honey for someone lost in the desert of a foreign land. The image of the desert, some bright colours like In Matisse's paintings, silence, and their solitude in the world, her world and his world, their feeling of being suspended from the crowded banality that surrounded them inspired him to

write, just after this encounter, his first poem ever, as if forced by the unique profundity of the event :

Between the yellowness of the desert sand
And the blueness of the sky
Thickened by a second layer of the blue sea,
Two small figures struggle in
Meaning making and discourse uttering.
They strive to weave personal and small communal histories
In a space of silence.

A small miracle. Writing in the oppressive language of Shakespeare his first poem in a foreign land, within a minority culture, with the deep and unconscious feeling that he was always on the Moroccan soil. Both at that time and at this very moment, he has felt all the contradiction of his situation; he has been using that other language in a poor land in the south where most of its inhabitants are illiterate. He has also guessed at his colleagues' not-so-nice remarks about his romantic flight and his arrogance to deform the English language that is meant here to be taught at school. His sin is worse, for he has forsaken his mother tongue, the tongue of his grandmother, the language of his father and of the Koran. For him, however, falling in love , with the other language, with that other woman, does need to be justified; it is his fate, his destiny, the coincidence of life, perhaps also his luck, something to be enjoyed without any feeling of guilt.

