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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Terre d'ombre brûlée* by Mahi Binebine

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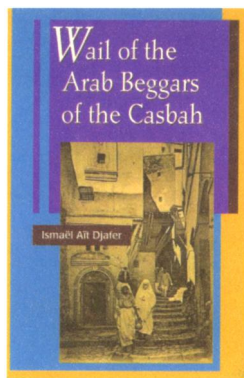
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AFRICA & THE WEST INDIES

Algeria

Ismaël Aït Djafer. *Wail of the Arab Beggars of the Casbah*. Jack Hirschman, tr. Willimantic, Connecticut. Curbstone. 2004. x + 63 pages. \$12.95. ISBN 1-880684-96-9



THE HANDSOME BILINGUAL EDITION OF Ismaël Aït Djafer's *Wail of the Arab Beggars of the Casbah* reintroduces to English-language readers an underground sensation first published in French in 1951. In short lines that create a chantlike effect, Djafer evokes the suffering of urban Algerians. Staying close to the French original, Jack Hirschman's translation captures the raw intensity of this memorial to a nine-year-old girl murdered by her impoverished, tubercular father, Khouni Ahmed, who twice shoved her until she fell beneath a truck in Algiers in 1949. Djafer, then

a twenty-two-year-old Algerian student, embedded this fact and its aftermath, Khouni's incarceration in a mental institution, in the core of his impassioned and still timely howl against the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, which so reduced Khouni that he sacrificed his child to minimize his own material suffering.

Saluting readers with a glass "full of blood," Djafer's persona repeatedly juxtaposes the beggars and the murdered child Yasmina with the exalted French colonial presence, "Charlemagne" and his "children," the colonials. He likewise intersperses throughout the "wail" random verses from common French schoolchildren's songs, rendered by "Charlemagne's children" with "a full stomach." Quatrains from such traditional ditties as "Au Claire de la lune" and "Sur le pont d'Avignon," evoking comfortable French childhoods, eerily underscore the precarious lives of indigenous Yasmina and her peers.

Suppressing details of the murder, the persona forces us to construct the scene and thus intensify our relation to it: "I was there when the / truck squashed her / and the blood spurted— / The blood!" Repeating, but isolating, "the blood," he moves from the generalized image of Yasmina's death to the metaphysical plane. Promising to mediate, "And more of that I just can't tell," instead he reinvents the scene by leaving "that privilege to those who've already seen a truck / crush a man and blood / spurt / to / recall / the horror." Reinscribing Yasmina onto our mental screens, "and the disgust and then the cowardly flight / from a corpse / especially from the corpse of a / little innocent girl," he assures that we, having twice visualized the incident, will store it as symbol.

An ostensible article by "one of those squashed curs" later interrupts the poem, narrating in journalistic prose those very details the persona withheld. Its rhetorical strategies embody the colonizers' recipe for success: assuming the hero's mantle while preserving an exploitative status quo. Thus its title, "Khouni, Murderer ["Assasin" in the original] of His Daughter Is Saved by a Psychiatrist," demonizes Khouni while anointing French authorities for their mercy, which ironically fulfills Khouni's desire for security by finding him insane. Here, Djafer both

reveals how mainstream media manipulate readers and unmasks the hypocrisy of a system that seeks to evade responsibility by appearing to offer compassion.

Finally, *Wail* cogently portrays the suffering of the oppressed, its terse, angry shriek recalling such recent Algerian works as Yasmina Khadra's *Wolf Dreams*. Alas, that Ismaël Aït Djafer's portrayal remains accurate for today's global society, whether in Algiers or east Los Angeles, suggests that increasingly transnational "Charlemagnes" and their complacent children run our world.

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Morocco

Mahi Binebine. *Terre d'ombre brûlée*. Paris. Fayard. 2004. 228 pages. €16. ISBN 2-213-61762-7

IN 1971 JILALI GHARBAOUI froze to death on a public bench in Paris. Widely considered to be one of the founders of avant-garde painting in Morocco, Gharbaoui died alone and in relative obscurity at age forty-one. While he was known to suffer from substance abuse and debilitating depression throughout his life, little of Gharbaoui's biography can be pinned down with certainty.

Mahi Binebine, himself a well-known Moroccan painter, has said in interviews that his sixth novel, *Terre d'ombre brûlée*, was inspired by the shadowy life of Jilali Gharbaoui. *Terre d'ombre brûlée* opens as a painter émigré, Ilias, sits on a Parisian bench in Clichy freezing to death. "Comment en suis-je arrivé là?" Ilias wonders as he slowly loses consciousness in the cold. From this haunting present, Ilias plunges into his past, narrating—like the abandoned protagonists in other Binebine novels—the tragic events that led him to personal catastrophe. In the process, Binebine not only depicts the alienated and precarious life of a Maghrebi painter teetering on the edge in Paris but also provides the mysterious Gharbaoui with a fictional autobiography.

From the opening chapter, the first-person narrative of an increasingly delusional Ilias is repeatedly interrupted by his bitter memories of life in Paris and his painful childhood growing up as an orphan in the old city of Marrakech. After years of poverty and obscurity shared with a cast of similar characters, a visit from a representative of one of the famous Parisian galleries offers Ilias a sudden sense of hope. Just as the illegal immigrants in Binebine's *Cannibals* imagine Europe as a paradise that will wipe out a lifetime of suffering, Ilias immediately begins to fantasize about the magnificent success that is sure to follow his opening at the famous gallery. After months of waiting, however, Ilias receives a rejection letter from the gallery; he is soon evicted from his studio and plunges into a deep depression. Forced to relocate to Clichy, Ilias's physical and mental health quickly deteriorate to the point that he meets his end in the freezing cold.

As in Binebine's other novels, *Terre d'ombre brûlée* begins after the narrator's fate is sealed. Abandoned by everyone around him, all that is left for Ilias is to retell his past. Still, by providing a personal and compassionate history for abandoned anonymous characters like Ilias, Binebine shows in *Terre d'ombre brûlée* that his protagonists are able to transcend their brutal destinies. Indeed, it is Binebine's stunning ability to depict his characters' tragic lives and crushed dreams in a humane way that makes him a masterful storyteller.

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