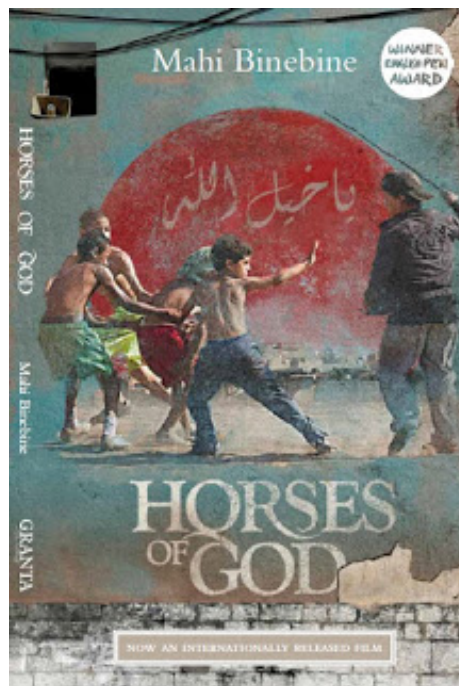


Moroccan novelist Mahi Binebine's *Horses of God* explores the path to suicide bombings

Horses of God probes minds of young Islamist suicide bombers
by Susannah Tarbush, London



Horses of God (Granta Books) translated by Lulu Norman

This month marks the tenth anniversary of Morocco's worst-ever Islamist terror attack, in which 14 young men carried out a series of suicide bombings in the heart of Casablanca. The bombings on the evening of 16 May 2003 killed 45 people - 12 bombers and 33 innocent victims - and wounded more than 100.

Many of the victims were killed when the attackers knifed a guard at the popular and packed Casa de España Spanish-owned restaurant and blew themselves up inside. The other targets were the five-star Hotel Farah, a

Jewish cemetery, a Jewish community centre, a Jewish-owned Italian restaurant and the Belgian consulate.



Mahi Binebine

It was found that all the bombers, aged from 16 to 23, had come from the shanty town of Sidi Moumen. The attacks raised profoundly disturbing questions, and in a search for answers the Moroccan writer and painter Mahi Binebine decided to go to Sidi Moumen.

On a visit to the UK last month, supported by English PEN, Binebine said: "We just weren't used to this type of terrorism in Morocco. Most people were very shocked and I wanted to understand what was happening to us."

In Sidi Moumen "I discovered a town of 50,000 inhabitants living in shacks with corrugated iron roofs, without electricity, without light, without water or proper sewerage. I found I was in another country, not Morocco."

The shanty town is hidden behind big walls and is not visible from the motorway: "If you're outside you wouldn't know there are 50,000 people living in this place. And in the middle of it is a rubbish dump. Everybody's working in that rubbish dump - you've got children rummaging around in it, you've got lorries parking up to dump more stuff on it." He witnessed horrendous scenes when people were so keen to be the first get to stuff

being dumped that it was deposited virtually on their heads.

"The first picture of Sidi Moumen I had was of kids playing football on top of the rubbish dump, and I said to myself OK, those kids are going to become the heroes of my next novel." That novel, *Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen* (*The Stars of Sidi Moumen*), was published by Flammarion in France in 2010 and won the Grand Prix du Roman Arabe 2010.

The novel was made into an acclaimed film *Les Chevaux de Dieu* directed by Paris-born Moroccan-Tunisian director Nabil Ayouch. Jamal Belmahi's script is based on Binebine's novel, but makes well-judged changes of plot and tone. The young actors in the film are from Sidi Moumen, with one set of actors playing the bombers as boys and another set portraying them as young men. The actors give some remarkably powerful performances. The film won Ayouch the 2012 François Chalais Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

Binebine's visit to the UK in April marked the publication by London publisher Granta Books of Lulu Norman's translation of the novel from French under the title *Horses of God*. The translation [won an English PEN Award](#) last November for writing in translation. These Awards help British publishers with marketing. The six books which received Awards last November were selected by a panel chaired by the renowned literary translator Ros Schwartz. In celebration of Binebine's visit to the UK, English PEN Atlas published his short story [Stolen Eyes](#).



Ros Schwartz and Mahi Binebine

Horses of God is the second of Binebine's novels to be translated to English by Lulu Norman and published by Granta Books. The first, *Welcome to Paradise* (the original French title is *Cannibales*), appeared in 2003 (it was [reviewed in the Guardian](#) by Maya Jaggi). *Welcome to Paradise* is about human traffickers; its characters are desperate to get from North Africa to Europe through clandestine and perilous migration across the Strait of Gibraltar.

Horses of God is Binebine's reimagining of the Casablanca suicide bombings. The first-person narrator Yachine, blew himself up in the bombings aged 18. Now a ghost, he looks back over his life and at the events that led him to become a suicide bomber.

"Sometimes I'm overcome by the urge to scream when I find misguided dreamers following in my footsteps.." Yachine muses. "Abu Zoubeir lied when he said we'd go straight to paradise. He said that we'd suffered our share of Gehenna in Sidi Moumen and therefore nothing worse could happen to us."

Yachine says he didn't hang around in life too long, because there wasn't a

lot to do. "And I have to say right now: I'm not sorry to be done with it. I don't have the slightest nostalgia for the eighteen years or so of misery that were my lot." And yet the tone of the novel, narrated from beyond the grave, is serene and rueful with touches of humour.

Yachine has a passion for football, and took his name from that of the legendary Soviet goalie Lev Yashin. As a boy growing up in Sidi Moumen he is in thrall to his dominating and violent older brother Hamid. Life is cheap in the shanty town. Hamid kills a man who had been teasingly coming on to Yachine, and buries his body among the rubbish of the shanty town.

Binebine's prose is spare and poetic, and conveys the texture of the world of Yachine and his friends. Yachine's boyhood comrades include beautiful Nabil who is a prostitute's son, Khalil the shoeshine, Blackie the coalman's son, and Fuad with whose sister Ghizlane Yachine is in love. He at last plucks up the courage to kiss her on what he knows will be his last night on earth.

"We made up our own little family: it was us against the world," Yachine says, remembering his friends. A current of homoeroticism runs through *Horses of God*. There is a rape scene set on a drunken evening when Hamid forces himself on a virtually comatose Nabil, and the other boys follow Hamid's lead. Yachine feels shame that he is unable to perform, and he instead quietly comforts Nabil.



from Les Chevaux de Dieu

The boys' drift towards extremism begins after Hamid falls under the spell of an Islamist, Abu Zoubeir, and his clique. Hamid undergoes a radical transformation: he starts praying and going to the mosque, grows a beard and finds a job in the city. He abandons his wild ways and becomes sober and serious. "He managed to spin a kind of austere web that ensnared us all."

Yachine and his friends fall under the influence of Abu Zoubeir and an Islamist emir and his companions. The TV is tuned to a channel that shows massacres of Muslims on a loop, making the boys' blood boil. They are told Jihad is their salvation. "Abu Zoubeir said we had to react. The Prophet would never have tolerated such humiliation". Not long before the suicide attacks the bombers are taken on what they are told is "a holiday" in mountains far from Casablanca, where they undergo final training and indoctrination. "The time we spent in the mountains will always be one of the happiest memories of my short life," Yachine says. During their time in the mountains Nabil and Yachine find themselves making love.

Binebine's English PEN-supported visit to UK

Binebine was born in Marrakech in 1959. After studying mathematics he worked as a maths teacher in Paris before turning to painting and then

writing. He spent many years living and working in Paris, New York and Madrid and then returned to live in the city of his birth. His paintings are in the permanent collection at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and are in many other collections. One of his works is on the cover of the latest issue of *Banipal* magazine of modern Arab literature in English translation.

During his April visit to the UK Binebine took part in three events. At the first he was in conversation at St Anne's College, Oxford University; the event was coordinated by Oxford Student PEN, in association with St Anne's Arts and Humanities Discussion Group.

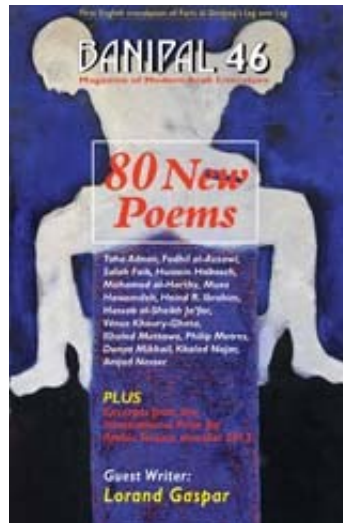
The second event was held in the cinema of the Institut français in South Kensington, London, where a screening of *Les Chevaux de Dieu* was followed by a discussion with writer and curator Omar Kholeif.



Sarah Ardizzone, Mahi Binebine and Omar Kholeif

The visit concluded with a launch of *Horses of God*, at the Brunei Suite, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University. A discussion between Binebine and Ros Schwartz was followed by a lively Q and A session. The event was organised by the Royal African Society. After the event he signed copies of his book with an individual drawing for each one.

At both London events the interpreter was Sarah Ardizzone, a highly-regarded translator of French literary works including novels by the young writer Faïza Guène, born in France to Algerian parents.



a painting by Mahi Binebine on the cover of Banipal

Binebine's first novel, *Le sommeil de l'esclave* (*The Slave Girl's Sleep*) appeared in 1992. A [further eight books](#), fiction and non-fiction, followed, most recently *Le Seigneur vous le rendra* (*The Lord Will Reward You*). His novels often focus on the marginalised.

Ros Schwartz asked Binebine how the two art forms in which he works - writing and painting - are connected. He said he has a "really military discipline", working in his office from 8 am until midday and spending his afternoons until 7 pm in his studio. Asked if the subject matter of the two art forms is connected, he said that when he is writing a novel the paintings he produces at that time are linked thematically to the theme he is treating in his novel.

In general, the literature comes prior to the painting - except in the case of his most recent novel, where it was the other way round. "For several years I'd been painting figures of people who are wracked with strain. And I had no idea that I was in fact going to write a novel the central character of which is

a baby that is mummified. That was the first time that the painting influenced the novel."

'a suicide bomber is at the same time a victim'

Schwartz said: "In *Horses of God* you trace the development of kids who go from being carefree and playing football to being suicide bombers. And I get the sense that, without in any way trying to write an apology for the horrific bombings, you are also showing that these young men are victims: they are victims of poverty, and in a way you are asking who is really to blame for this."

Mahi replied that "poverty doesn't necessarily lead to terrorism. But I wanted to show that poverty is like a petri dish, it's an area in which issues can ferment, particularly when you have these Islamist mafias installing themselves within the shanty towns."

Binebine said that if fingers of blame are going to be pointed, they should be pointed at the state, which allow these shanty towns to exist, and at the religious mafia that set itself up within the shanty towns and brainwashes uneducated young people who are easy prey. "And we can also point at the Moroccan bourgeoisie who underpay the people who work for them: the official wage is 200 Euros a month but you've got the Moroccan bourgeoisie paying 100 Euros a month, half the official wage."

"And so in that sense yes, these young people are victims. Of course, that is a very difficult statement to make in the West - but a suicide bomber is at the same time a victim."



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Ros observed that his recent novels appear to have a common theme of escaping poverty and misery. In *Welcome to Paradise* the protagonists are seeking to leave their country and find paradise in Europe. They want to get away, with fatal results. In *Horses of God* they seek paradise in martyrdom - again, with tragic results. "And in your most recent novel *Le Seigneur vous le rendra* the narrator Mamoun seeks and finds escape through literature and education. Would you say that's your message, of the importance of education as a way out of poverty and misery?"

Binebine said "of course the priority of priorities has to be education." In *Le Seigneur vous le rendra* a child is born with an extraordinary talent for begging. His mother hires him out to beggars, who outbid each other to have him beg on their pitch for the day. But then the child starts growing, which is not good for business. His mother has heard of the Chinese practice of binding feet to stop them growing, and she decides to "mummify" her baby. "Of course she doesn't entirely mummify him - she stops at the neck. So the body stops growing but the head carries on growing."

'the baby has his own Arab Spring'

In order to remain a baby the child is forbidden to speak. "And of course this is a metaphor for all these Arab societies which stop people growing up and

infantilise them." But the baby is given access to culture by a Spanish person he meets (just as Binebine was very much encouraged early in his artistic endeavours by a Spanish artist who became a friend.) "The baby has his own Arab Spring. He's going to kill the mother - not physically, he's going to cut that umbilical cord - and he's going to do exactly what the Arab people have been doing these past two or three years, they stop being frightened of their dictators . So revolution stems from education, but it also stems from love, because he'll also encounter love." (The novel received a favourable review in [Libération](#)).

Schwartz finds the striking thing about Binebine's work to be "the extreme richness of the characters: every character has a story and the stories are humorous, they are unusual, there are stories within stories. Where does the inspiration for this extraordinary range of characters come from? Do people tell you their stories, are these people that you grew up with?"

"I was born in the heart of the madina in Marrakech and in order to get to school I had to cross the central square of Marrakech, Djemaa el Fn, where you have all the performers and snake charmers," Binebine said. "I spent years crossing that square witnessing the oral tradition that's so central to our country. On the other hand people never stop telling stories in Morocco so I harvest these stories people tell me and I don't really have to invent anything. It's as if we writers are fighting over who is going to nick which story!"

Ayouch and Binebine have maintained their links with the young people of Sidi Moumen. Asked by Ros Schwartz about their project in the shanty town, Binebine said that in order to do something for the youngsters, he and Ayouch had organised a major auction of donated art works to be held in Casablanca on 16 May - the 10th anniversary of the suicide attacks. The proceeds would go towards building a cultural centre for children in Sidi Moumen. The auction would be preceded on the previous evening, 15 May,

by a screening of *Les Chevaux de Dieu* in Sidi Moumen, bringing together the families of the victims and of the suicide bombers.

Forty-one painters, sculptors, photographers and private collectors [donated 66 valuable artworks for the auction](#) which was held in a room offered by the Hyatt Regency hotel and was supported by Hicham Daoudi of Compagnie Marocaine des Oeuvres et Objets d'Art (CMOOA), Binebine posted a euphoric [message on Facebook](#) announcing that the auction had raised 2 million dirhams (equivalent to around \$US 233,000).



still from Les Chevaux de Dieu

During the event at the Institut français, which began with a screening of *Les Chevaux de Dieu*, interviewer Omar Kholeif said that despite the brutalism and poverty "there's a real romanticism to this coming of age story. Was that intentional? There's even a line where one of the characters says they don't necessarily hate living in this particular kind of context."

Binebine said: "That's precisely why I didn't write a dark book. It is a very funny book even if Nabil Ayouch the cineaste turned it into a very serious film. The novel itself is not very dark because the children I encountered in Sidi Boumen were light, were fun, they laughed, they played with a sardine

tin, there truly was a point when I said they almost seem to be happier than the kids who live in the posh areas."

Binebine started writing the novel in 2004, a year after the attacks, but stopped writing in 2006 "because it was out of the question to apologise for terrorism, to justify the unjustifiable. And at the same time I said if I was born in that, and I wasn't educated, and I was living in that kind of dirt, I would have been an easy prey for those dream merchants."

He said the dictators who have ruled Arab countries in past decades have created a kind of void around them. "They've killed, they've imprisoned, they've corrupted all the alternative voices, all those who could have offered something different, which means they've laid down the red carpet for an Islam that actually has nothing to do with Islam. These Islamists are the children of the dictatorships and not the children of the revolutions of the Arab Spring, they've been there for 40,50 years; they won, they are there."

Kholeif asked Binebine whether he had ever been conscious, or worried, that his novel might be instrumentalised or misconstrued as something that could be used to promote those people who are keen to promote Islamic xenophobia.

Binebine said: "There is a risk, because in Sidi Moumen there are Islamists who have installed themselves there and we've let them set themselves up there and they've emptied, cleared out, the other mafia who are the 'normal' mafia, the almost-nice mafia, who sold hashish, who did little deals – a normal mafia. It was a mafia that didn't kill as much as these Islamists – they set themselves up and they created order."

When Mahi met people in Sidi Moumen they were "very happy about the Islamists arriving because they said 'these guys cleared out the hash sellers, the wine sellers, they cleaned the place up'. They've got money, they

help people and are very present in people's lives. And so in the film in the story these are people who take the kids away from the rubbish dump, they clean them up – if you're going to be praying 5 times a day you've got to clean yourself up 5 times a day – wash – and they separate them from their families. And the group becomes their family.

"They find jobs for them, and what they are given is dignity, a kind of dignity they have never had. And little by little they embark on the work of brainwashing – so they start showing them tapes of Palestinians, Chechens, martyrs, you're going to save Islam – you are the horses of God – it's terrible how little by little you start to create human bombs. They are already in hell, that's what they're told, what have you got to lose? What they are being offered is a direct ticket to paradise – 70 virgins, I don't know if that's funny or not – they are offered this and that and little by little they convince them."

