

Mohammed Mrabet and the Significance of His Work

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This article is an introduction to the fiction of the illiterate Moroccan storyteller Mohammed Mrabet (1940-). Mrabet is the author of some works which include novels such as *Love With a Few Hairs* (1976), *The Lemon* (1969), *The Big Mirror* (1977), his autobiographical work *Look and Move On* (1976), and a few collections of short stories and tales.¹ These works of Mrabet have been published in English translations, rendered by the American author Paul Bowles, and have not yet been translated back into Arabic.

Mrabet first met Bowles in 1965; the latter quickly revealed a special interest in Mrabet's fiction, and translated many of his recorded stories from the Moghrebi (Moroccan Arabic) into English. The pleasure Bowles took in translating Mrabet may be related to his earlier attraction to Muslim storytellers in Moroccan marketplaces; it is in part related to his interest in the life and culture in Morocco, where he has spent much, if not most, of his life. Mrabet himself had heard some of his stories from local storytellers. However, this oral tradition is only one of the sources of Mrabet's fiction.

In *Look and Move On*, Mrabet enumerates the sources of his stories as follows: "Some were tales I had heard in the cafés, some were dreams, some were inventions I made as I was recording, and some were about things that had actually happened to me."² As a result, Mrabet's work is often quite different from the religious or legendary tales of the marketplaces and cafés. He not only reproduces traditional tales, he also invents many others which sound the depths of Moroccan life.

Because Mrabet works within the oral narrative tradition, one cannot say that he has been influenced by Western or Arabic written fiction; he does not read well enough to acquaint himself with written narrative traditions and conventions. In *Look and Move On*, Mrabet does not mention ever reading a book; he did not have the education necessary to enable him to read and write in any language. Nevertheless, Mrabet is by no means an anomaly within the context of North-African literature, and it would be helpful at this point to discuss more precisely the ways in which his stories relate to the themes and forms of that tradition.

¹ Mohammed Mrabet's works are: *Love With A Few Hairs* (London: Peter Owen, 1967); *The Lemon: A Novel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969); *M'hashish* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1969); *Hadidan Aharam* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975); *Harmless Poisons, Blameless Sins* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976); *Look and Move On* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976); *The Big Mirror* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977); *The Beach Café & The Voice* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980); *The Chest* (Bolinás: Tombouctou, 1983); and with Paul Frederic Bowles, *The Boy Who Set the Fire and Other Stories* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1974).

² Mohammed Mrabet, *Look and Move On*, taped and trans., Paul Bowles (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1976) 91.

At least two traits of North-African and Arabic written fiction are clearly present in the oral works of Mrabet. First, fiction are clearly present in the oral works of Mrabet. First, the presence of autobiographical elements—a phenomenon of which Mrabet himself is apparently aware. A second common theme is the search of an Arab youth for identity in his contact with his own society and with the West. In the process the character may condemn his society and move to the West which often frustrates his ambition to identify with it; thus, he returns to his society and embraces its tradition and values in a final attempt of self-assertion. This pattern appears in Mrabet's *Look and Move On*, as it does in the written fiction of native North-African authors writing in French, such as Moroccan Driss Chraïbi in *Le Passé Simple*. The same pattern occurs in the fiction of Algerian authors like Kateb Yacine, Mohammed Dib, Assia Djebar and others.³

It is significant that characters in Mrabet's work are generally alienated either from society, from members of other cultures, or from themselves. There are cases, however, where an individual character is alienated in all three respects at once. The three kinds of alienation presented in Mrabet form one multifaceted phenomenon. The phenomenon begins when the well-being of these characters is threatened by the pressures arising from strict traditions which society imposes on individuals in matters which they associate with personal freedom, from poverty or from division of classes.

Dissatisfied with their society and its traditions some of the Moroccan characters in Mrabet are led toward an attempt at Westernization. The search for Westernization is clear in the characters of Mohammed in *Love With A Few Hairs*, Abdeslam in *The Lemon*, the countryside Moroccan driver in "What Happened In Granada," a short tale included in *The Boy Who Set the Fire*, and in Mrabet's actual attempt at Westernization during his visits to America. The three facets of alienation are revealed in Mrabet's character in *Look and Move On*. Failing to achieve a sense of happiness and balance in Morocco, Mrabet travels to the United States. The sophisticated modes of life in America, the large crowds of people in a city like New York, and the American sense of cultural superiority over the developing nations are more than the Moroccan Mrabet can cope with during his stay in the United States. Here, he receives a cultural shock which he cannot transcend, and he finally returns to Morocco. Unable to achieve a true adjustment to the local environment of Morocco or the sophisticated environment of the United States, Mrabet moves to the phase of alienation from himself, which takes the form of a praise of death. In a morbid psychological condition which recalls the existentialist mood of despair, he states that existence is without value and death alone worthy of praise.

Alienation of the individual from society may lead directly to alienation from the self without an attempt to identify oneself with other cultures. Examples of this are found in Rachida and Ali in Mrabet's *Big Mirror*. Social alienation in this case shifts from boredom with life and society into a quasi-existen-

³For this and more on North-African fiction, see Mouloud Mammeri, "African Literature of French Expression," *Afro-Asian Writings* (March 1967): 73-80. See also Georges J. Joyaux, "Driss Chraïbi, Mohammed Dib, Kateb Yacine and Indigenous North African Literature," *Yale French Studies* 24 (1957): 30-40.

tialist mode of thought. Such a shift occurs when the socially alienated characters cannot achieve self-liberation. In many cases in Mrabet, such as those of Mohammed in *Love With A Few Hairs*, Abdeslam in *The Lemon*, Mrabet himself in *Look and Move On*, and others, however, social alienation of Moroccan characters finds expression in their defiance of and confrontation with society as represented by some of its members or categories. The struggle of the alienated individuals sometimes leads to self-liberation as in Abdeslam's case in *The Lemon*.

Many themes of alienation in Mrabet's works have their roots in the personal experience of the author. Mrabet's childhood experiences, as presented in *Look and Move On*, were bitter. Born in Tangier about 1940, he preferred the life of a vagabond to the discipline of life at his parents' house. His father's statement, "If anybody hits you, you hit him back," reflects his rough upbringing. At sixteen, he smoked cigarettes and kef, drank alcohol, and visited prostitutes.⁴ In the poverty and rough street life of Tangier he encountered many difficulties and fought with many people; and in all this, he showed bitterness mixed with wit and humor, experiencing a sense of revulsion at many local traditions and concepts. He hates the gathering of women in his house after the death of his child. Death to him should be joyful; man's misery starts on the day of his birth. As he says to his mother-in-law: "The people of my race don't cry over dead bodies. In my country when somebody dies everybody else puts on new clothes and goes out happy into the street and invites friends to the party. The day for tears and moans is the day you're born, not the day you die."⁵ This attitude is a clear indication of his somber view of his life and the kind of pessimism reflected in his autobiography and in many of his characters, such as Rachida in *The Big Mirror*, Abdeslam in *The Lemon*, and Hamed in "The Datura Trees," a tale included in *M'hashish*.

Mrabet's strong and defiant personality alienated him from his own parents and from society in general and led him to choose a fiercely independent mode of life. He rebels against what he does not like, even if his attitude leads him to jail. Mrabet's work reflects his mode of life and personality. His alienated characters, such as Hadidan Aharam, the hero in a few tales in *Harmless Poisons*, *Blameless Sins*, and Abdeslam in *The Lemon*, are struggling with society, trying to find their identity in the face of oppression and frustration.

Themes and motifs in Mrabet's work are presented in a simple and straightforward style which can be attributed in part to the nature of oral narrative tradition within which he works. What Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg say about written and oral fiction may explain the difference between the two traditions: "Rhetorically, the use of writing permits the individual, creating narrative artist to add an important level of complexity and of potential irony to his story. The new level has always appeared to result from the introduction of a self-conscious narrator and an opening of ironic distance between him on one side and an opening of ironic distance between him on one side and the author and audience on the other."⁶

⁴Mrabet, *Look and Move On* 8.

⁵Mrabet, *Look and Move On* 111.

⁶Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) 53.

The "important level of complexity and of potential irony" which Scholes and Kellogg attribute to written literature is not present in Mrabet's fiction, including even *The Big Mirror*, which achieves a level of complexity unmatched in his other works. This is because Mrabet is both narrator and author of his stories, since he always relates them to Bowles. Thus, the "ironic distance" between audience and himself as author on the other, does not exist in his work. In other words, Mrabet is unable to introduce in his tales and stories what Scholes and Kellogg label as "a self-conscious narrator" separate from him as an author. Besides, as a semi-illetterate, he does not have the broader experience and education required to develop analytical complexity and sophisticated presentation of characters in his fiction. In *The Lemon*, for example, we are introduced to Abdeslam's feelings and thoughts not as they are worked out in his mind, but primarily as they are revealed in his simple words and actions. Mrabet does not analyze the processes of Abdeslam's thought and psychology in depth. Nevertheless, Mrabet is aware that his fiction should be an original, independent creation separate from life as such. He says: "When I was working on *The Big Mirror* I was thinking of nothing but making a good novel, not of the Jilala nor of my father or grandfather or my ancestors. When I'm working, I think of nothing but what I'm doing. I don't think of myself, because I am not there; I'm outside myself, in the book."⁷

Finally, it is my hope that this attempt to introduce Mrabet and his work to the reader is illuminating. Mrabet is a powerful author of compelling literary texts, who deserves attention and respect. In Mrabet's fiction, we have random characters in real environments made subjects of serious fiction aimed at the presentation of contemporary man's problems and his tragic predicaments in modern cultures of the East and the West. Through a mixture of Westerners and Muslims in his fiction, for example, the reader is given access to some Muslim's views of the West. The light which he sheds on Muslim-Western relations helps to explain the continuity of the historically negative views each of these cultures has of the other and the consequent friction between the two.

⁷Letter to the author from Paul Bowles dated April 5, 1980. The letter is Mr. Bowles's translation of Mohammed Mrabet's answers to the author's inquiries in a letter to Mrabet dated March 1, 1980.