

## Disgust and Abject in Mimouni's *Le fleuve détourné*

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### Abstract: Version française

Nous proposons dans cet article une analyse discursive et textuelle du troisième roman de Rachid Mimouni, *Le fleuve détourné* (1982). Nous tenterons de mettre en évidence la façon dont l'auteur exprime sa désillusion et son amertume à travers deux personnages. L'analyse sera menée sous l'approche de deux concepts théoriques à savoir « l'abject et l'abjection » de Julia Kristeva et « l'outrage et le dégoût » de William Ian Miller. La mise en perspective de ces deux thèmes revêt un caractère pertinent, tant ils persistent dans le vécu quotidien de la société algérienne actuelle.

Mimouni's third novel, *Le fleuve détourné* (1982) describes a population which came out of dependence and insecurity of colonialism to find itself engulfed in other horrors and other enslavements. The novel is primarily a depiction of the chronic unhappiness and a sumptuous meditation of the social, economic and intellectual crisis that Algeria passed through and the heavy burden of the post-colonial moment provides the background framework of experience to which Mimouni's third novel testifies. Quite significantly, the novel is also notable among the author's literary output for its dealing with the post-colonial Algerian turmoil and its scathing condemnation of the carelessness of the post independence Algerian political leaders. Its narrative centres on the decadence of the country and the pervasive sense of sterility and decay that extends from the stagnant, unproductive economy to the consciousness of the new ruling leaders whose narrow self-serving interests have made them incapable of creating a social policy that might

eliminate the prevailing conditions of poverty, deprivation and misery that are parcel of the colonial inheritance.

To develop the issue and highlight the author's subversive attitude towards his society and political leaders, key to this paper are two theoretical concepts in tense interplay with each other, "Abjection" by Julia Kristeva and "Disgust" by William Ian Miller. Put differently, we will approach the text from the theoretical premises provided by Julia Kristeva's notion of "Abject" as well to Ian Miller's theoretical formulation of the term "Disgust". Our reference to these theoretical concepts is to relate the notion of disgust and abjection as put forth by Julia Kristeva who thinks that abjection and disgust are two facets of the same coin. In so doing, we seek particularly, through a discursive and textual analysis to explain how and why the novel is, satiric, ironic, and subversive. The task is to identify the various abject and disgusting elements in the text and relate them to Kristeva's description of the abject and Ian Miller's disgust. But, before, it may be relevant to define these theoretical concepts informing this approach at the outset.

The first theoretical notion is what Julia Kristeva calls abjection. As it is discussed in her book entitled, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Kisteva defines the term as one of those violent, dark revolts of the human being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, and the thinkable. It beseeches worries, sickens, and rejects. The difference between an object and abject, according to Kristeva is that abjection is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, and order. It is closely linked to what does not respect borders, positions and rules, the in-between, the ambiguous, and the composite. It can also be provoked by the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the

shameless rapist, and the killer who claims he is the saviour. Abject is immoral, sinister, scheming and shady. It happens in cases of a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you,,,,,. The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes prohibition, a rule, or a law, but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them, and curbs the other's suffering for its own profits. Corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance, which is a socialised of the abject, concludes the theorist ((Kristeva. 1998:16).

Very close to Kristeva's notion of abjection stands William Ian Miller's concept of disgust provided in his book entitled, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997). In its simplest sense, the term disgust means something offensive to the taste and it is linked to foul odours and loathsome sights. It can also be a complex sentiment that can be lexically related to things and actions to be repulsive, revolting or giving rise to reactions described as revulsion, abhorrence as well as disgust. Miller states that disgust includes five domains like: sex, hygiene, death, violation of the body envelope (gore, amputations), and socio-moral violations. All of them are gathered under new generalizing theory of disgust. Miller adds that some emotions, among which disgust and its close cousin, contempt are most prominent, have intensely political significance. They work to hierarchies our political order: in some settings they constitute righteously presented claims superiority (Miller. 1997:9). Disgust uses images and suggests the sensory merely by describing the disgusting. Images of senses are indispensable to the task, senses are offended of stenches that make us retch, of tactile sensation of slime, ooze, and wriggly, slithering, creepy things that make us cringe and recoil. Miller also argues that disgust is a moral sentiment that figures in the everyday moral

discourse: along with indignation it gives voice to our strongest sentiments of moral disapprobation. It is bound up intimately with our responses to the ordinary voices of hypocrisy, betrayal, cruelty and stupidity. But disgust ranges more widely than we may wish, for it judges ugliness and deformity to be moral offences. It concerns all what revolts, what repels, not the rosy view of the world, disgust, contempt, shame, and hate all join hands in the syndrome of self-loathing (Ibid. P. 21)

Having explained the theoretical concepts of disgust and abject, the question which imposes itself here is how these transgressions and the satiric tools appear in Mimouni's text. To foreground the view of amazement and how the vision of the disgust and abjection emerge Mimouni's disillusion with the independence period, we will try to show how they appear in the novel through two characters, namely The Administrator and the anonymous Man. Read as a whole, Mimouni's third novel is dominated by a disgusting and abject atmosphere which comes to sight through the loathing of corruption, cruelty, and hypocrisy of the political leaders. So, how is disgust structured in the novel? There is no doubt that we will look closely at several scenes that provide a point of departure for describing how disgust and abject might fit in Mimouni's novel that depict a world which bad smells, loathsome sights, contempt, corruption and political abuses are ungodly present. Mimouni spares no detail in describing a population at the mercy of a few power-hungry individuals, and a society afflicted with hypocrisy and false beliefs. He exposes to critical scrutiny certain elements of Algerian's post-colonial order and depicts a world of hopelessness, randomness, moral chaos, and despair where only smell thrives making the atmosphere so poisonous and depressingly frightening. There is malnutrition and squalor everywhere in the country while those in power are oblivious of the basic needs of the people they are supposed to serve. They continue to squander money while the rest of the

population goes hungry. The narrator sees that the only changes in the country are superficial ones: the import of refrigerators, colour television, Gruyère cheese, mini-skirts and rising inflation (p 49). The same leaders who dream of building a prosperous country allow the birth rate to increase, but do not want to provide housing for the expanding population. They insist on the use of literary Arabic, which few people can understand (P. 70). In trying to rebuild the country according to their caprices, they seem to have left nothing unturned. They have even drawn straight lines on undulating hills, and diverted the course of the river (P. 49).

The characters which typify the above features of disgust and contempt are without doubt the Administrator and his Chief. Both are painted arrogant, unconcerned with others' welfare, and ineffective in combating ignorance and poverty. The opening scene of the novel shows that, like most African leaders on whom the Administrator is patterned, love grandiloquent discourses (P.9). Through the Administrator's words, Mimouni exposes the mechanisms exploited by the ruling leaders to entrench themselves in power. For instance, they convince people that power is monolithic and brooks no opposition. Not even the language escapes the taint of arbitrary rule in the narrative; the Administrator's contradictory language is in a way a reflection of his misrule when he pretends that the evil comes as much from external influences and indicts suspicious foreign interference and hidden attacks (P.51). His language is replete with deceit and tergiversation. Thus, he finds a common interest in ridiculing and intimidating the population to mute it.

The Administrator is shaped as a caricature of known African despots who are committed to bizarre political postures and rely on power acquired and sustained solely through violent coercion. Mimouni exposes the character's violent intolerance of opposition and his urge to perpetuate himself in power. The Administrator's

appeal to violence allows him to stay in power in spite of the disasters he inflicts on the progress and stability of his country. To divert people from the state's disastrous mismanagement, he keeps luring people about some suspected foreign threats which can hinder "the national development" (pp, 50-51). Concretely, the Administrator's words remain mere powerful statements of outrage, disgust, and betrayal of popular aspirations. Moreover, disgust in Mimouni's *Le Fleuve détourné* comes out through a drastic denunciation of economic exclusion and cultural erasure that engulfs the protagonist in a world without mercy and pity. In one word, it makes his life totally abject.

Abjection is displayed in the Man's journey of an aggravated situation of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and of an exceptional sensibility of disgust, primarily provoked by an arbitrary arrest and later by several spectacles of humiliation and violence. The Man's mad trip contests the existential primacy of the emblematic "impasse" which is startling and pessimistic. It questions the very existence of the space to the point of completely reversing its initial symbolism. Mimouni's main character wonders "why has the national political universe become so closed, so crushing?" To arrive at an answer to this question, Mimouni examines the concept of "national consciousness" and the manipulations of nationalist sentiment that was the hallmark of the post independence officials' ideology.

Mimouni uses the main character as a destabilising force of irony to insist that politics is the rejection, contestation, disruption of the shared norms. Mimouni's criticism has long been centrally concerned with the exposure of the false consciousness embedded in the ideologies of various discourses by official leaders. As an illustration, the narrator's voice is self-incriminating and absurd. It tells two stories, that of prisoners confined in a camp because their «spermatozoïdes sont

subversifs» and the story of the narrator, himself imprisoned in the camp, and who claims that his «présence en ce lieu n'est que le résultat d'un regrettable malentendu". The story of the detainees does not develop as a narrative. It should be read as a microcosm of the new company that the administration is trying to establish. On the contrary, that of the narrator is so tempestuous, puzzling, and somehow disgusting. He was born in a peasant family which had been forced to exile because of the French expropriation. Later on, he works as a shoemaker and marries Houria whom he soon leaves pregnant in order to participate in the Algerian War for independence. We learn that after the bombing of a camp by the French army during the War of Independence, the character-narrator was suffering from amnesia. A few years later, he recovered his memory and returns "home" to assert his identity and meet his wife and son.

Abjection is strongly embedded in the delineation of the Mimouni's anonymous main character and the foul coating of his society. The Man travels through an absurd nightmare where old values have given way to a mentality that sets up the lies and demagoguery as ubiquitous rules. The unnamed protagonist faces several violent, corrupt and lusting for power social abjections. He sometimes seems to be outside and distinct from the follies he describes, either the descriptions he gives are self-betraying or the absurdities he views are allegorical. For example, we first encounter the Man in chapter one in the company of many detainees. Suddenly, the voice of the narrator breaks this circle of death to recount the story of an ordinary man who leans away from typical social patterns towards mystery and the unexpected. This use of the fantastic to describe the human body and all its processes is well illustrated, first and foremost, in the portrayal of the main character's strange and unbelievable story. The absurdity of the tale resides in the strategy of novelistic space that Mimouni

adapts by making the opening of the narrative coincide with its closure and the text is thus suspended between two points based one in the other.

The protagonist is the sole survivor of the bombing attack by French soldiers. It is from the world of the dead that he returns back to his people. He tells his story to a circle of friends that attended the prisoner camp in which he finds himself after killing his wife's predators. Equally abject is the fact that his asocial friends are all completely out of touch with reality that they evacuate each in his own way, in suicide, illness, resignation and oblivion. At the end of the narrative, when he finds his son, the latter is corrupted by the necessity of survival; the son denies his father's paternity and stands as the representative of the new generation that remains without a future, which looks at a shining future without being able to find it. Even more abject and monstrously aberrant is the protagonist's alienation, not only because the authorities do not listen to him, but also because even his closest family doesn't accept in any case to awaken the ghosts of the past, it is better to leave them buried. For instance, Ahmed, his cousin, the Mayor of the village talks to him in strange terms when he goes to regulate his administrative situation (P.57). His wife prefers him dead because she is afraid of losing her war widow's pension. Therefore, the man should assume and keep his status of a dead and becomes so disgusted by the answers of his fellow humans that he is left no other option but to converse with the dead. Mimouni reminds us the Man is a desperate, a suffering creature and thus in some ways discerning our pity. At the same time, he makes the episode seem both abject and somewhat funny when he describes how the man during his efforts to find a careful ear, engages in a serious discussion with Si Cherif, his Commandant during the Algerian Liberation War (P.81). It is the disgust with his society that has driven him to

escape into the world of the dead entirely divorced from the real world. The story takes a fantastic twist when the man finds that Si Cherif remembers him, understands his plight, and answers that he could do nothing for him. In this scene, the grotesque is suggested by the idea that the visible world is incomprehensible and unregenerate, and that the individual is floundering in a sea of contradictions and congruities. The shocking and rude scene stands for the author's will to present a world devoid of justice where the idealistic innocent suffers.

The other feature that also helps make the story abject is Mimouni's stress on the Man's gradual moral degradation. The Man's account begins badly, but his situation eventually becomes worse and worse. The man starts his tragedy by a foolish misjudgement: "His presence in the camp is erroneous". However, its humour seems less obvious because the smiles it provokes are often tinged with guilt. We cannot help being amused by some of the Administrator's predicaments. The abject appears when the Man is physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. More bizarre still in some ways than the physical degradation of Mimouni's Man undergoes is his steady spiritual or emotional decline as he becomes even more nihilist by the end of the story. In the beginning, the man remains admirably courageous, motivated in his thought and feelings despite the profound change in his community. By the second half of the story, he becomes more and more aggressive, impatient, more threatening. His transformation, in other words, has become both physical and spiritual. Thus, one of the outrageous scenes in the shocking story occurs when the man faces his wife's physical metamorphosis and her decline (P.167). Her narration suggests not only lack of decency but shows the height of incongruity and the farcical shame she endured bodily. The abjection of the Man reaches its apex when he loses his temper and feels rage over when Houria tells him her horrible

adventure. A bit later still, full of resentment, bitterness, guilt, shame, and vengefulness, the man tries to get out of this situation but comes the tragic death of his wife's predators who in their wordless pathos, are pure victims of their desires, excesses, and lust. Even in their death, they remain grotesque, as they: « tâtonnaient, rampaient sur le tapis, comme des vermisseaux. Fou de terreur et de souffrance, criaient et suppliaient. Comme des vermisseaux. Comme des porcs. Trois d'entre eux avaient déféqué dans leurs pantalons" (P.181). The quote from Mimouni's novel stands for an invitation to death and this is exemplified by the man's killing of his wife's aggressors. It indicates that the Man plays the game to satisfy and revenge his wife, and in the foolishness of the moment, he feels happy for performing the heroic things that were expected all the time. But confronted by the true reality, he realizes the heavy price he has to pay for his act.

By the end of the story, then, the Man has come to seem less ideally human, not only physically, but also morally in his emotional and mental responses. Once more, the full abject effects and abjection is elaborated through a failure to meet the Administrator and recover his lost identity. The Man's decline and loss are not completely felt until the wrapping up of the tale. The novel ends with this sudden descent into hell in which the narrator finds himself suddenly and profoundly alone. Therefore, we think that the "I" of the narrator can be seen as a nickname, ie, the name par excellence of 'no man'. The name in its signified and signifier is linked to either death, or a complete absence. We mean that it becomes identical to the death and absence. Though we already know from the very beginning that nobody can restore him what he was dispossessed of.

In addition to the abject life of the Man and by focusing in his fiction on marginalized members of his society, Mimouni introduces a critique of the power structures in place and

indicts poverty, urban abjection and the absence of spirit and hope in the Algerian society where unsanitary living conditions, long trails of dirt, lined walls, hay heaps, and filth are daily plethora metaphors. Foul smelling excrements with its stench expand to capture the odour of decay and poison the reader's senses. Such images are uttered by some voices and all of them condemn political oppression, militarism and poverty. The world is full with disgusting sights which arises disgust and shame. People are doomed by the strong smells from the lagoon. The odours offend because of their contaminating powers. The images carry enormously more social and moral significance. Disgust is prompted by contact with a contaminating substance, and more important, by witnessing shameful and disgusting behaviours of people forced to violate ethic norms. As an illustration, some families are obliged to do something disgusting, they are compelled to defecate inside the house where they live. But Mimouni is careful to show that these people do it not by choice, they are dirty by necessity. The author puts forth such an awful stench that no one would attend. The coming out of an horrible stench that one could hardly bear is shameful not because it forces people to violate ethic norms, what is revolting is rather the behaviour of the authorities that let people without any sanitary conditions.

As a conclusion, we may sum up that Mimouni divides the Algerian society into two categories characters. The first category of characters in *Le fleuve détourné* is made up of individuals whose main purpose is to safeguard their high positions and lead a pompous life. Mimouni's narrative foregrounds their loathing of corruption, cruelty, and hypocrisy that appear in the novel through the theme of disgust which is bound up intimately with the author's response to the ordinary vices of hypocrisy, cruelty and stupidity of the ruling leaders. In the second category, stands the majority of the population

whose rights as citizens had not only been abused by the state administration, but completely eroded. They feel betrayed by the government and there is no prospect for them. Unfortunately, more than two decades after the publication of Mimouni's *Le fleuve détourné*, the Algerian state and the ruling leaders' disgust and contempt persist and is still alive making the population's daily lives completely abject.

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