

## II

### *Retour à Thyna* : A Female Epic?

#### Title

Hédi Bouraoui's *Retour à Thyna* (1995, 1997) is an extraordinary novel, for want of a better term, but it really breaks all the rules of the genre. Henry James once said that the novel is truer to its form "in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould", and therefore its future is unlimited ("Preface", *PL* 7).

If *Bangkok Blues* is based on an exploration of the culture of the Far East, *Retour à Thyna* is a return to origins which ends with its beginning, the *conte* of the founding of Sfax (the Roman Tafarura, from the Berber "tafrura" "fortifications") told by Al-Fdaoui, paradoxically the murderer/accidental executioner of Kateb, the writer-*trublion*-"shit-disturber", whose violent death, a fall from the ramparts of Borj Ennar, is the puzzle to be decrypted, decoded in the course of the work. The "detectives" are his friends, his alter ego and heir, the journalist Mansour ("the victorious one"), and his cousin and intended bride whom he has raped when she was fifteen, Zitouna ("the olive" or "olive tree"). The concept of "twinning", or doubling, the characters continues, but whereas Koï embodied « l'Autre », the Other, Zitouna is, in the phrase of Évelyne Sullerot, « l'autre semblable », the similar other (as all women are to all men). Not only are the heroines alter egos of the male protagonists, they are also "twinned" with their own sisters, Koï with the reckless Joy, Zitouna with the mercurial Ahlem. By the same token, Virgilius is doubled by the *homme moyen sensuel* Pierre Blinduel, and the chaste Mansour by the dissipated poet Kateb.

Virgilius is a citizen of the world, who has lived on three continents, Africa, Europe, and North America, whereas Mansour refuses to move to France, unlike many of his contemporaries, and never travels beyond Tunis. The “roots” he returns to are not geographical, but temporal, for he revisits the ancient city of Taparura.

Zitouna is in a sense what the text is all about. She is both subject of the epic and its literal and symbolic source. At the same time she functions as the epic hero/ine who creates, or recreates, the dream of the ideal city. She identifies with Thyna, or the Latin Thaenae, « Thyna, ville romaine en ruine près de Aïn Fallat... » (32). Aïn Fallat is the country retreat for Zitouna, and it is the site of the profitable olive groves. Zitouna’s permanent home is Picville, a southern suburb of Sfax (south of the Médina, the old Arab walled city), while Mansour lives in Moulinville, a suburb north of the Médina. Living in Picville, Zitouna is closest to the southern countryside of Aïn Fallat. Her name, Zitouna, also sounds very like Thyna, or Thaenae,<sup>1</sup> and her character represents a postmodernist variation on the age-old identification of woman with country, the *mère-patrie*, or, here, the *mère-ville*. This identification has been exemplified in one way or another, for instance, by Willa Cather’s Antonia Shimerda in *My Antonia* (1918), Scott Fitzgerald’s “fresh green breast of the New World” suggested by both of his female characters, Daisy Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and, closer to Zitouna, Kateb Yacine’s Nedjma in the novel of the same name (1956). But Bouraoui’s is a radical revisioning of this woman as trope for the country. Zitouna is an active heroine with a mind of her own who refuses to be a passive Muse, or object of worship. If she does not tell her own story, she does recount and interpret the tale written by Kateb and left as his heritage. She is at the very least the ideal reader or ideal critic, and the most forceful promoter of Kateb’s « écrits », or writings. Moreover, as the narrative proceeds, there are indications that she increasingly finds her own voice.

### Structure: « coïncée entre géographie et histoire »

We are told that Taparura/Sfax, capital of the south of Tunisia and center of commerce, is « coïncée entre géographie et histoire » (65). But Sfax’s geography is its history, and the converse. The walled rectangular Médina, with its seven gates (mystic number – seven days of creation?) and grande Mosquée, is surrounded by the European city (Christians and Jews), the Bled Essouri, with its church and synagogues. Françoise Naudillon

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<sup>1</sup> In his « Épilogue » to *Retour à Thyna*, François Bruzzo also suggests that “Zitouna - Thyna” is an anagram (221). I had not yet read the Epilogue when I noticed the echo.

suggests that the gates represent « les sept piliers de la sagesse » (157), and Dorra Chammam suggests either « les sept péchés capitaux » or « les sept étapes qui mènent à la lumière » (n.p.).

Seven of the ten sections, or chapters, of the novel take their titles and locations from the seven gates: Bab Ed-Diwane, the principal gate, the Porte du Conseil « qui s'ouvrait sur la mer » (18), or more loosely, of poetry (*Diman*); Bab Bhar, the Porte de la Mer or, more loosely, the modern city, Bled Essouri or the French town; Bab Jebli, the gate to the countryside, closed by the French in 1881 to prevent the flight of the Tunisian rebels; Bab El Farh, nearest the Marché Central, where Zitouna recounts the tale of Kateb; Bab El-Kasbah, where Zitouna wants a cultural center bringing home their past to the commercially-minded Taparurians, whereas Kateb wanted it to become a literary café like Les Deux Magots in Paris, where he could give readings and publicize his writings; Bab El-Garbi, the gate to the West, that ambiguous site of success, or of exile and alienation; and Bab Echargui, « cette porte au Levant qui débouche sur la route de la capitale » (153). Section VIII, however, incorporates the real « Retour à Thyna », where the love of Mansour and Zitouna finally finds expression, isolated from the patriarchy, the ruling powers and their politics.

Of the other three sections, IV, « La Route d'Agareb », uses the movement of Hédi Faker's statue away from the center of town to the countryside as a trope for all the ills of post-independence enumerated at the beginning of the section: the departure of the « colons », the French colonizers, and, in a movement from public to private, Kateb's death, and the future of this nation « coincée entre histoire et géographie » (65). Section IX, « Borj Ennar », is the site of Kateb's death, « L'Innocence sacrifiée ». Section X, the Conclusion, brings us back to Zitouna, « Sur les Traces de l'Olivier ». Significantly, it brings Mansour, who has been working in Tunis, back to Thyna/Zitouna, in a kind of return of the prodigal son. And Zitouna breaks totally with patriarchal tradition, as she has done by enacting and telling Kateb's tale in the Marché Central, by proposing to Mansour, and « La Paix [est] dans les cœurs » (65; 191).

It is important to remember that gates not only permit penetration into the walled city, but also are openings to the outside world. To the East is the Mediterranean Sea, over which all the successive conquerors and colonizers of Tunisia have come, from the Phoenicians in ancient times, who founded Carthage and may have first imported the business mentality – they were the merchants and traders of the ancient world – the Romans, the Arabs, the Norman prince Roger de Sicile, again the Arabs when Abdel el-Moumène « la rendit à l'Islam » (173), the Spanish in the sixteenth century, then the Ottoman Empire, then a period of piracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries « jusqu'au traité du Bardo » (173), then the French in 1881 until the 1950s, when the action of the novel begins, though

for the most part it takes place *after* independence (1956), therefore in the '60s and '70s. Robert Elbaz quotes this entire passage to prove that this is a « roman véritablement historique », though he claims that it oscillates « entre l'autobiographique et l'historique » (143). Because « la capitale du Sud ... se fait une réputation dans les activités lucratives du commerce sans trop se soucier de son héritage culturel » (173), Kateb and, later, Mansour and others insist upon « ce retour sur soi, la traversée du désert du temps » (173).

### Map of the Novel

The structure of the novel is identical with the map of Sfax/Taparura. It breaks with the linear, sequential narrative of the traditional novel, and adopts instead a circular pattern: in its end is its beginning, to paraphrase the Bible. A similar *apparent* circularity was already at work in *Bangkok Blues*, as we have seen. Following the plan of the circular Médina and surrounding European town, the narrative moves cyclically, between the two pillars of Kateb's tale of the sultan's son who is ultimately killed for his abuse of innocence and virginity, performed by Kateb's adored "victim", Zitouna; and the variant on the traditional tale of the founding of Sfax/Taparura recounted by the sinister Al-Fdaoui in which a sultan (presumably) tries to escape a dreamed-of attack on him by fleeing Kairouan, the then-capital, and pretending to be a workman in Thyna. He is slapped in the face during a ceremony of circumcision for attempting to offer more wealth to the child's family than a workman could conceivably possess. Returning to Kairouan, he gathers his army and completely levels Thyna – surely an overreaction, as the narrative voice drolly comments. The sultan then moves the inhabitants of Thyna to a new site which is to become Taparura, or at least its center, the walled city of the Médina. Two crafty Thynaean, father and son, contrive to steal two gates from Kairouan, in partial compensation for the destruction of their home, and install them at Taparura. So Taparura is already partly constructed of the remains of the Roman Thyna.

### "The Personal is the Political": Feminist Motto

The feminist motto that "The personal is the political" fits this text like a glove, and Bouraoui moves easily back and forth between the love story of Kateb/Zitouna/Mansour and the love of Kateb, Zitouna, and Mansour for Taparura, and for its ancient forerunner Thyna. There is a strong identification, in other words, between the locale and the individual characters. Thyna was discovered buried under layers of sand. By the same token, the characters are layered or masked, whether for good or evil. The layers must

be stripped, the masks removed. Mansour's mask is shyness, reserve, covering deep passion, Zitouna's an ambiguity rooted in the secret of her violation which she has kept so long. Kateb's public role as voice of social conscience is betrayed by his private debauchery.

### A. La Médina

The Médina is « *la Médina* » and is indeed seen in female terms. Images of sexual penetration proliferate on both the public and private levels. The Médina is a kind of womb. It is « *enceinte* » – surrounded, but also pregnant – by « *le sour* » (masculine), the fortifications. Bouraoui makes the analogy explicit when he writes of the desire to « *ramener l'esprit de Thyna dans l'enceinte même de la médina à laquelle elle appartient* » (163). The image is close to that of the *hortus clusus* in the medieval Court of Love tradition. Bab El-Kasbah is viewed as « *le lieu idéal pour accueillir la ville-mère dans le sein de la ville-fille... Pour redevenir un fœtus, Thyna a dû mourir symboliquement* » (163-4). Indeed, the novel is replete with womb/tomb images, alternating births, deaths, and rebirths or resurrections. Zitouna experiences a spiritual death as a result of her violation (and defloration), but she awakens, paradoxically, to a new, liberated self. She is, in fact, both liberated and liberating of all the social strictures, reinforced by ritual, which prohibit sexual activity before, or outside of, marriage. Kateb dies physically but is, arguably, resurrected in the person of his victim Zitouna and his friend Mansour who both endeavor to separate the value of the writings from the messy real life of the author. As D. H. Lawrence wrote, “Never trust the author, trust the tale” (13).

### B. La Mer, la Mère, et la Pieuvre

The map image of Taparura is « *sous forme d'une pieuvre aux tentacules plongeant dans les jardins, les oliveraies, les villages et le désert* » (65). Bouraoui has pointed out that the head of the octopus is Sfax, which also corresponds to the circle of the old city, surrounded by walls with the seven gates leading to the outside. The octopus is a fitting image for a people who derive both their triumphs and their « *catastrophes* » from the sea: « *La famille, la terre et la mer sont leurs trois sources fondamentales* » (165). These sources all represent a feminine principle, connecting, suggestively, the octopus and womb images: the earth is a mother; the sea in French, « *la mer* », is usually equated with the mother, « *la mère* »; and the mother is the very center and heart of the family. When Kateb dies, his body is found with his head turned towards the sea, a metaphorical return to the womb, which suggests that he has indeed willed his own death, and his feet towards the Médina, as if he were fleeing the rigid and oppressive traditions of the

past. Perhaps he can only escape them in death, repair the schism between his public rebellion and his private internalization of patriarchal evils which he manifests in his sex life and various addictions.

Significantly, it is the woman, Zitouna, who does not reject the past as monolithic, but seeks a return to an even earlier past, to origins and sources, while divesting herself of the oppressive structures of the patriarchy. It is no accident that she is a descendant of the Berbers, who are probably the earliest peoples traceable in the Maghreb, before the Arab invasions. Zitouna's coloring, radiant blonde hair and olive-green eyes, reflects this background<sup>2</sup>. In the Berber tradition, women are equal to men and rule the family. It is, in fact, the woman who chooses her mate and proposes to him; Zitouna is recalling this egalitarian past in proposing to Mansour.

The octopus, « la pieuvre », like the sea, is feminine;<sup>3</sup> it comes from the sea, and, moreover, it is a delicacy when beaten tender and served to the family. (The « bastonnade » of the child Mansour by the French school-teacher, on his father's orders, echoes the octopus ritual: the child is beaten until "tender", and solaced only by his mother's love. [24]) The octopus is thus linked with all the food rituals associated with the major sacred and ceremonial events of the novel: circumcisions, weddings, and funerals. It is the object, in fact, of a ritual within a larger ritual, and is an expression of community values and aspirations. The weddings on the human level subtend a mythic « Mariage permanent entre terre et mer qui intensifie leur passion pour leur cité »... (134).

But the octopus also has some negative implications, for its tentacles reach out in a greedy abuse of power and authority. The government is likened to a swollen octopus, in Zitouna's eyes. The tentacles also destroy the purity of the countryside, polluting and infecting the environment: « Les tentacules avalant, par grosses bouchées, tout l'espace vert, se plantent dans le cœur d'un passé prestigieux de plus en plus empoisonné » (163).

### **Fragmentation and Integration: Towards Transculturalism**

Circularity in a narrative, as in a geographical space, is frequently described as either female or Oriental; here it is a little bit of both. There

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<sup>2</sup> According to one theory, the Berbers may have intermarried with Crusaders who remained in the Maghreb, further suggesting a multicultural, multi-religious background. Tunisia has the smallest proportion of Berbers at 10%, Algeria at 30%, and Morocco, which has mountains where the Berbers tend to gravitate, at 60%.

<sup>3</sup> There is, however, a masculine noun for it, « le poulpe », but it seems to me Bouraoui more often uses the feminine noun.

is no Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end; there is in fact no closure. We are tending towards a marriage at the end, of Zitouna and Mansour, and towards a reaffirmation of what is to be treasured in the distant past, but the novel ends, as it begins, *in medias res*: « Jet de pierres »... (11). In some ways the narrative strategies are postmodernist – a mystery which is ultimately unsolvable; masquerading, carnivalesque characters à la Bakhtin, an interrogation of history by fiction, etc. – but as a whole it is not postmodernist because it is teleological. It uses fragmentation, but invites integration – on the part of Zitouna and Mansour, but also, most importantly, on the part of the reader. *Retour à Thyna* is intensely self-reflexive: it reflects not only on the uses and abuses of the past, but also on the role of the writer in heightening our awareness of where we have been, and where we may be going in the coming millenium. Bouraoui is eager to transcend the personal and *locally* political in a vision best described, in his own terms, as “transcultural”, that is, transcending single cultures by building bridges between them.<sup>4</sup>

The opening epigraph is by Saint Augustine, – himself a Maghrebian born, and a Christian – from *The City of God*, the dream of an ideal city: « Citoyens de la seule cité terrestre dont le règne est l’unique but de tous les efforts, que pouvaient-ils aimer sinon la gloire? » The epigraph sets the tone for Zitouna’s, and later Mansour’s quest for an ideal, natural city of the past, Thyna.

### Epic: The Ideal City

This quest to found – or refound – an ideal, or nearly ideal city suggests that the model for this narrative, which is avowedly of a *genre mixte* – incorporating elements of lyric poetry, journal, confessional, reportage, history, detective story (*roman policier*) – is above all the epic, about the founding – or in this case, refounding – of a city-state. A couple of epigrams drawn from the Tunisian epic, *La Geste Hilaliennne*, translated by Lucienne Saâda, point in this direction. But Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in particular, springs to mind, a Roman model as Thyna was a Roman city. On his way to found Rome, Aeneas is distracted by Dido, the Phoenician queen who founded the city of Carthage, whose site still remains near Tunis. Homer’s Ulysses was also detoured and tempted on the Isle of the Lotus-Eaters, probably the modern island of Djerba in Tunisia, so both epic heroes, the Greek Ulysses and the Trojan Aeneas, are distracted by women in what is now modern Tunisia.

But *Retour à Thyna*, as a self-reflexive, very self-conscious narrative, revisions and interrogates the epic/quest form. It also incorporates tales from

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<sup>4</sup> Bouraoui defines “Transculturalism” in his texts, *Créaculture I* and *II* and in *The Canadian Alternative*.

the oral tradition – the epic, it is important to remember, began as tales told orally – documents, and letters, from the early eighteenth-century epistolary form of the novel, as clues – notably Ahlem’s furious letter to Kateb and his inflammatory reply to a woman whose counterpart in Kateb’s tale is *Ablem Ennar* (“dream of fire”) – and whose hair is flaming red; this reply may help to trigger his death.

In the epic, women are generally victims – or doormats, more flatteringly known as “warrior’s playthings”. They are there either to tempt the hero and be abandoned by him, like Dido, or to watch from the sidelines and applaud, like Aude in the *Chanson de Roland*, the French *chanson de geste*, who simply crumples and dies on learning of Roland’s heroic death.

Zitouna refuses the role of victim. Yes, she is violated, victimized by Kateb, but she rises above her victimization, promotes and interprets his writings, and breaks with patriarchal structures which dictate, for instance, blood as public proof of the bride’s virginity on the wedding night. Not for Zitouna this part of the marriage ritual, nor, presumably, the orgiastic feastings and collections of material offerings to which Fathia submits when she marries Sadok, Mansour’s and Kateb’s friend.

### A Female Hero?

Is Zitouna herself, perhaps, the epic hero rewritten as epic heroine? Certainly, Bouraoui raises the possibility. She is the active partner in the couple Mansour/Zitouna, and hers is the dream of a resurrected Thyna within the walls of the Médina, near Bab El-Kasbah. The epic hero/heroine must descend into hell, as all three of our principals do. The epic hero, like Zitouna, does not tell his/her own tale. There is a kind of push-pull between Zitouna’s forging her own identity, and the attempts of all the males – and to a certain extent, the females – to construct her according to their own needs and desires. The three potential “villains”, Tahar, Sadok, and Dahak, are all, to a greater or lesser degree, in love with her. These three are contrasted to the triad/trinity of principals, Kateb, Mansour, and Zitouna. Zitouna is also one of three sisters, so trinities proliferate.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Elbaz sees the characters as « des personnages-idées », and stresses that they are not « ronds » (presumably E.M. Forster’s distinction between “flat” and “round” characters) (148). Françoise Naudillon, on the other hand, sees them as psychologically complex: « Bouraoui excelle à peindre ces personnages avec les délicates nuances d’un portraitiste. Au delà des caractérisations nécessaires à la fiction... l’écrivain refuse toute caricature et s’offre des développements d’une grande finesse sur la psychologie de ses personnages » (156). I agree with Naudillon, and would say that it is possible to represent both ideas and psychology. But it is up to the reader to re-create the psychology from the clues given.

If Zitouna is not the primordial female artist, she is at least the decoder. She asks, « Quel est le sens caché du conte? » (105). She recognizes that there is « la matière à décrypter » (105). Zitouna, like Mansour, is in the role of detective trying to uncover the reasons for Kateb's murder (?)/suicide (?). She recognizes her sister Ahlem's name in Kateb's posthumous text and begins to piece together the jigsaw puzzle. Did he want, she wonders, to « indiquer une piste »? (106)<sup>6</sup>. If Kateb has mixed myth, oneiric vision, the fantasmagoric with fiction, while Mansour is a journalist who deals with facts, Zitouna tries to bridge the gap between the fantastic and the factual. She is the most active force in reconstituting Kateb's story and its significance. The possibility of viewing *Retour à Thyna* as a female quest novel remains enticing and seductive.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On a first reading, one might think that Zitouna was responsible for the marginal scribbles in Kateb's conte, this text « noirci de surcharges, des notes éparses, de commentaires décousus, de fragments de pensée inondant même les marges » (106). It is somewhat disappointing to realize that the scribbles are, of course, Kateb's own editing and revisions, discordant and hallucinatory.

<sup>7</sup> There are suggestive resemblances to another twentieth-century re-visioning of the quest narrative, though still in masculine terms, and that is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), whom many have seen as the archetypal American hero. The title imparts an epic dimension to Gatsby's quest for the so-called "American Dream", which involves a transcendence of class and immigrant status to attain a myth he mistakenly identifies with the shallow Daisy Buchanan. (American literature, too, is in a sense a postcolonial discourse and has afforded models for emerging nations in the twentieth century.) Kateb's and Mansour's quest for cultural integration and identity is hampered by the deformations effected first by French colonization, and later, after independence, by a revolution coopted by the bourgeoisie. Daisy Buchanan, however, could never herself be a questor; she is not even a worthy object of the quest. But Zitouna is in quest of a Tunisian "Dream", for want of a better term, the dream of Thyna. Both novels are structured according to a « retour aux sources ». The ending of *Gatsby* evokes the enchantment of the Dutch sailors who first saw the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (182). *Retour à Thyna*, similarly, ends with the legend of the destruction of Thyna and the creation of Taparura/Sfax.

Gatsby dies in a swimming pool on a raft tracing a circle of blood, comparable to Phlebas the Phoenician in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), who "was once handsome and tall as you", who dies in a whirlpool, sometimes seen as a symbol of the cyclical, and by extension of resurrection. The water imagery suggests a hope for renewed fertility in Gatsby's Valley of Ashes. If there is resurrection for him, it is through Nick Carraway who comes to share his vision, and to tell the tale ("carraway" is a seed, in keeping with the fertility imagery). Kateb, very possibly himself a descendant of the Phoenicians, falls (or is pushed) off a tower, with his head towards the sea, the great mother, not towards the arid desert. If there is immortality, it is through Mansour, who lives to tell the tale, but also through Zitouna, who disseminates Kateb's writings. Gatsby dies at the end of his novel, Kateb at the beginning

### “Triangular Desire”: Mansour, Kateb, Zitouna

The three principal characters – Mansour, Kateb, and Zitouna – represent what René Girard has called “triangular desire” (*Mensonge poétique et vérité romanesque*)<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, their experiences of violence and fragmentation are parallel. Kateb’s death results in part from violence associated with sexuality and his rape of Zitouna. His funeral, like his sister’s wedding, is a traditional ceremony, with one important exception: « C’est elle [Zitouna] qui a tout organisé » (72). The women, contrary to tradition, join the procession unveiled. She is rebellious, then, in regard to the ceremonies we witness.

Even the quiet Mansour knows what it is to experience a quasi-sexual violation: his father has encouraged the schoolmaster to strap him (the « bastonnade ») for going to the circus instead of to school. He has committed « l’erreur d’enfreindre l’ordre paternel » (24). The French schoolmaster is a sadist who, with the complicity of the father, derives sexual satisfaction from this act: « ... plus ses larmes coulent, plus le tortionnaire s’adonne à sa symbolique pénétration » (23), an allusion also to the complicity of the bourgeoisie with the occupying French. Thus, Mansour knows firsthand what it is like to be in the “female” position of powerlessness, as Kateb does when, as a child, he is circumcised by his uncle, Zitouna’s father, against his will.

This image of violation, penetration is repeated with relation to the country, moving between the personal and the political: « ... son histoire [est] fissurée par l’Histoire » (12), as Zitouna is “fissured” by Kateb. The *literal* fissure is the « fossé » of Scipio Africanus, located near Thyna, which divided the African continent into north and south. Thus, circumcision is equated with defloration, death, the « fossé », alienation or exile.

Although he is a survivor, unlike Kateb, could Mansour ever take charge without Zitouna, effect a return to origins in order to come to terms with the present and build a better future? His passivity forces Zitouna to become the aggressor in their relationship: does she test him, is it a « test imposé du dedans à Zitouna pour pousser Mansour à sortir de son mutisme et de sa réserve? » (112). Significantly, she challenges him immediately after she has adopted the male role as conteur of Kateb’s posthumous tale. At the conclusion of her « performance », after she becomes dizzy and falls, she goes to Mansour « pour le nommer, par le geste, héros du jour » (112).

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<sup>8</sup> As we have seen, there are other triads/trinities in the narrative, the three potential suspects in Kateb’s death, Tahar, Sadok, and Dahak, and, on the female side, Zitouna is the oldest of three sisters; the youngest, Ahlem, is another potential suspect in Kateb’s death. Is transculturalism meeting transreligion through the mystic numbers?

Zitouna, however, seems to be the *female* hero of that day, but she is also the “Namer”, another term for the Poet.

Mansour is, for the most part, the central consciousness, in the Jamesian sense. He is also both alter ego and heir to Kateb, whose disturbed personality provokes an early death. But Mansour is a survivor. Both Kateb and Mansour are verbal artists, the former a Baudelairean romantic, seeking poetry in excess, the fantastic, addiction, “trips” « n’importe où hors du monde ». The ultimate “trip” is death. Mansour, on the other hand, is a journalist who strives to achieve distance from his material. The two modes of fantasy and realism interpenetrate after Kateb’s death.

When we first meet the teenaged Mansour, he sees himself as *not* « un roseau flexible » (echo of Pascal) bowing to the French presence. Sadok flees to his home, the isles of Kerkennah, Tahar – soon to be a prosperous businessman – characteristically flees to Tunis, and Dahak – soon to become an actor – takes refuge near the gate of the Theatre. Mansour, on the other hand, escapes to the Médina, to his friend Kateb’s.

“Mansour” means victorious, “Hachem” timid, so he contains contradictions. He is very susceptible to female influences, largely as a result of mother love, « la chaleur maternelle ». She represents an « Amour inconditionnel sans la moindre trace d’affectation », and he has been spoiled (15). The softness of Mansour’s mother’s love is sharply contrasted to the paternal tyranny, both of his own father and of Zitouna’s father with Kateb. There is, in fact, a strongly feminine side to Mansour, which makes him a fitting partner for Zitouna, who assumes some so-called “masculine” attributes in rebelling against the traditional female condition in her world. What we may have at the end, in fact, is an androgynous couple, whose “feminine” and “masculine” traits complement each other.

Mansour meets Zitouna for the first time at her cousin/supposed fiancé Kateb’s house, and immediately falls in love with her. Mansour barricades himself, typically, behind books and reads of distant lands, instead of contending with Kateb for Zitouna (22). He becomes a journalist (taking refuge in facts?) and continues to love Kateb, « de toute l’ambiguïté de son cœur » (26).

If Mansour rejects the patriarchy, it is by cultivating a personality and sensitivity that will never tyrannize over others: « Rares sont ceux qui possèdent la force de s’effacer pour laisser briller les autres prêts à éblouir les incrédules et les innocents » (135). Mansour is not aggressive, not a conqueror, save of himself (135). Rejecting the patriarchy necessarily implies rejecting Taparurian materialism. He prefers « l’art du verbe » to « celui de thésauriser l’argent » (138). Words, not money, are to become the new “currency” in Mansour’s world. Mansour’s passivity strengthens the role of the heroine. And she may prefer Mansour to Kateb for his very

malleability: strong heroines may not need strength from their men, but rather sensitivity.

Mansour's family, in Moulinville, lives at a crossroads « de deux routes, l'une menant vers la gare et la ville européenne, et l'autre vers Bab El-Jebli et la Médina » (139). This location is perhaps a sign of Mansour's entrapment, in which he must choose which road to follow – or neither. His first meeting alone with Zitouna, significantly, occurs in neither the European/French nor the Arab setting, but in the ruins of the old Roman town of Thyna. Zitouna urges him to « consacrer un article à l'origine et à la splendeur de cet endroit sacré qui lui tient à cœur » (157). She sees that Mansour's weapon will be words, not physical violence.

Kateb is a continuous presence in their lives. If he has written the script which they perform, it is characteristically fluid and ambiguous, asking more questions than it answers. It is up to Mansour and Zitouna not only to decrypt or decode it, but to face the consequences. These three, we are constantly reminded, along with the marginalized Amar and Moshé, « n'ont jamais trempé leurs mains dans l'eau bourbeuse des gains et du crime » (173-4). On Thursday, the « jour des morts » (Holy Thursday?), Mansour visits Kateb's grave, on the road to Gabès, murmuring a few verses of poetry by Aboul Hassan Sahnoun: « Il y a en moi un tel désir de Toi/que si la pierre le supportait/Elle serait fendue/Comme par un feu violent » (180). He is thinking both of Zitouna, and of Kateb in his tomb. The split rock sounds like an echo of Christ's resurrection when the disciples go to his tomb and find the rock rolled away, the body gone, possibly referring to Kateb's resurrection through Mansour and Zitouna. But the split rock could also refer to the « violations » of Zitouna, Mansour, and Kateb (as well as to the fossé of Scipio Africanus). The « feu violent » could refer to Ahlem, whose name appears in Kateb's tale as Ahlem *Ennar*, meaning fire, which is also the name of the site of Kateb's death. At Sadok's wedding Mansour has learned from Amar that Ahlem sent a letter to Kateb: « Cette nuit-là, je lui ai apporté un couffin de figues et une lettre d'Ahlem, la sœur de Zitouna » (112). Suspicions begin to arise that Kateb has committed a kind of suicide, using Ahlem as an instrument by inciting her to kill him in order to avenge her sister's honor. When Ahlem drowns by swimming out to sea, Mansour « se sent vide comme une coquille remplie de sable sans la pulsation de l'eau nécessaire à sa survie » (186). The water undoubtedly serves a symbolic function as well; Kateb died with his head towards the sea, and all invasions came from the sea. Moreover, Kateb's tale concerns a fisherman – suggesting St. Peter, the fisher of men, and also the rock, “petros”, on which Christ founded his Church. Mansour tells Sadok he is trying to explore the links between Kateb's tale, *L'Ogre et les trois filles du pêcheur*, and that of the origins of Sfax/Taparura (183). Thus, the imagery of the novel derives from multiple religions, as well as diverse cultures.

While Zitouna mourns her dead sister, Mansour is obliged « de quitter sa ville natale et la femme qu'il aime » for Tunis (193). Would Kateb have simply stood his ground? Mansour's heart remains in Taparura, and he refuses to join the "brain drain", turning down « une mission journalistique en France » because he remains « un simple citoyen attaché à son patrimoine régional » (199). At the end, he rediscovers « enfin sa sfaxitude ! » (207).

During his absence, Zitouna has continued to plan the installation of a theater and museum in the heart of the Médina. And when the prodigal son returns, it is Zitouna who proposes to him, as she has previously singled him out as the hero of the day when she performed Kateb's tale: « C'est moi qui te demande en mariage, rompant ainsi avec les sacrosaintes traditions » (209).

\_\_\_ Kateb is in a way the other side of the coin from Mansour. Almost the first thing we learn about him is that he smokes and drinks, and that he does not practice what he preaches: « Kateb va jusqu'à défendre la cause féminine et sa libération des traditions: Pure démagogie puisqu'il est incapable d'appliquer ses théories dans sa propre vie » (30). Although we are told that he resembles Mansour and Zitouna in keeping his hands clean, he seems to belong to the same camp as others with good intentions, such as the Combattant Suprême (based on Habib Bourguiba), who end up abusing power. His very personality is *fissuré*: between public and private, between « La ville arabe et la ville européenne » (39), between past and present. He is a reformer who cannot reform himself. He wants to abolish Ramadan fasting, the repudiation of wives, and the serving of alcohol in public places after 8 P.M. (42). It is hinted that these proposed reforms may lead to his death. In reality, ironically, he is a womanizer, a rapist, and an addict. Perhaps this fissure in his character accounts for the cryptic nature of his verbal art: « Je ne peux m'exprimer que par l'indéchiffrable ! » Mansour replies, « Non, c'est ta conduite qui est ambiguë » (31). His writing, like his self, is torn between two worlds, "the eunuchs of Cairo" and « les superduperies des élucubrations » of Paris, giving him an inferiority complex « en dépit de ses ancêtres prestigieux comme Apulée, Saint Augustin, Ibn Khaldoun et tant d'autres... » (37). He complains of the sickness of literature in his country, both in the national language and in French (37). In despair, he hangs his « poèmes-fruits » from trees, symbolically giving them back to nature in protest against the lack of modes of production and distribution.

His funeral rites are described in great detail. The body is provided with scissors so that « le Diable ne vienne pas perturber son âme » (43). Kateb's soul seems restless even after death: « Le corps ... semble s'animer par les secousses de transport », again supporting the theme of resurrection (50).

Only in his absence, and with the aid of his writings, do his motives begin to be unraveled by the others, and by the reader. It is pure speculation whether his rape of Zitouna is in part motivated by revenge against her father. Once Kateb has raped her, however, he has possessed her virginity, thereby usurping the role of “husband” in the marriage ritual. Kateb attacks the Taparurian « rentabilité », materialism of Si Mokhtar and other patriarchs (118). He seeks to heal the fissure, to bridge the gap, to « abolir les frontières entre la vie et la mort, le passé et le présent, le rêve et la réalité » (118). But he is himself split. Perhaps only his death, and Mansour’s and Zitouna’s inheritance of his vision, will restore wholeness. We are told that, from the point of view of the community, « ... l’erreur de Kateb, justement, c’est d’avoir poursuivi le non-lucratif » (66). Ironically, in his posthumous tale recounted by Zitouna, *L’Ogre et les filles du pêcheur*, the eldest sister, Zarzour Aâkal, says to her father, « une bouchée dans le ventre et une bouchée dans la muraille », stressing food as the necessary of life (95). The middle sister says, « une étoile dans les habits et une étoile dans le tapis » (96)<sup>9</sup>. The youngest, Ahlem Ennar, stresses money and food: « un dinar pour manger et un dinar pour combattre les dangers » (96).

Is Kateb’s death a kind of triumph?<sup>10</sup> We are told, « Le sublime pour Kateb ne consistait pas à avoir goûté le fruit défendu ou à l’avoir gâché avant sa maturité, mais à s’installer sur le bord du rempart entre deux creneaux pour fumer sa pipe et rêver aux étoiles par les nuits sans lune » (186-7). He dies, in fact, by starlight, perhaps with the complicity of the real Ahlem, and thinking of his « étoile », Zitouna.

If Zitouna is the very heart and soul of the novel, her sister Ahlem is almost equally fascinating – in some ways more so. Perhaps the two represent the positive and negative of female artistry, as Mansour and Kateb may represent the positive and negative of male artistry. The two women can be seen as doubles, as can the two men, but there is also a cross-gender pairing of similar personalities: Zitouna and Mansour, Ahlem and Kateb. Zitouna writes nothing, but there is a crucial exchange of letters between Ahlem and Kateb, which both help to solve the mystery and add to it. Mansour finds an anonymous note, torn to bits, probably from Ahlem, in Kateb’s tobacco pouch after his death: « ... certaines des imprécations qu’elle contient sont celles que Kateb a reprises et griffonnées en marginalia sur le

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<sup>9</sup> This seems to be the only non-material wish, perhaps an echo of Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma*, the star.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Elbaz sees Kateb as a kind of « bouc émissaire », car un sacrifice est nécessaire au maintien de l’ordre nouveau » (146). While I agree that Kateb’s death is a kind of sacrifice, I think he is more than a scapegoat for others, that he chooses his own death to restore order to himself, and not to the society he abominates.

texte du conte » (188). Pieced together, the note reads, « Ma sœur n'est plus la même. Je ne la reconnais plus. Nous l'avons tous perdue » (188). Ahlem deplores Zitouna's defloration as if it had altered her value utterly. The note reveals a number of aspects of Ahlem: she is more traditional than her sister if she accepts that a rape turns Zitouna into a different person, and that the different person is somehow lacking all the positive qualities of the old Zitouna. Losing her virginity by force is no shame at all; Zitouna is a victim, not a fallen woman, except according to the most literalist interpretation of virtue. Perhaps, in fact, her value has increased, and the new, resurrected Zitouna is better, arguably, than the *jeune fille*, the blank page, who was « salie », as Ahlem puts it, by Kateb. Ahlem's note is fragmented and has to be reassembled, rendered coherent, like Kateb's poèmes-fruits hung from trees and at the mercy of wind, and passers-by.

Kateb has written a provocative reply to Ahlem: « Ogresse de malheur, que fais-tu? » This is an allusion to the tale, but unclear: « ... il enrobait ses idées d'obscurantisme et d'ambiguïté » (187). He advises Ahlem to be kinder to herself than he has been to himself: « Instaure le rêve [her name] si tu peux ... dans la vie ... dans la vie... Pas le désastre que je n'ai pu éviter dans la mienne! » (187). Kateb, it seems, recognizes a kindred spirit in Ahlem: they are both dreamers, fantasists; they are both out of control, hotheads, firebrands; they are both, ultimately, responsible for their own deaths – a “suicide” which may be a provoked manslaughter, and a “suicide” which could be an accidental drowning. Ironically, even in their deaths they are circumscribed by tradition, suicide being a mortal sin in their, as in so many, religions, so it is made to look like something else. Furthermore, in addressing her as the Ogress of the tale, he is blurring her identity, since she is also the Ahlem Ennar of the tale who kills the Ogress and rescues her sister. Kateb seems to be suggesting that Ahlem is both accomplice and victim in her own fate<sup>11</sup>.

If the more rational, moderate, calmer Mansour is Kateb's heir, then Zitouna is Ahlem's. Ahlem's is a “Death by Water” like that of Phlebas the Phoenician in *The Waste Land*. The *flame* of Ahlem is symbolically extinguished by water. If hers is indeed a suicide, it is an active one, to swim out to the point of no return, like Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* (1899). She does not put rocks in her pocket, like Virginia Woolf, or iron weights, like Faulkner's Quentin Compson, and walk into a river. And as in Chopin, *The Waste Land*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), water is also a symbol for the resurrection.

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<sup>11</sup> It is also unclear to what extent Ahlem's suicide is triggered by her jealousy of the middle sister Ibtisem.

As Mansour does with Kateb, Zitouna is constantly warning Ahlem to listen to the voice of reason. She recognizes that Ahlem « *s'enflammait pour rien* » (181; emphasis mine), and counsels her to remember only Kateb's writing: « ... il a mis l'accent sur le *bien collectif* dans son œuvre, même s'il a été atrocement égoïste sur le plan personnel »... (181). In the final analysis, Kateb's and Ahlem's inability to escape tradition leads to their deaths. Zitouna, on the other hand, is to be an instrument of healing and salvation through her ability to come to terms with the past, accept it, and transcend it.

Zitouna may be predisposed towards liberation by her Berber heritage, but above all by her identification with the olive, and the olive tree. Her eyes are olive green (13). The olive tree is not only the national symbol, but it is « l'huile d'olive », as Mansour remarks, « qui nourrit, illumine, et guérit » (168). Does Zitouna, then, represent nourishment, healing, light? The Zarzour of the tale, Zitouna's fictive self, urges her father to keep food in the bin, and a food ritual is attached to each of the major ceremonies of life and death. When Zitouna "baptizes", or anoints, Mansour, after reciting Kateb's tale, it is with a mixture « *savamment dosé d'huile, d'extrait de fleur d'oranger et de jus de citron* » (101). The oil, one assumes, is olive oil, and it is a healing « *baume miraculeux qui l'apaise sur-le-champ comme il l'a fait sur le cuisant de la bastonnade enfantine ...* » (101), when it was his mother who comforted him. François Bruzzo puns (perhaps excessively) on « *ma-terre-(n)elle* », linking Zitouna with the mother country: « ... elle, Zitouna, en son corps, en ce savoir de son corps, science de femme, savoir *ma-terre-(n)elle*, qui porte hors de soi, qui parle certes mais qui en dit plus qu'elle n'en sait et dont le dire et le nom excèdent le savoir: *Zitouna* dit en son nom qu'elle est *retour à Thyna* » (222). The association is prepared in Mansour's mind by his close relationship with his own mother.

The olive oil also lights lamps, and Zitouna provides illumination for the others to look into their hearts and souls. Last but not least, the olive branch is an almost universal symbol for peace, as in the United Nations logo. For all of her activity – she leads a women's demonstration pictured in *Paris-Match*, like Chraïbi's liberated "mother" in *La Civilisation, Ma Mère!* (1972) – in the final analysis she is a peacemaker. As in Chraïbi and in Rachid Boudjedra's *La Répudiation* (1969), we witness an alliance of women and young poets in the Maghreb.

The question then arises, is Zitouna not herself a poet? If not, why not? Though this is not a first-person narrative, we are usually well aware of Mansour's point of view, but more likely to be surprised by Zitouna's, presented mainly through actions and words. Presumably she makes speeches of her own, not those scripted by others.

Fire images link the two sisters. Like Ahlem, who is a redhead, Zitouna is associated with fire. She is « d'une chevelure solaire et d'yeux algue-

marine » (174) – sun and sea – an odd description of a blonde. And oil lights fire and lamps. She is the “virgin oil” slipping between our fingers. She has suffered her “Paradise Lost” at the age of fifteen, has passed through hell, and emerges to « son paradis retrouvé, Thyna » (73). If she is the « symbole de la femme par excellence » (80), she is linked with nature: stars, sun, sea, air, fire. « Les hommes poursuivent leurs intrigues », we are told, while the women enjoy nature (68). She is fascinated by the cartouche at the pool in Thyna, « Amour chevauchant un dauphin » (55), again a water image. And she arrives from the sea to recite Kateb’s tale, like Botticelli’s Venus rising from the waves.

Zitouna is not only the olive, but the « Inaccessible étoile » (13), an allusion to Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma*, and « cette perle berbère » (14). Even if the tale she recites is scripted by Kateb, she flouts tradition in performing and interpreting it in public as a female conteur, and is implicitly contrasted to the male conteur, Al-Fdaoui, who may have been Kateb’s executioner, intentionally or not. But Zitouna is also « la romaine Thyna vêtue à la tunisienne qui s’avance en personne jusqu’au cœur du marché de la Taparura moderne ... » (94) – an image of Art in the Marketplace. There are hints of her finding her own voice: the contrasting interpretations by Zitouna and Mansour of the mosaic of the « lionne et chevaux » are suggestive of their characters. She identifies with the « lionne » which, though victorious, will always « chasse seule », while the male goats forever outnumber her – a critique of “male bonding” to the detriment of the female? She reacts strongly « aux non-sens et aux âneries sur les femmes » (136). In fact, Zitouna is often mentor to Mansour.<sup>12</sup>

Zitouna is also an amateur archaeologist, in the crucial dialogue at Thyna in Chapter VIII with Mansour. Like the Roman mosaics, Thyna/Taparura represents a kind of cultural mosaic: « ... ici le brassage des races et des religions a été plus tolérant et plus convivial que chez eux... Quant à nous, nous n’avons exclu personne ! » (161). Mansour exclaims, « C’est pour cela que je t’aime, Zitouna » (161). At Thyna, Zitouna « a le sentiment d’avoir retrouvé sa virginité » in an almost mystical moment (164). Her wound is healed, which has been « l’écho de la déchirure du pays et de leur ville » (163).

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<sup>12</sup> Françoise Naudillon notes that Zitouna « symbolise la femme arabe moderne, éduquée, militante et lucide, qui a son mot à dire dans la gestion du pays ». She adds, « Les femmes mieux que les hommes pour conduire les destinées du pays... L’idée est suggérée », and notes that in addition to Zitouna, we have « Fathia, sœur de Kateb et épouse de Sadok, qui s’avère aussi une redoutable femme d’affaires » (156). However, it seems to me that Fathia is, in fact, wedding the “man’s world” of her husband, whereas Zitouna is forging her own destiny – and that of Mansour as well.

Perhaps Zitouna, finally, has found her voice, and it is the voice of Thyna. She becomes a female artist by forging her own path: « Elle ne récite plus de formules apprises, mais crée elle-même les notes de son chant pour mieux les transmettre » (164).

Ahlem's death delays the formation of this androgynous couple, but it is also the catalyst for solving – insofar as possible – the mystery of Kateb's death. Mansour and Zitouna have much in common: « ... ils ont vécu dans le cocon double d'une famille traditionnelle versant vers un modernisme taillé à sa mesure, et de l'autre, d'une banlieue taparurienne hétéroclite où les races et les religions vivaient en harmonie » (181).

Although they will become a couple, there is no closure to the novel, which will continue like life itself. Those who could not escape the past – Kateb and Ahlem – were destined to be the sacrificial lambs, permitting a resurrection of Mansour and Zitouna who will value the past without being imprisoned by it. Thus, at the end, Thyna itself, the ville romaine, is reborn in the womb of the old Arab town, the Médina (212). As Mansour says, there are three things that remain: « les mosaïques de Thyna, l'avenir de Taparura et la vigueur de l'olivier » – past and future, works of man and nature. And Mansour will not regurgitate Kateb's writing, but find his own way through Zitouna: « Je me sens vivre en toi ... rien qu'à travers toi » (211).

The narrative voice of the opening and closing phrases sounds depersonalized, representing neither the point of view of the characters, nor of the novelist-as-historian who informs the beginning of each chapter. The « Jet de pierres » of the opening puts us *in medias res*, in an eternal present. The « jet de pierres » anticipates the usually empty stone fountain that replaces not only the French colonial presence the rocks are being thrown at, but also a whole transitory series of leaders and political movements. The ending is prophetic – no matter what changes, the olive tree, personified in the novel by Zitouna – remains an eternal presence, a symbol of resurrection in ever-recurring spring, or life radiating out of death in a Whitmanian rebirth: « S'en vient le jour de ta gloire, Zitouna ! » And the novel could “not-end” with these words: « à continuer... ».