

The King's Jester

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For an epigraph of *Le Fou du Roi*¹, Binebine chooses, to quote Victor Hugo who describes the jester's job as follows: « *Poor red tail! Countless are the pains and numerous the sorrows in a buffoon's gaiety! What everlasting and incurable pains, what lugubrious occupation laughter is!* ». When reading this, one wonders whether the narrative which is about to unfold, tells the story of the monarch or that of his jester. To this one may only go back to the title of the book which clearly sets the mood and the narrative mode: We are about to read the personal experience of the King's favorite jester with his master. As a narrator, *Lefqih* is both a stakeholder and an onlooker. He partakes in, and witnesses, the servility of the courtiers. He, in an attempt to read and sound objective, describes his own «obsequiousness» before his master: « *I was, as usual, closely following him with a slightly bent back, a little obsequious as appropriate when one is escorting the king.* »

The French journalist, Jacques Martin, who used to host the very popular French T.V. program «l'école des Fans (*the School of Fans*)» in the late eighties of last century, once asked a kid who was taking part in the program's broadcast, «What job would you like to have when you grow up?» The child's answer was as follows: «*Je veux devenir banquier* (I would like to become a banker)» and when asked why, the young boy replied, «*Dans ce métier on gagne beaucoup d'argent!*²» In the child's reply one can obviously pinpoint a lot of naïveté. The question worth asking, however, is whether this gullibility is proper to children only. How about a pastry chef? Does he consume a lot of the cakes he makes? And how about a tailor? Does he dress himself in the best garments of the city? The answer unfortunately may sometimes sound shocking, or (at best) unexpectedly surprising! The reason I have chosen to start the present essay with the mentioning of this case is that the child of Jaques Martin's program is within every one of us. We all tend to think that a mechanic must be driving the best car; that a cook must inevitably be making the best dishes for himself, and so it goes. But how about a buffoon? Does his job, as a jester, make of him the happiest person on earth? A Moroccan proverb seems to answer the above Question. The proverb goes as follows: *though a butcher, he has turnips for dinner!* This may fit perfectly the case of Mahi Binebine's main character in *Le Fou du Roi (The King's Jester)*.

The opening sentence of the novel illustrates the contrast between appearance and reality and seems to refute the false impression one may have that life behind the palace ramparts can be made only of joy: « *Everything looked normal, but nothing was really so* ». This sentence (or rather statement) seems – in the opening page of the novel – to be used by the narrator as a refrain. It is used four times to open the first four paragraphs of the first page of the novel. In what reads like a refrain, the repeated sentence, sets the mood and establishes the relation between this first person narrator and the novel's main character (the King).

An actual person who spent nearly forty years in the Royal Palace's pavilions at the service of Hassan II, *Lefqih** *Binebine* – from the outset – seems somewhat to legitimize his presence through the intimate bonds which link him to the deceased monarch. From the outset, too, the tone of the narrative seems to herald an impending event which does not say its name: We are here being told about the last hours of the life of a monarch who ruled the country for thirty eight years (1961 - 1999). And when we know that the scene in question is chronicling the Monarch's last hours, we come to realize that the narrative unfolds in a flashback mode.

This last scene of the narrative, with which the novel starts, also portrays to the reader the attachment of the jester to his patron. « *I had pains to see him suffer, but I was abstaining from showing it. I was endeavoring to be funny because it was my job to make my master laugh.* » The irony of the situation is that the jester has no right to show his pain, since his job consists mainly in making his master laugh. The trouble, however, is that the master is in no mood to laugh.

Another aspect worth spotting is the contrast between the pompousness of the setting and the agony of the monarch. This is best illustrated by the narrator when he presents us with the scene of the *mokhazni* who was caught, red-handed, looting the Monarch's presents at the king's gift room

This useless opulence was not providing him with any pleasure. To where he was very soon

¹ Mahi Binebine, *The King's Jester*, translated from the French by M'hammed Benjelloun.

² Fr. « *In this job, one earns a lot of money* »

* In Arabic the title *Al Faqih*, which in the Moroccan dialect is pronounced *Fqih*, refers to someone who is well versed in theology. It is also a sign of respect shown to anyone called by this title

going, there was no need for much. He and I knew that. On the other hand, giving the slave a chance to flee delighted him immensely.

The second chapter opens with the same atmosphere of a looming doom which was formerly observed in the first. However, and in order not to maintain what might become a monotonously expectative tone, Binebine introduces Princess Sofia who – in real life – is no other than Princess Soukaina; the King's first and most favorite granddaughter*. The other point worth marking is the presence of the *Mokhaznia*** who, by doing their job, are supposed to say at the passage of the monarch, and in unison, the usual praising and greeting sentence «Allah Ybarek f'Aamer Sidi». The ironic about the situation, however, is that these «chorus boys» seem to be rather bidding farewell to their master. This in itself shows the spuriousness of the royal house protocol in a moment like this.

We obviously tend to think that, because he « creates » joy in his surrounding, a court bufoon or (more precisely in Binebine's case) a king's jester must be but happy all the time. An interview with Binebine refutes this when he declares on the French T.V. 5 Channel, «*Je suis né dans une famille shakespearienne. Entre un père courtisan du roi pendant quarante ans et un frère banni dans une geôle du sud* (<https://youtu.be/4OjprRIsVd0>).» And when he had to make a choice between remaining at the service of the King's court or caring for his jailed son, the jester publically declares to the king that he (the jester) had publically abjured his putchist son! The answer to this public disavowal comes in the opening lines of the fifth chapter of the novel: «*On entre au palais royal comme dans une secte. L'hadesion est pleine, entière, irréversible*³».

Regarding the title of the novel in its original language, one can spot a play on words which – unfortunately – is not affordable in the English translation. The same play on words can be observed and allowed in Arabic, but – again – not in English to the best of our knowledge. In French one can use either the qualifier or the noun «*fou*» which are spelt in the same way either to mean «insane», «madly in love with », or «mad about » someone or something. Accordingly, and apart from the first meaning mentioned before, when someone describes his/her love for someone/something, s/he can be described as «*fou/folle de quelque chose / de quelqu'un*». One can be described as being «*fou de sa femme*» or «*de cette musique*» etc. Translated into English, one can turn the first epithet «*fou de sa femme* » into being «mad about his wife» . Still, as soon as the adjectival form of the word turns into the nominative form, the translation becomes challenging. If we say «*il est fou de son roi*» this would translate into «*he is mad about his king*». Still, when the word «*fou*» is put in the nominative case, the translation will prove impossible. As an epithet, «*Le Fou du Roi* » denotes – in the novel –the unconditional faithfulness and attachment of the king's jester to his master). But this proves impossible to render in English.

One may wonder why Binebine has chosen such a delicate topic to write a novel about, especially that the *Fqih*, the main center of consciousness in the novel, is an actual character who is nobody but the author's own father. In my view, he seems to appropriately answer this question when he says, «*My father used to have a strange taste for life. For years, I have been intent on telling about that. This story I submit to you, for it has the fantasy of a fairy tale and the starkness of a human tragedy*⁴ ». In what reads like an apologetic answer, Binebine is telling the reader about the new relation which now binds the author to his father. As a complement for this answer, one may read what Binebine himself says to describe his novel. He calls it «*un livre de réconciliation* » (a reconciliation book). To that effect, and in the same TV5 interview, he says,

*I have often taken the side of my brother who had been interned in the death house, called Tazmamart. ... [There], and for 18 years, people were jailed in the dark under the ground. I had been affected by this story, and had often taken the side of my brother who was jailed for a long time. ... **The King's Jester** is a reconciliation book where I gave the floor to my father. The narrator is my father.*

With this in mind, one realizes that Binebine sets the mood in which he had written the novel. The elements, in the light of which the narrative can be read, come as follows:

- From the outset, the author declares that he is going to present a true person and appoint him the task of the novel's center of consciousness.
- Though the main character's job , in real life, was that of a mirth maker at Hassan II court, *Lefqih* (as the King himself used to call him) is not presented as a buffoon only, but as a human being, with all his flaws and defects which (in the author's eyes) made of him anything but an

* The princess was so much adored by the King that he had named a mosque, in Rabat, after her (Lalla Soukaina Mosque)

** *Mokhazni* (pl. *Mokhaznia*) are the servants who are working at the royal palace. They are the ones who would hail the monarch, in his passage, from a pavilion to another. And the way they would do that is by saying «Allah Ybarek f'Aamer Sidi » Literally meaning May Allah Bless Sidi's life.

³ One gains admission into the Royal Palace the way one joins a sect: Full, complete and irreversible is the membership!

⁴ «*Mon père avait un étrange goût de la vie. Cela fait des années que je cherche à le raconter. Cette histoire, je vous la soumet, elle a la fantaisie du conte lointain et la gravité d'un drame humain.* » op cit.

ideal father.

- He also declares that his intention behind writing the novel is to give his father the opportunity to defend himself; hence his making of *lefqih* the novel's narrator through whose eyes the story unfolds.

When finishing the reading of the novel, the explanation of the title's choice is finally given. As the narrative shows it, it is the adjective «*fou*», rather than the noun, that has been used. The jester is the one who has been madly loving, and unconditionally serving his monarch. This adoration proves to be like a flame that attracts a moth only to consume it. Here the jester/moth is given the floor to explain *why* the flame's light and heat become irresistible. «*I moved towards the big house like an insect drawn by light.*»

In the second chapter, Binebine – through his narrator – keeps reminding us of his main character's status as a privileged story teller. By doing this, he gives more legitimacy to his being the main center of consciousness, as previously mentioned.

The opening sentences of the second chapter bring us back to the wait and see atmosphere: «It had been weeks that everyone **was doing as if** at the Royal House. A heavy atmosphere had slowly taken the upper hand over the usual tumult...», and out of the blue, emerges the King's granddaughter who apparently is not aware of the looming major event which is about to occur. One may wonder why this granddaughter is being introduced on the scene. Strangely enough and in a confessional tone, the narrator gives the answer:

She was overshadowing me, shamelessly encroaching upon my territories. I feel ashamed to tell you – from all my seventy years of age – that I happened, at times, to go jealous of this jovial, unconcerned, fair haired child whose caprices delighted my master.

If one is to wonder why this young child is being introduced in the narrative, the answer is to show how the jester is mad about the master. In the young child, the jester sees a potential – not to say an *actual* – competitor:

I had to deploy treasures of imagination to equal and neutralize her power to bring joy to the master who used to take a malicious pleasure in observing our secret rivalry. Whatever the case, I was not a man to give up easily. ... The competition had always been my daily bread; and it was out of the question to be ousted by a snotty nosed little kid.

The other aspect of this rivalry displays the fierce competition taking place at the Royal House as a whole: Everyone is eager to please the monarch and win his favors. In the case of the grandfather's pampered child, this comes naturally, hence the real danger. Ironically, then, innocence takes the upper hand over machination; the common practice – not to say the rule – at the Royal House. According to the Royal House rules, having the monarch for a customer is a privilege that everyone aspires for, and only a few can gain. In the case of the monarch's grandchild, this comes effortlessly and naturally.

The deceased monarch was said to have respect for those who abhor genuflection and pliancy. This is why he was impressed by *lefqih* when the latter refused, in his first meeting with the Monarch, to speak ill of *Pacha Leglaoui*; the latter having been a former patron to the narrator (in the Elizabethan sense of the word). This led to the Monarch's reaction, «*here is a faithful man, the like of whom none among you, Gentlemen, will ever be.*». In the ensuing chapter, the narrator is explaining to us, readers, the reason for his refusal to fawn over anyone: «*Pliancy and genuflection were repelling to me. ... The high status to which my culture was raising me would not allow me to kowtow or show forced sympathy.*» The second point he scores is when he speaks to the midget – the only courtier who could use foul language before the monarch; and whom the *fquih* brings back to his (the midget's) natural place. When addressing his words to the midget in what looked like a fencing match with words, *lefqih* replies by saying to the midget, «*you should learn to talk like the elders. One should say **Fqih** when talking to a man of my culture*», to which the Monarch reacted by saying, «*Welcome to Fqih Mohamed in our midst.*».

Generally speaking, courtiers are known for being obsequious. Here one can recall two examples: the first is the story of an Umayyad Khalif who once asked one of the courtiers, «Do you not fear Allah?» To which the courtier replied, «Your fear, my Lord, made me oblivious of the fear of Allah, the Almighty!» ! The second point concerns a servant in a king's court, who – by means of praising his monarch's taste, started praising aubergines when the monarch said that they were tasty. Immediately, however, and as soon as the monarch started speaking ill of aubergines, the courtier adopted his master's attitude and taste, to which the master reacted by saying, «how come a moment ago you were praising aubergines and now you are speaking ill of them». The courtier's reply was simple: «I like what my lord likes, and despise what my lord despises. As to my taste, it is meaningless, and without any importance whatsoever!»

Unlike the aubergine lover – hater who is at the service of his master's whims, *Lefqih* draws his legitimacy, as a privileged eyewitness, from his having already served another master – a kinglet actually – who was no other than Pasha Leglaoui. Though abhorred by King Hassan II, this personal feeling did not prevent the monarch from being impressed by the jester's loyalty to the Pasha. Unlike the «aubergine praisers», *lefqih*

proves to be a man of principles who, when asked, abstains from reviling the Pasha. And that had heightened the man's status in his master's eyes:

For my part, having grown up at the rear court yard of the Pasha's residence, taking the first steps at Sidi's palace was not a major discovery. Hardened with the uproar of the seigniorial ceremonies I felt at home within the Royal Palace.

Another confession coming from *Lefqih's* mouth is that being a servant at the close royal circle might prove a curse much more than a privilege or a blessing. This is the case with the monarch's physician:

this brave doctor was sentenced to evolve around a monarchal circle which should never exceed a hundred meter in diameter - an ad vitam aeternam punishment with no possibility for remission!... This precious man was Doubtless also the unhappiest amongst us all. « When one lets his buttock, my Mum would say, one has no more right to sit on it ! » Dr Mourra's posterior was perpetually "rented." [!!!]

Not forgetting his function, whether in the narrative or in real life, *Lefqih* sets his duly deserved authority as a privileged well informed narrator. In this, he breaks his surrounding into two bunches: that of obsequious beings, whose main job is to please their master at whatever cost (in his description of this cast, he calls them « *the swarm of faithless and lawless individuals*»). Here, one may also recall Nizar Qabani, the great Syrian poet who, to speak about those poets' servility, describes them as poets who, *to please the sultans, accept to wear fake eyelashes**.

Then, *Lefqih* does justice to some self respecting servants like Saher, the lutist, or Dr. Mourra, the physician whose very name deserves to be pondered over: In French, the word « *Mourra* » denotes the future form of the verb *mourir* (to die). The irony of the situation is that we are before someone whose mission is to keep his master alive, and whose medical skills will prove useless when the Master's time should come. « *Il mourra!!!* » This phonetic play on sound segments does not stop here. Pronounced in Arabic, the Doctor's name is articulated with a stressed rolled « *r* ». *Mourra* in Arabic is the feminine adjectival form of *Mourr* (bitter), especially when the double /r/ is phonetically stressed. Can't this be used, as an attribute to best describe the bitter taste of the life which the closest « *privileged* » courtiers are leading within the hermetically close royal circle?

Now that the reader becomes aware of the legitimate position which the narrator occupies in the narrative, we are – at last – in the fifth chapter given an idea about the jester's private sphere: ***what does a jester's private life look like?*** Actually, the question seems to buttress the information given in the first opening sentence of the fifth chapter. In what sounds like a confession, *Lefqih* says: « *I saw neither my wife grow old nor my children become adults. Still, I am neither a bad husband nor an unworthy father* ».

In the same confessional mode, the narrator shifts his account, in the sixth chapter, to dialogue with the reader. His position of the privileged eyewitness gives him legitimacy to inform the addressee about « *the dark side of the moon* ». And in contrast with the conception of an inevitably illustrious and lavish existence which ordinary people might have of palace life behind the ramparts, a gateway to hell is being opened ajar. The opening sentence of this chapter reads as follows:

A courtier's most severe punishment is to see himself stripped of his dignity. ...to see himself deprived – in human terms – of the most precious thing he might possess. ... [At the portico of the royal house], one is required to put down one's ego, self esteem and other forms of pride...

The ironic about this situation is the Stockholm Syndrome which makes the courtier nostalgic to his former servile state as soon as he is cast off the light circle. There is nothing worse than becoming a fallen star, a cast away moth, whose quest now becomes that of reintegrating the orbit. With respect to this the narrator says,

Dismissing a relative is more charitable than suspending him away for an undetermined period of time which could last for an evening, a week, a month, a year, or a lifetime. Abandoning him in a state of doubt, letting uncertainty gnaw his heart and entrails is the worst of all sanctions.

The other scene worth focusing upon in this chapter is that of a minister who, having developed the illusion that he has now become indispensable to the court, finds himself face to face with the jaws of death. The urgency and seriousness of an affair he had in hand, made him think that he could exempt himself from the court protocol. By acting like this, the courtier (apparently a minister whose name has been hushed by the narrator) walked straight to the King's apartments to speak to him. This led to the monarch's ire and to the minister's fall into dementia.

In the seventh chapter, the reader's attention is caught by the introduction of the Queen Mother. *Oum Sidi* (literally meaning My Lord's Mother) is used to show the other facet of the omnipotent King. With respect to this mother – son relationship, the narrator says, « *For me, it was so moving to see Sidi, bending almost on his knees, kissing his Mum's hands on the two sides.* » If, in the former chapter, the reader is allowed a peep at the

* AR. الشعراء الذين ليسوا ليرضوا السلاطين الرموش المستعارة

relation binding the Monarch to his favorite grandchild, here the focus is on the woman who has given birth to the Monarch. In fact, the common image that the people have of the king is one which sets him as the main point of focus, at whose service a myriad of servants and courtiers are restlessly endeavoring. He is usually presented as a man whom everyone is accountable to, and who is accountable to none. *Oum Sidi*, however, steps in to tell us, by her very presence, that he is not only accountable but even obedient to someone. This other facet of the king – just like the one which presents him as a grandpa – makes us, for a moment, completely oblivious of his aspects of *grandeur*. And whether we are dealing with Princess Sofia (as Binebine calls her in the novel), or with *Oum Sidi*, what the author – through his narrator – is trying to present us with is an image which only a privileged narrator, like *Lefqih*, can reveal. At this stage, (and by means of reminder) the narrator is also confirming his status of the well informed story teller.

The eight chapter lifts the veil off a dark corner of the narrator's privacy:

Numerous, indeed, are the circumvolutions I have resorted to in my account in order to avoid recalling a wound I have been bearing for so long: the wound of my eldest son who – just in one morning – had the ingenious idea of turning upside down the work of a lifetime.

To get a clearer idea and therefore a clearer explanation of what truly happened, one should cast a look at *Tazmamort*, the book published by Aziz Binebine, the author's eldest brother, and eldest son of *lefqih*. In this account, one should start with the very title of the book, which is a deviation of the name of the most horrendous secret detention center that ever existed in Morocco. The said prison was secretly built in the south of Morocco in a region called «*Tazmamart*» to confine the officers who took part in the abortive successive 1971 and 1972 coups* against King Hassan II. Aziz kept clamoring his innocence from the first day he found himself involved in this experience, till the day he was released from Tazmamart eighteen years later.

*Tazmamart was, first of all, a bunch of men, living and dead; of demons and angels; of some wise men and of some insane ones; nothing but men projected in a world where extremes and horror were turned into commonplace... ***

The genius of Mahi Binebine manifests itself not just in the account he gives of the event that had cast his father off the velvet circle. Out of the disgracing *Skhirat* episode a phoenix is born. Unexpectedly, *Lefqih* (in what looks like a stage actor's monologue) indulges in giving an account of his love relation with his wife. His being tied to a master he unconditionally used to serve had not prevented him from loving his children's mother. The man's over demanding function made him miss the opportunity of being royally treated by his devoted wife.

The French proverb says: «*à quelque chose Malheur est bon****» The jester's ejection out of the royal closed circle gives the man a chance to turn to his wife

That first evening of disgrace was that of our reunion. By looking at the collapsing empire I had built on the wind, you had the grace of sparing me a speech which I was not ready to hear. I was in need of tenderness and you drowned me in it.

The magic of the narrative, in my view, takes effect in what looks like the jester's dilemma; to please the master, the jester needs to renounce to being an «ordinary», trustworthy and caring father and husband. Serving *Sidi* comes first. And when one is cast off the luminous circle, one should do everything to regain one's place into that circle, whatever the sacrifice or the cost. Since the beginning of the narrative, the jester has been giving accounts of different cases of which he is much more a witness than an actor. In the eighth chapter, the tone changes as of the first paragraph:

They made me subject to more than an iniquitous trial; they pre-judged and pre-condemned me before hand. In what way shall I tell my story while hushing that of my own son, the flesh of my flesh who – in his fall – was bound to carry me away with him?

Here, the author puts us before a narrator who ceases being a reporter, and takes the function of the subject giving an account of his experience. Instead of engaging the narrator and his wife in a dialogue which one would expect to be a series of confessions made by *Lefqih* to his wife, Binebine chooses to make his narrator/protagonist speak to his wife in the form of a soliloquy. A jester who becomes like a cast off planet that has strayed from its orbit; he is holding to a tiny thread of hope that might bring him back to the royal circle. The question worth asking is how, and at what cost, this return could be made possible. On this the narrator says :

This tragedy turned me, in everybody's eyes, into the grave digger of my own progeny. I became a monster, a less than naught being; a sold out traitor. They made me subject to more than an iniquitous trial; they pre-judged and pre-condemned me before hand. In what

* The first coup was led in July 1971 by Colonel M'hammed Ababou. Most of the officers involved were sentenced to death, while those who were not had, after a short passage in the Kenitra Central Prison, were sent to «Tazmamart». As for the second coup, it was engineered by the King's most entrusted man, General Mohammed Oufkir. Once again, after the trial of the officers involved, those who were not executed were sent either to the secret detention prison of «*Qalaat Megouna*» (ironically a city where a yearly rose festival is held), or to «*Tazmamart*» the most ill reputed secret detention center which Morocco had ever known.

** Aziz Binebine, *Tazmamort, Recit de vie* (Aziz Binebine, *Tazmadeath, A Life Chronicle*) Casablanca : Edition Le Fennec, 2015.

*** to something a misfortune might prove beneficial

way shall I tell my story while hushing that of my own son, the flesh of my flesh who – in his fall – was bound to carry me away with him?

Further on, the narrator is made (at least by his wife) into the absolute master of the situation. For the mother, someone who was enjoying the status of the Monarch's favorite jester could easily bring his son back home by a simple request made to *Sidna**:

«When are you going to bring me my son back? » I remained dumbfounded, powerless, contenting myself with a look at her without the capacity to emit a single sound. I received her request like those treacherous slaps that my father used to administer to me for mistakes I was not guilty of.

Speaking about this incarceration experience, Binebine could not help expressing his cynicism regarding the mother's hope for her son's return. And that was at a moment when nobody could either side with the mother's view, nor believe that Aziz, her son, would ever come back, safe and sound. « *During the twenty year period which was to ensue, Mina kept believing in miracles; she was convinced that her missing lad would end up coming back one day*». With respect to this, Binebine declares, «... *Mothers do know.Everyday, and for the twenty years of my brother's absence, my mother used to put aside his share [of the meal] at noon; he was more present than anybody else* »**.

The other character who is not given a chance to speak for herself and is only spoken about, is Mina, the jester's wife. Dedicating nearly a whole chapter to her (Ch. 09), the narrator uses the second person to speak to and about her. She is portrayed through the jester's reminiscence of what reads like an act of gratitude towards everything she had done for the family in order to keep it cemented. In the said chapter, we are offered a look at what can be considered as the closest and most intimate sphere of the jester's life.

The other scene worth focusing upon is that of the golf course; Binebine describes how, when missing the hole, the jester praises the King's action, claiming that it was not the King's fault if the golf course had been poorly designed.

No, Sidi, you haven't missed anything at all. The hole was not in its place!! Those who had dug it in the wrong place should be scourged in an exemplary manner!

Here, just as before, the narrator explains that he has only been doing his job as a jester, for the effect was immediate. « *It was the last time I had seen my master laughing on his knees*». One might recall the fawning Egyptian poet who, when the earth had shaken under his feet due to an earth quake, told his king *The earth had not shaken because of a bad luck which had befallen it. It rather gleefully pranced at your sense of righteousness, My Lord [!!!]*

The interesting thing about the ensuing chapter is the chronicling of a major historical event from a jester's perspective: We are on the eve of the Green March. One does not need to be a seasoned historian to know that, subsequent to the two abortive coups which the country had undergone, the Hassanite era can now be *grosso modo* divided into two main phases: the ante and the post Green March eras. The interesting thing is that all the Moroccan people were – in a way or another – involved in this major event. Documents, books, reports and testimonies had been published from different perspectives, but how about a king's jester's view? Who had ever considered listening to a jester expressing his opinion about the Green March? The other point worth marking is the King's perspective. To the best of our knowledge – and despite the importance of this perspective – no information had ever leaked away, and been made public regarding the Monarch's view. Most certainly, the king had addressed the nation on the eve of the big event. The mystery is unveiled through the «privileged eyewitness» who – once again – legitimizes his position by stating, first, the reason why he proves to be a privileged eyewitness. With respect to this *Lefqih* says, «*My profession made of me a privileged eyewitness of a historical event which was going to change, in depth, the whole country.* »

While chronicling the scenes preceding the launch of the major event, the jester fully performs his task. Doing his job as someone who is not there just to make his master laugh, but also to make his master break the «starvation strike», he had been undergoing for three days. The jester chooses the comic mode of narration to recount the event:

Dipping a mouthful of hot bread in the egg yolk, and taking hold of a piece of dried medium salted meat, I clamored:

- *To hell with cholesterol! An invention of those suffering from taste impediments!*

The narrative is definitely meant to be comical at a moment when the nation's fate is at stake. The impressive about this passage is the fact that there is apparently a *mismatch* between the event and the narrative mode. In other words, what is supposed to be treated – almost religiously – with a stern tone – is rather comically handled: we are before a jester who is trying to convince his master to break his hunger strike, and eat. A strange situation indeed!

* our Master/our lord the King

** interview with Binebine

I raised my head to the sky at the second mouthful, and waged a duly prepared attack against Dr. Mourra who had the nerve to forbid me to eat the bread because of my diabetes, the salt because of my blood pressure, and the meat for I do not know what kind of gout.

Still, the said mismatch is not coincidental: it is meant to put into relief the other method which – at times – proves to be more efficient in approaching a whimsical Monarch. One may recall here the over-confident minister who (not being as gifted as the jester) did but cause the King's wrath when deciding to break the protocol and meet the latter without going through the necessary protocol steps. This event may also be contrasted with the jester, when, pushed by the other courtiers, had to meet the Monarch (who was in no mood to see anyone) and inform him about the death of his (the Monarch's) aunt.

The third paragraph of the tenth chapter deals with the Green March impact on the Monarch's psychology. With respect to this, *Lefqih* says «*The Tumultuous Green March epic had sensitively modified my master's nature. There are decisions which no man would ever wish to be driven to take.*» Needless to say, this has nothing comical about it. For the first time, during his reign, the Monarch seemed to have taken a decision the consequences of which he could not predict. Further down, the narrator, commenting on the Green March says, «*Such actions could be but the work of either a fool or a genius; it depends* ». Actually, even in the direst situation the jester does not forget his function. He decides to get into the lion's den and convince the lion to eat. The whole scene takes place a few hours before the launch of the March.

The marking point of the eleventh chapter is the scene in which a mutineer refuses to act as a rascal. He refuses that one of the King's concubines be raped by one of his companions. Having heard of this, the king summons him and offers him a deal: He, the mutineer, reveals to the King the name of the soldier who dared ill treat the concubine. In return, the King would forgive him. Instead of grabbing this opportunity, the soldier rejects the deal. Out of solidarity, he feigns oblivion. The narrator's comment comes as follows:

He did not sell off his brother in arms, and paid with his life for that. I had difficulties understanding this esprit de corp, for which one was willing to give away his life, in order not to take away his comrade's.

What comes next is decisive: «*Such solidarity does not exist in the world where I live. One is rather ready to sacrifice a whole tribe to save his head!* » It is said that the event which Binebine makes use of in his narrative is true. The interesting thing here is how this event is being used not only to show the solidarity spirit reigning among the soldiers but also to show its absence in the royal house where every courtier is concerned with ways to improve his status at the expense of anything or anyone. Needless to say, this is contrasted with the narrator's forswearing his own son (in order to keep his place within the royal circle) and win back the King's favor.

After the comparison between the inner and outer space of the Royal house, the most striking event which ensues is the one that chronicles the reconciliation moment between the jester and his son. Instead of presenting us with a revengeful son who might be driven by hatred towards a father who – as formerly mentioned – had publically abjured him, Binebine chooses to present us with a reconciliation scene where the son fully forgives and forgets his father's deeds. The scene clearly demonstrates the author's originality: one might expect anything except a tear shedding scene where the father – son instinct takes the upper hand. And this the author does without falling in the pathos trap. On this, the Tazmamart survivor says to his mother,

Forgiveness is a miraculous remedy, Mum. Out of the thirty detainees, incarcerated at Building B, we are four to have survived, because we knew how to spew the poison of hatred.

The scene which Binebine has chosen to deal with is worth observing: To begin with, there had been a myriad of testimonies formerly presented by other Tazmamart survivors regarding their first contacts with their family members. Most of these encounters take place between some patient wives or children and the long awaited father, son or husband*, with the predictable moving effect which this kind of encounters might engender. In the father-son encounter scene in *The King's Jester*, we are before a mutineer son, and an abjuring father. The expected scene would have been imagined to be an «*account settlement* » scene. Instead, we have two persons who make abstraction of the past and look forward to the present and – most importantly – to the future. They simply refuse to speak about the past and hold each other in the arms and cry. On this, Binebine says that the first thing that Aziz, the former Tazmamart convict, asks Mahi, the author, to do is «*You take me, please, to see my Father*», to which Mahi reacts by saying, «*You are not going to see the one who publically disowned you*». Aziz's reaction was as follows: «*At the building where we were interned we were 29 convicts, and only four had survived. The survivors are those who had no hatred towards anyone** ». Most certainly, we are before a reunion scene, but (most certainly too) with a «*Binebinian*» touch!. And this seems to be corroborated by what Aziz Binebine himself declares when talking about his post-Tazmamart experience, and how he decides to handle it:

* One can recall Mohammed Erraïs's testimony's *A Ticket to Hell and Back*, or Ahmed Merzouki's *Tazmamart, Cellule 10*

* <https://youtu.be/4OjprRISVd0>

*I think I was the first to have been aware of the place where we had been put. We had not been put there for a sinecure. We had been brought there to stay for a long time. In order to be killed. ... By getting into my prison cell, I took a decision. I told myself, «I am here for a long period of time. Accordingly the first thing I have to do was to ignore my past. I, therefore, [told myself] that I had neither a family, nor friends, nor a past ** ».*

Having partly fictionalized, partly actualized the reunion scene, Binebine proves to have been very original in many respects: There is, first, a touch of optimism and a rupture with the sad past that had, for ages, opposed the father to his progeny. On the other hand, and technically speaking, Binebine seems to invert the role of the mirth maker who – instead of making the readers laugh – makes them rather shed tears in the reconciliation scene between the father and the son. This might bring back to mind the Japanese artist Mira Fujita, and her demystifying portrait of the sad tear – shedding Pierrot, the clown before the portrait of whom one cannot help feel sad, to say the least.

The last chapter brings us back to the opening scene of the novel, where, «*everything looked normal [while] nothing was really so.*» This is buttressed by the first sentence : «*Painfully was Sidi walking*». Once again, Binebine resorts neither to pathos nor to exaggeration. And instead of contenting himself with the depiction of the agonizing monarch, he ironically contrasts the latter's gilded *entourage* with the emptiness of his last moments, except that he chooses to make some symbols of power bespeak the meaninglessness of the said power:

At each small step, he used to stop to take a breath by leaning on his cane: a precious ivory beaked stick, representing a roaring lion, which I had been ogling for ages. In former times, Sidi used to make use of it as a ceremonial item ...[.] while walking through the alleys of the palace. Not anymore now. The cane had become again a cane supporting a frail body – one which was now unable to move.

The cane, which was formerly having some Pharaonic attributes as a power scepter, has now been relegated to the status of a walking aid. Now that it has ceased having royal attributes, now that it has ceased symbolizing power, the monarch offers it to the narrator. This last scene chronicles not only the end of the monarch's reign, but also presents a moment of truth where the King is not to hear the aubergine lover/hater discourse. For the first time the monarch sees in the jester a friend: «*You are not any servant, Mohammed. You are my friend.*» In this apparently simple sentence, one can hear gratitude expressed by the King towards his favorite jester. Technically, this gives further legitimacy to the jester as being the most appropriate person to tell about the monarch's last hours.

The other point worth making is the following: if the jester – as he himself declares – has been assigned the task of varnishing and sugar – coating the truth for the Monarch during his long career («*I am paid to offer joy* » he says), this time he decides to portray life as it appears, not as it might have been wished to be seen by the King. When the monarch says to the jester, «*This is the last time I am going to see this tree laden with flowers, ... I shall see them no more, shall I?* ». In a moment of truth which can only be inspired by the monarch's approaching death – Mohammed, the jester, says, «*No my Lord; you will see them no more.*».

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