

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 3, 2015

Improbable Subjects: A Cast of Characters to Voice Nationalism's Failures

Muhammad Zafzaf, *Monarch of the Square: An Anthology of Muhammad Zafzaf's Short Stories*, trans. Mbarek Sryfi and Roger Allen, Syracuse University Press, 2014, 296 pp., \$29.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780815633693.

Monarch of the Square: An Anthology of Muhammad Zafzaf's Short Stories marks the first book length translation of the fiction of Muhammad Zafzaf (1945-2001), arguably Morocco's most important contemporary writer. Though Zafzaf is an equally accomplished novelist, translators Mbarek Sryfi and Roger Allen have chosen to focus on his short stories, selecting a representative sample of forty-five narratives—often no longer than three pages each—taken from the nine collections published by the author between 1970 and 1996. Arranged chronologically, *Monarch of the Square* allows the reader to follow Zafzaf's thematic and stylistic evolution of a literary form with which he continued to experiment throughout his career.

In the volume's afterword, Sryfi and Allen cite Ahmed Bouzfour, a fellow Moroccan short story writer, who divides Zafzaf's work into three distinct phases: the Moroccanization of writing, the depiction of social misery, and, finally, a marked concern for literary style over content (279). Categorizations that partition a writer's creative trajectory into a teleologically driven tiered structure may hold a certain utility for an author like Naguib Mahfouz, but Zafzaf's work cannot be collated into discrete groupings so easily. Particularly in a collection like *Monarch of the Square*, the continuities within narratives written over two and a half decades are immediately striking. The stories presented here, whether initially published in the early seventies or the mid-nineties, rarely fail to confront the reader with a startling portrait of alterity. One of Zafzaf's most notable achievements is his creation of protagonists who effectively destabilize the archetypal nationalist heroes popularized by authors like Abdelkrim Ghallab, whose *We Buried the Past* published in 1966 epitomizes the model of realism typical in Moroccan fiction after independence in 1956. While authors of Ghallab's generation wrote characters who primarily served as vessels for the independence movement's ideologies, Zafzaf shifted focus to a more challenging type of realism populated by those less assimilable to a nationalist ideal. Zafzaf's aesthetic is grounded in a post-independence disillusionment that refuses to either romanticize or vilify the many lives marginalized by the state and alternately left out of or idealized by prevailing literary representations. The subjects of these stories resist the reader's inclination to identify with

the narrative's protagonist, or as David Palumbo-Liu observes in a different context in his recent book *The Deliverance of Others*, "a real experiential distance is insisted on."¹

While Zafzaf's geographies move from the rural to the urban, often settling in Casablanca—the city he called home for most of his life—he is consistent in his utter lack of interest in the stories of the country's elite. Many of the themes around which the narratives in *Monarch of the Square* coalesce can be read through the various modes of otherness they present to a conventional reader, yet not all of these portraits of difference are equally easy to accept. A number of the collection's pieces—"The Pound Street Game" (1982), "A Tale of a Drunk" (1988), and "A Night in Casablanca" (1988), for example—exhibit little concern for the traditional moral qualities of *adab*.² In this regard, the writing is often reminiscent of Zafzaf's celebrated compatriot Mohamed Choukri. One of the chief complaints against Choukri when he was famously censored by the American University of Cairo in 1999 was that his novelistic-autobiography's hero is not "intrinsically clean," that the narrator "appears to be a rogue, devoid of positive attribute," violating the sense of propriety that regularly governs the shape of literary protagonists in Arabic realist texts.³ Zafzaf too often presents his readers with central characters unapologetic for their disregard of conventional morality: drunkards and prostitutes, hustlers and practitioners of the lowest superstitions. It is not just the content that represents an innovation, however, but his manipulation of narrative discourse to unexpectedly shift the reader's sympathies to these unlikely heroes.

"A Night in Casablanca" illustrates this point. The story opens as a woman named Su'ad exits a nightclub against the backdrop of an intoxicated crowd. The scene offers the promise of "fights involving fists or razors," eventual stabbings proceeded by an official disregard for the prostitutes inevitably killed in such uproars—after all, "[t]hat's what happens to prostitutes. They suck men's blood, and theirs flows all over the sidewalk" (210). She is followed by a male companion, Sa'id, whom she has met for the first time that evening:

Now out came Sa'id too, talking to the elegant doorman, whom he knew very well.

"You're drunk tonight," the doorman said. "Can you drive?"

"I'm not drunk. That whore drank the whole bottle. Of course, she'll have to pay for it."

"Are you to have some fun tonight? Be sensible, Sa'id."

"I'll do what I do every night," he replied with a laugh as he slipped the doorman ten dirhams. "I'm King Shahriyar!" (211)

For the remaining eight pages, the two drive the city's rain-slicked streets, first in search of a quick after-hours meal, then a place where they can be alone. The class difference between them gradually becomes clear through the course of their conversation. Finally, when their car is randomly checked by a police officer, Sa'id's status allows them to leave unharassed even though an unmarried couple alone together late at night is a potentially actionable offense. The exchange between the pair immediately after this encounter unequivocally places each in their respective socioeconomic positions. As the officer withdraws from them,

¹ David Palumbo-Liu, *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 16.

² On the historical intersection of *adab* and morality see Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), Chapter 1.

³ Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 245.

Su'ad exclaims, "Tfoul!...They are just like flies," to which Sa'id responds, "Shut up or get out of my car. He was nice, but you're insulting him. If you weren't with me, you would be spending the night at the station" (215).

Sa'id is wealthy with a wife at home, a self-proclaimed Shahriyar who aims to exploit a different woman each night, and he resolutely aligns himself with the police, always in Zafzaf's writing the most material embodiment of a corrupt governing authority infamous for persecuting all those outside the ruling elite. Su'ad will prove to be the story's heroine but there is a clear challenge to the audience in this figuration. Unable to use Sa'id's apartment due to the presence of his wife and barred from reserving a room together in a hotel since they would need proof of marriage, Su'ad suggests an open space on the outskirts of the city. When they arrive, Sa'id's car is surrounded by four men and Su'ad is heard to say, "Don't hurt him, 'Abdelqader...He's a nice, kind person. Just take everything and leave him his ID. Don't behave the way you did on that foul night with that other stupid man" (217). Su'ad is a con artist who beats Sa'id at his own game and the would-be victim is instantly transformed into the victimizer. This switch mirrors the reversal in the reader's point of identification in a way that is almost counterintuitive.

Much of the story is written in the form of quoted dialogue. Interspersed within it, however, are moments of narrated monologue—what in French would be termed *style indirect libre*—discourse that remains in the third person but functions as "transposed thought quotations" in which the unknown omniscient narrator wholly identifies with a particular character's mentality.⁴ Throughout the story, Sa'id's consciousness is privileged by virtue of this device and the reader is led to view events through his perspective as a result. Yet the tonal range of Sa'id's narrated monologue has more reach than it initially seems; there is an irony interspersed with the narrator's identification that gradually undermines our own. By the time Sa'id is revealed to have fallen prey to Su'ad's scam, Zafzaf has already rendered transparent the systemic oppression and exploitation to which women like her are regularly subjected by men like him. As the significations of the narrative's details accumulate, we are gradually forced to reexamine our first assessments and pushed to transpose our empathy to Su'ad, regardless of the overt criminality she displays in the story's final lines.

Other narratives within the collection feature protagonists just as far removed from standard literary imaginings of the country's citizenry but who present a different sort of challenge to the reader. Faced with the post-independence national ideal of a virile masculine subject, Zafzaf frequently approaches the marginalized from another vantage point, turning to characters with physical disabilities to focus on their embodied difference and abjection. Stories like "The Cripple and the Whore" (1982), "Shamharush, King of the Jinn" (1984), and "The Baby Carriage" (1993) critique the degradation of modern Moroccan social conventions and institutions through the representation of the visceral everyday experiences of non-standard bodies forced to navigate a society that refuses to accommodate them. The misshapen and broken limbs of the protagonists of these narratives are not strictly symbols for something else, as is often the case (Shakespeare's use of Richard III's deformity as a marker for his villainy, for example); these are illustrations of disability as normality, in Ato Quayson's categorization, where the characters "exist within the full range of human emotions, contradictions, hopes, [and] fears..."⁵ They nevertheless play a significant role in

⁴ Dorrit Cohn, "From Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction," in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 501.

⁵ Ato Quayson, *Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 51.

the construction of the unique tone of Zafzaf's literary world, which is frequently a place of collapsed social bonds.

In "The Baby Carriage," Zafzaf employs the same style of narrated monologue used in "A Night in Casablanca" to express the thoughts of a crippled beggar, Ibrahim, over a two day period. Night is closing in as we see him sitting on the street "no taller than a trashcan" in front of a piece of cardboard under which he keeps the day's meager yield (242). His legs are described as stubby bones attached to a piece of leather strapped to his backside. Next to him is a small baby carriage that serves as his primary mode of transport from the shanty where he lives to the street where he waits for passersby to throw him spare change. Every morning he sits in the carriage while a woman named Kulthum pushes him to his spot, where he stays until she retrieves him in the evening. The seven-page story plots the way Ibrahim handles his circumstances when Kulthum fails to appear:

By now there was no hope of Kulthum coming. If this had been the first time she was late, he would not have believed she was not coming; but, as it was, she had left him many times sleeping in the alley and resting his head on his small carriage. The last time it had happened, he had woken up at dawn to find himself spread-eagled in the middle of the road with no money. (242)

To spend the night exposed on the street would leave him vulnerable to any number of dangers, and while he could crawl back to his shack, he lacks the physical ability to drag along the baby carriage on which he depends.

Ibrahim will not remarkably triumph over his disability to provide the reader with the relief of catharsis, a common trope in stories that contain characters with non-normative bodies. Instead, we will watch him struggle to accomplish the most mundane tasks surrounded by people who view him as either an object of revulsion or an opportunity for petty profit. Throughout, Zafzaf relies on heavily metaphoric language to code the chronic dehumanization of Ibrahim's miserable state. A group of children extort more than his day's earnings to push him home after he finds himself abandoned by Kulthum the first evening of the story; when they place him on the carriage, he looks "just like a sack of potatoes" (243). Once home, he must crawl to get water or a bite of food. He finds a dry piece of bread and nibbles at it, "like a household pet that can neither speak nor express emotion" (244). He then goes to the corner store and "[a]s he crawled, he left behind a long trail in the dirt, just like a dog" (244). On his second day without Kulthum, he makes his way to the street by himself and takes a taxi home; when dropping him off, "[t]he driver picked him up with evident disgust and tossed him inside," creating an image in which Ibrahim is handled exactly as the "sack of potatoes" he is described as earlier (245).

In the most literal sense, the severity of the material conditions of Ibrahim's life with a disability is inextricable from the societal framework in which he exists. He lives in a state that does not provide him with so much as a wheelchair and within a community that views him as a despised object to be promptly "tossed" away from view. Beggars like Ibrahim are highly visible in most Moroccan cities and though there is an evident realist mimetic function to his character, there is a symbolic function beyond it as well. The body in literature is regularly the "locus of socio-political resistance."⁶ Ibrahim's particular body translates into a critically reduced ability to insulate himself from an outside world that is

⁶ David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. David Hillman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5.

hostile to it and Zafzaf manipulates the representational power it provides. He is at once the indigently poor beggar he signifies on the surface and an unsettling stand-in for all those stigmatized or forced to live on the periphery.

Zafzaf's interest in the question of otherness echoes throughout the collection. At times, it takes the form of the familiar theme of the explicitly foreign, questioning the construct of national identity with a nod to those categorically excluded. The poor rural Moroccan children of "In the Woods" (1982) make a hobby of watching gypsies, "like two dogs staring at food they can't have"; they are then shocked to find that the differences they imagine to exist between them are largely illusory (121). Their flashes of recognition are written with a naïveté that is again evocative of Choukri: "Strange! Even their babies cry like ours; the screams sound just like my little brother when my mother refused to give him money to buy a balloon" (122). At other points in the collection, Zafzaf interrogates the East/West binary, reworking the theme of his most well-known novel, *The Woman and the Rose* (1972). In contrast, however, to the novel's narrative arc that focalizes around the experience of a Moroccan national in Spain, stories like "Antonio" (1988), "A Newspaper Report" (1988), and "Monarch of the Square" (1988) highlight the advantages Europeans continue to reap within Morocco's borders. In these short narratives, Moroccans remain in a twilight state of liminality even on the soil of their own country.

Overall, *Monarch of the Square* is a volume that demands patience. Read too quickly, the stories run together and lose their individual significance. Yet when each narrative is given its due, their often startling import comes to light, as does the value of Zafzaf's contribution to a post-independence aesthetic that turns its gaze to a dazzling array of the most unlikely of literary heroes. It is a welcome first introduction to Zafzaf's writing in translation; we can only hope that more will follow.

Gretchen Head
Assistant Professor of Humanities, Literature
Yale-NUS College

© 2015: Gretchen Head

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Head, Gretchen, *Improbable Subjects: A Cast of Characters to Voice Nationalism's Failure*, *SCTIW Review*, September 3, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/701>.

ISSN: 2374-9288