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The Shock Effect of Apocalyptic Satire: When Everything We Fear Has Already Happened

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The apocalypse in fiction is often used to criticize political, social and cultural practices in the Arab world, and focuses mainly on the culture of fear and its negative political effects. I would like to show how apocalyptic fiction can produce elaborate shock effects that paradoxically question the ability of apocalyptic messianic thinking to cope with the political and moral chaos, and that provoke the reader to redefine his/her fear and re-invest his/her apocalyptic desire for punishment in a conscious impulse for change. I will be analyzing this topic through a critical reading of a novel written by an Algerian novelist a scant six years before the outbreak of the Arab spring demonstrations in most Arab countries. The prophetic dimension of the novel is stunning and calls attention to how literature is central to the human culture insofar as it has spawned continuous attempts at representing the unthinkable and the untold, paving thus the way to the great cataclysmic changes in the history of humanity.

Authoritarianism and the culture of fear

All human societies suffer the occasional occurrence of collective fears, panics or frights; however, in a context where insecurity prevails, fear becomes “the permanent and muffled undertone of public life” (Corradi *et al* 2). Authoritarian power holders instill a sense of fear in the public and manipulate this fear to engender an unquestioning acceptance of their rule. While this fear induces servility, it is also internalized by the public and transformed into, what James Scott has called a “hidden transcript” or that “discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, beyond the direct observation of the power holders” (Scott 4). In other words, there are two types of discourse that inform public life:

–The “public transcript” controlled by the powerful and designed “to affirm and naturalize the power of the dominant elites” (Scott 18).

–The “hidden transcript” of the subordinated who internalize the apocalypse narrative of doom for the oppressor and hope for the oppressed as their hidden transcript. This discourse provides a countercultural and political code for dissent that can, under certain historical conditions, break out from secrecy into public defiance, generating a strong

shock effect for the rulers and the ruled alike.

There is increasing concern nowadays for the study of this type of apocalyptic hidden discourse and its subtle relation to fear, guilt and political powerlessness. *The Pure Wali (Saint) is Lifting up his Hands for Prayer*[1] written by TahharWattar (2005) toils in the same vineyard and takes pains to reveal that this apocalyptic discourse reflects paradoxically the opposition to existing political practices and political powerlessness to change them.

False Prophets for Ironic Apocalypse

TahharWattar's novel draws on the mythic apocalyptic narrative but it does so in an ironic imitation of the tones of the original apocalypse. The number of characters is limited: the Wali[2], a sufi tormented by guilt and fear, who represents, according to the author, the Muslim collective unconscious; Bellara, a woman from the past whose relationship with the Wali is problematic and finally, a TV news reporter who gradually supplants the narrator and becomes the central voice of the narrative. The narrative is composed of ten chapters; the first one is an apologetic preface in which the author claims that his novel is an attempt to apprehend the real and to look for a way out of the aporetic situation of the Arab world. The second and third chapters portray the psychic life of the Wali in the form of a dreamlike journey into the past and into the transcendent world where he lives away from the corrupt and impure reality. The writing looks like an automatic surrealist script teeming with visions, voices and fragmented dramatic dialogues. As the Wali moves upward in his seven-floor holy shrine, past memories arise, triggered by a nice fragrant smell and a soft female voice urging him to keep moving upward. While doing so, he walks past mummified bodies, corpses, idols made of wax, and hears female voices mourning the dead. When he gets to the sixth floor, he meets Bellara, a woman the Wali once loved, and once again another vision surges and places itself in his mind.

The scene that follows is a parodic rehearsal of the myth of temptation and resistance that draws intertextually on the story of the prophet Joseph in the Quran. Bellara tries to seduce the Wali but the Wali's resistance to her seems to grow out of an indeterminate fear, a fear that the Wali feels but cannot explain. He keeps repeating a prayer that begs God to save him from what he fears. He justifies his resistance to Bellara's call for consummation by his doubts about her real nature, as he thinks she can be either a false prophetess or a damned devil. To make sure she is not a devil, he makes up his mind to shed her blood. He snatches

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[1] The title and the quotations to follow are my translations. Unlike other novels of Wattar, this novel hasn't been translated into English yet.

[2] 'The Wali' is the Arabic equivalent for 'Saint' or 'holy person' in English.

her earrings and her ears start bleeding. As her body fades away in grey fog, he realizes, but too late, that he has killed the woman he has ever loved.

Then the Wali moves downward towards the immanent world and meditates on the deteriorating political and social situation of the Arab world. Haunted by the specter of a romantic failure with Bellara, the Wali is tormented by a persistent feeling of guilt and wishes he hadn't doubted the intentions of Bellara. He journeys in search of Bellara, riding a female donkey which, he imagines later, is the reincarnation of her soul. The second coming of Bellara occurs at a time when the Wali is on the edge of despair. On hearing her voice, he feels the ecstasy of their union, of getting back what has been lost for ages. Bellara comes back as a liberating force for the Wali for she urges him "to lose fear" (27) and beg God to inflict disaster on the corrupt Arab world.

These dream-like scenes should be viewed as a symbolic reconstruction of reality. What is foregrounded is the transition of the Wali from a state of chronic guilt, indeterminate fear and narcissistic self-preservation to an apocalyptic mood of total destruction. The radical change in the Wali's attitude towards reality portrays the despair and the powerlessness of the movements of change in the Arab World that are doubly crippled by their tendency to transcend reality by exalting past norms, and by their tendency to adopt an escapist apocalyptic eschatology. The ironic parody that permeates the text is meant to put into question both tendencies as they fail to apprehend the real and trigger action to change the reality. The text establishes an ironic distance from both, as the first transcends reality and the second destroys it. The Wali is a parodic representation of the true prophet because of his fear of what he deems to be impure, corrupt and evil, represented by the emblematic figure of Bellara. The Wali resists Bellara but kills her in the name of a false spiritual purity as killing people on the basis of doubt is worse than adultery. The text thrives on these two radical stances towards reality: false prophetism and escapist apocalyptic eschatology and creates significant lingering shock effects that provoke the reader into a deep rethinking of his fears, attitudes and destiny.

Apocalyptic Satire and its Shock Effect

The fourth chapter maintains the uncertainty created by the previous dream-like scenes about the level of reality the narrative refers to, and then a sudden shocking change of frame occurs to mark a transition to reality. On the level of form, the reader undergoes a second shock, doubled in its effect, as the reality is represented through a dark TV screen, as if the narrative refused to punctuate the relationship between dream and reality. The author establishes a structural paradox as he recalibrates his narrative structure, not to foreground a

difference but to put special emphasis on the similarity of the absurd and chaotic world of reference to the nightmarish visions of the Wali.

The Wali, sitting on his throne in his holy shrine, watches through a large screen that is as wide as the Arab world itself, the apocalypse that is to occur thanks to a divine intervention. The news of the apocalypse is reported by a single central voice through an imageless black screen. The Arab world gets into an apocalyptic state due to a large black cloud that covers all the Arab countries, which generates complete darkness and total disorder. The fear of the apocalypse is great and countless suicides are reported. People can hardly see and all the blind people are recruited by the government as guides. Cats are also used as guides because of their ability to create holes of light in the darkness. Most people stay at home and strangely surrender to sleep.

The satiric subversion of the social and political hierarchies that displaces the blind from the margin of the social and political order to its center is quite unexpected but it is also telling as it highlights, on a symbolic plane, the real identity of the power holders, as utterly blind and insensitive. Apocalyptic satire turns the world upside down to reveal the real identities of these power holders and to poke fun at them. However, the attack is double-edged; it is directed against the rulers and the ruled alike. Satire is thus subversive and punitive; it is also ironic as it invites the reader to be skeptical about all discourses, including the discourse of apocalypse. The TV reporter examines the different explanations of the origin of the black cloud and quotes some comic stereotypical reactions: all the Arab governments except for Libya claim that the phenomenon is the outcome of some terrorist conspiracy (Wattar 46), while Libyan government considers the darkness to be a sign for the success of the African unity project proclaimed by Gaddafi (47). As for the Americans, the belly-like cloud is the effect of a mass destruction gas that the Iraqi soldiers produce after eating large amounts of oak acorn imported from North Africa (48).

The comic demystification of the black cloud allows the narrative to gradually achieve a kind of rough blending of carnivalesque and apocalyptic elements. The apocalyptic collapse of the existing order takes on a carnivalesque tone as the degradation of the social and political reality is reported in a comic mood that shocks the reader by the discrepancy it creates between the situation and its representation. It is worth noting here that the carnivalesque is disruptive and in no way positive, as it was meant by Bakhtin, for it focuses on the body as the locus of negative practices and images: weird sexual practices, drug addiction, scatology, sleep, inactivity and blindness.

The satiric exploration of the apocalyptic reality is mimetic inasmuch as it reflects the unreality of what the Arab world has become before the Arab spring: total apathy and apoliticism, irrational fears, reliance on external rescue for change, social powerlessness and

moral chaos. The novelist employs what Lois Parkinson Zamora calls "the dissenting perspective of the apocalypse" (Zamora 4) to criticize political and social structures; satire uses this perspective to unveil the reality and expose the existing practices to carnivalesque revision and ironic inversion. A few examples from the book well illustrate this point. When the apocalypse occurs, the Arab government officials are reported to be "having some rest in the hotels along the European coasts after having worked hard all year long constructing roads, digging them up and constructing them again" (Wattar 35). People in Yemen feel so sad as they cannot pick qat[3] leaves to chew in order to achieve a state of stimulation (99). In Syria, people find neither cats nor blind people to guide them owing to, in the ironic words of the reporter, "the rational social welfare policy of the Syrian government" (66). The people in all the Arab countries surrender to sleep because of some unknown reason, save for the people in Tunisia who spend the night having sexual intercourse, and some people in Yemen who spend the night under qat trees, waiting for the black cloud to fade away.

Paradoxical Post-Apocalyptic Scene: the Persistence of Fear in a Hopeless World

The post-apocalyptic reality is supposed to sustain a message of hope with the destruction of the damned and the salvation of the good; yet in this ironic novel, things look different. Satire takes on a provocative tone as the punishment is not selective but inflicts the whole society; the corrupt are cut down to size, but no one is saved. While the exploration of the apocalyptic reality invites the readers to rediscover the corrupt social and political order where they live, the exploration of the post-apocalyptic world seeks to create real shock effects that undermine the readers' complacency and challenge their attitude towards reality. The satiric provocation of the readers lies in the systematic use of the paradox as a trigger for deep rethinking of their certainties, their fears and their relation to the real.

One of the intricate paradoxes that the narrative deconstructs is the fear that corrupt power holders instill in the people to keep them subjugated. This fear "eats away at everything, crumbles hope, flattens emotion and saps vitality" (Corradi et al. 26); it makes people powerless, apolitical and narcissistic, indulging in personal worries and obsessions (consumerism, sex, drugs, gambling, etc.). This fear sustains corrupt power for some time but creates a vacuum that only extremists can fill. This is exactly what happens when the black cloud disappears. People find out, upon waking, that the political power in Egypt is now in the hands of fundamentalists and Bin Laden is elected president of Egypt and a Caliph for all Muslims. The fear allows corrupt rulers to stay in power but the resulting lack of democracy

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[3] Qat is a flowering plant native to the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

gives rise to extremist movements. Fear sustains and undermines, in the long run, corrupt powers which are supplanted by fanatic fundamentalists. People who internalize this fear and sustain these corrupt powers by their passivity will have to think their fear over to overcome it and become the architects of their destiny. Otherwise, they will have to choose to live either under authoritarianism or radical fundamentalism.

The dependence on oil for the creation of wealth is another provocative paradox that is at the heart of the post-apocalyptic changes that take place in the narrative. Oil is reported to have become a valueless liquid. This metamorphosis of oil causes panic, and precaution measures are taken by the western countries; the funds of the Arabs in Western banks are seized and their properties are foreclosed so that their debts can be paid. To highlight this paradox, the narrative makes use of satiric exaggeration and plays on the fears and desires of the readers. Arab immigrants are expelled from the host western countries and Arab citizens are denied entry to them; the Arab world is cut off from the rest of the world as it has lost its most precious resource and its status as a site of economic attraction for the western countries; even the Israeli parliament adopt a unanimous resolution to dissolve the state of Israel and to cancel the project of establishing a Zionist state for the Jews.

The dependence on oil as a source of wealth for the Arab world is paradoxical insofar as oil, when used up, can be also the cause of its regression to a state of primitive chaos and poverty, in the absence of any scientific and human development. The corrupt reality is supplanted by a chaotic reality and the reader is thus placed in a paradoxical stance, torn between consolation and dismay. As an ironic apocalyptist, TahharWattar strives to make the reader feel disappointed at his own wishful thinking expectations and to point out real objects of fear and desire. What the reader should fear is the enemy within, his political powerlessness and his escapist theology that account for the moral and political chaos in the Arab world. TahharWattar's novel views the apocalypse as a construct of imagination, or, to use Catherine Keller's terminology, a "habit" or a "pattern" (Keller 11). In fact, the dates of apocalypse people make, to cite Frank Kermode, "bear the weight of our anxieties and hopes" and "when we refuse to be dejected by disconfirmed predictions, we are only asserting a permanent need to live by the pattern rather than the fact" (Kermode 17). To push this logic to its limits, which the novel does in effect, the apocalypse is but virtual and we are virtually living in the apocalypse; Jean Baudrillard elaborates on this point asserting that "virtually, we are in the apocalypse, you only have to see the devastation of the real world all around" (Baudrillard 110).

Conclusion

Tahhar Wattar tries to demystify and deconstruct the discourse of apocalypse. The author uses the code of apocalypse to trace a narrative pattern but the end it provides is inconclusive and points rather to a transition to a hopeless chaotic state. The narrative has failed to provide the consolation that mythic apocalyptic script promises. The end of the novel is designed to produce what Paul Fiddes calls–drawing on the work of Kermode– “a sense of transition” (Fiddes 10), rather than the sense of an ending. Though the prospects are grim, one feels that the options are not exhausted. The apocalypse serves satiric ends but tends to punish a whole culture for exalting, out of fear and guilt, an escapist messianic politics. The author departs from apocalyptic discourse that seeks a simple quick way out of history and exhorts the reader to action on the basis, not of a transcendent ideal, but of a new form of desire, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, the desire for change as production. The author seeks to shape the new awareness of the reader into a vitalist approach to life and reality and longs to see an Arab world teeming with free individuals, free from fear and guilt and ready for action and creation. The latest protest demonstrations in various Arab countries, which reflect a move from story to history, were held not by apocalyptists but by a new type of prophets who have overcome their fear and shaped their desire into action.

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