

## Algeria Unmasked: the fiction of Rachid Mimouni (1945–1995)

*Farida Abu-Haidar*

It has often been remarked that postcolonial literature is a faithful reflection of the social and political climate of the countries which produce it. Writers frequently use psychological insight to explore and project the life they see around them. This seems to be the case as far as Africa is concerned, where literary works, whether in English, French or the mother tongue of the writer in question, often appear to be living testaments of the world they depict. Algeria, for its part, has been a major contributor to the francophone output of Africa. One Algerian writer who can be credited with providing authentic documents of post-independence Algeria is the late Rachid Mimouni, who died in February 1995.<sup>1</sup> In just over a decade—from 1982, when his novel, *Le fleuve détournée*, was published, to 1993, when his last work, *La Malediction*, appeared—Mimouni was one of a handful of writers from the Maghreb who dominated the francophone literary scene. His works, which won a number of literary prizes, were translated into the major world languages, thus reaching a wider readership than the Maghrebian and French.

*Le Fleuve détournée* was the first of Mimouni's novels to be published in France. It was, however, his third novel. His first two, *Le Printemps n'en sera que plus beau* (1978) and *Une Paix à vivre* (1983) were published in Algeria. The author later admitted in an interview that both novels had been written several years before they were actually published.<sup>2</sup> They had also been heavily censored and cut. *Le Printemps n'en sera que plus beau* is Mimouni's only novel set during the Algerian war of independence (1954–1962). The title, that Spring cannot but be better, refers to the symbolic Spring of independence, a contrast to the 'chill' of the war years. And in order to emphasise the lack of warmth, Mimouni sets his novel in December, when it is always raining and cold. Narrated by several voices, the novel shows how young people of Mimouni's generation, who reached maturity during the war years, were full of hope and expectation as they waited for the war to end and for Algeria to be rid of colonial rule.

Once war was over and the much-awaited independence proclaimed, many Algerians found it difficult to come to terms with life in peacetime. *Une Paix à vivre*, Mimouni's second novel, describes the disillusionment of a group of young students for whom independence had promised much during wartime, but delivered little in peacetime. The work describes in detail the rebuilding of lives and the attempts at striking a balance between being citizens of an Islamic country, with its age-old traditions, and members of the new world order with its increasing technological innovations. The novel asks a number of important questions. How far should Arabisation be taken? Can science and technology be taught in Arabic? Does taking Algeria into the second half of the twentieth century mean an end to Islamic values?

Mimouni, as he often stated in interviews, was disenchanted with the way the censors and publishers had dealt with his novels. For his third work he chose the first French publisher whose name he chanced to find in a magazine.<sup>3</sup> The novel, which was published under the title *Le Fleuve détournée*, was an immediate success. It raised the relatively unknown Mimouni to the ranks of established writers from the Maghreb. Set in the years following independence, it describes the turmoil and havoc that occurs when autocratic leaders take power and rule a country despotically, squandering the wealth of the nation. The events are seen through the eyes of the central character, a poor man who had been severely injured in the war and as a result had lost his memory. When he

eventually recovers, he discovers that he had been taken to a neighbouring country and nursed back to health.

Back in Algeria he starts by looking for his wife and son. He discovers that his wife, who had given him up for dead, has turned to prostitution, her only means of survival. He finds that his son is one of thousands of aimless young men who have no prospects of employment and no hope of a good life. He and his generation are the very people the revolution seems to have betrayed. There is malnutrition and squalor everywhere in the country, yet those in power are oblivious of the basic needs of the people. They continue to squander money while the rest of the population goes hungry. The man sees that the only changes in the country are superficial ones: the latest refrigerators, colour television, Gruyère cheese, mini-skirts and rising inflation (p 49). The leaders who dream of building a prosperous country allow the birthrate to increase, but do not want to provide housing for the expanding population. They insist on the use of literary Arabic, which few people can understand (p 70). In trying to rebuild the country according to their whims, they seem to have left nothing unturned. They have even drawn straight lines on undulating hills, and diverted the course of the river which once flowed 'calm and free' (p 49).

Mimouni's fourth novel, *Tombéza* (1984), caused more of a stir than *Le Fleuve détournée*. In an interview, the author explained that he wrote these two novels because he could no longer tolerate certain conditions in his country.<sup>4</sup> *Tombéza* spares no detail in describing a population at the mercy of a few power-hungry individuals, and a society afflicted with hypocrisy and false beliefs. The narrator is the eponymous character, who, when the novel opens, is lying fatally wounded in a hospital bed, remembering his previous life. The illegitimate son of a girl who was sexually assaulted by a passing stranger when she was working in the fields, he is born badly deformed as a result of the blows his mother received during her pregnancy. He grows up hated and abused, and is even barred from entering the mosque to pray. Tombéza observes that in a society obsessed with a certain code of morals, a girl who has been forcefully assaulted is condemned and punished as if she were the perpetrator of the crime and not its victim (p 232), and the child she bears carries the stigma of her 'crime' throughout his life.

When he is older Tombéza goes to work on the farm of a French settler. After independence he finds employment in an Algiers hospital. Through his eyes, as he lies dying in hospital, we see a society laid bare, where typhoid, cholera and other diseases plague the country (p 166); religious bigotry is widespread (p 55), and cruelty is the order of the day (p 45). Like all primitive people, his compatriots are dazzled by technological innovations (p 170). Tombéza is shocked by their false piety and hypocrisy. It does not seem to matter to them how they behave in their private lives, as long as on the surface they maintain a veneer of respectability. 'Living without laws and without a conscience', he concludes, 'we cannot but close in on ourselves, and sooner or later we shall be overcome with nausea' (p 263).

Mimouni's fifth novel, *L'Honneur de la tribu*, was published in 1989.<sup>5</sup> Zitouna, the remote mountain village of the setting provides the backdrop to the events in the novel in much the same way as the hospital does in *Tombéza*. It is as if both the hospital and Zitouna were microcosms of Algeria. Zitouna's corrupt village elders hold sway over the rest of the inhabitants, who exist as if in a state of torpor. They are cut off from the rest of the world by the remoteness of their geographical location and by the efforts of the village elders who want to keep out modern civilisation from reaching them so that the age-old customs can go on undisturbed. They even forbid them to learn 'the language of the Christians...which can open the door for them to regular paid employment' (pp 33-34).

When the villagers are told that Zitouna has been designated county headquarters,

many are afraid that their isolated way of life will come to an end. When a new leader is appointed by the central government, he proves to be more cruel than the village elders. But the people of Zitouna succumb to his tyranny. They do not think that there is any point in rebelling. No sooner is one ruler deposed than another, more cruel than his predecessor, takes over. It is only towards the end of the novel, when an enlightened man comes to the village, that the people of Zitouna begin to understand that it is possible to go on maintaining their pride in their cultural heritage while at the same time being open to new ideas coming from outside their village.

*Le Fleuve détournée*, *Tombéza* and *L'Honneur de la tribu* are a trilogy of novels which depict the Algeria of post-independence years, as seen by a generation for whom independence did not prove to be the panacea they were led to believe it would be. Although the novels are specifically about Algeria, they are relevant to other countries with colonial histories and postcolonial single-party regimes.<sup>6</sup> *Une Peine à vivre*, Mimouni's next novel, which appeared in 1991, is a parable of power and corruption which can occur anywhere in the world where dictatorships are the order of the day. Set in a fictitious oil-producing country, once a colonial outpost, it describes the rise to power and eventual demise of a ruthless dictator. In a number of interviews following publication of the novel, Mimouni said that he chose a fictitious setting and nameless characters to make the point that all over the world there were despots and autocrats, who rose from insignificant origins to hold sway over whole populations, and on occasion to occupy centre stage in world politics.

The story is narrated by the central character, the dictator himself, who is referred to as *Le Maréchalissime*, the highest military authority in the land. The novel opens as he is about to be executed after having been toppled from power. As the rifles are pointed at him his whole life appears before him in a flash. As a child he was shunned and humiliated because of his humble origins. Early in life he learns that the only way to succeed is to lie and cheat to get to the top. The army offers him the opportunity to become powerful. This he does by showing no mercy to anyone he comes across, and getting rid of anyone he feels is in his way. He often repeats: 'I have nothing but disdain for life, and the people I have sacrificed, whether innocent or guilty, have never troubled my conscience' (p 15). When he reaches the highest military rank the leader of the country appoints him as head of state security.

In time he deposes the leader, confining him to a closely guarded subterranean prison before eventually having him executed. As the new self-appointed *Maréchalissime*, he becomes even more powerful and cruel than his predecessor. He is, however, aware of the evil that results from absolute power and recalls his predecessor's words: 'There is nothing more vile than power. It amounts to absolute depravity, utter evil, sheer villainy, horror on a day to day basis, the worst of calamities ... One has to thrust one's hands into shit to have some idea of what it is like'. (p 112). He is also well aware that ambition and drive are often the subterfuges of people from disadvantaged backgrounds who want to camouflage their feelings of inferiority and insecurity (p 61). Eventually he too is deposed and led to the very place where thousands of his subjects were put to death on his orders. Like them, he is made to face a firing squad.

Mimouni's last novel, *La Malediction*, was published in 1993, two years before he died. Having explored life in post-independence Algeria, with all its advantages and disadvantages, Mimouni in this novel tries to analyse the rise of religious fundamentalism in Algeria, its background and the reasons for its seeming popularity. With his characteristic linear, story-telling style, he introduces a number of characters, representing the many faces of Algeria. The novel is set mainly in a large Algiers hospital, similar to the one in *Tombéza*. Some of the events, however, take place outside the hospital, and even briefly in France. It is in and out of the hospital that the various characters drift.

There are the patients, some of whom are victims of crime, the result of growing unrest in the country. There are also the doctors, the orderlies and the nurses. Out of this amalgam of people, the reader discovers the old combatant who had taken part in the war of independence, the idealist obstetrician Kader, the central character, who cares for his patients, regardless of their social background or political affiliation, and the militant fundamentalist who turns to religious piety as fervently as he had turned to Marxism in the years immediately following independence. The events of the novel take place in June 1991, when the fundamentalists crippled the country by strikes, taking over important state buildings, like the hospital in the novel.

Mimouni has often been praised by some as a writer whose works expose his country and all its malaise. He has also been condemned by others as a controversial writer who, by raising highly sensitive issues, seems to be betraying his country. Anyone who has read a Mimouni work or listened to him during one of his many interviews, would find both opinions misguided. Mimouni was a man who both loved Algeria and felt most at home in it. He continued to live and work in Algeria, even though life there had become intolerable. He left when his life and that of his family were threatened. Unlike some Maghrebian intellectuals, he could not live in France and so moved to Tangier, saying that a Moroccan existence would be the closest he could find to an Algerian one.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the violence and corruption depicted in his novels, he was both a reflective and a peaceful man who firmly believed that the rebirth or salvation of any nation could only come from within, from those who love their country and their fellow citizens and yearn for a world which can accommodate different opinions and beliefs. This has been the viewpoint of a number of his compatriots. Mimouni's voice, therefore, was not a solitary one. But it was a voice which continued to ring loud and clear.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mimouni's novels are: *Le Printemps n'en sera que plus beau*, Algiers: SNED, 1978; *Une Paix à vivre*, Algiers: ENAL, 1983; *Le fleuve détournée*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1982; *Tombéza*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1984; *L'Honneur de la tribu*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989; *Une Peine à vivre* Paris Stock, 1991; and *La Malediction*, Stock, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> *Jeune Afrique*, 1618; 16 January 1992, pp 66–76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Jeune Afrique*, 1240, 10 October 1984, pp 76–80.

<sup>5</sup> This novel was reviewed in *Third World Quarterly* 12 (2), April 1990, pp 147–149. It has been translated into English as *The Honour of the Tribe* and published by Quartet.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Tahar Ben Jelloun's review of *L'Honneur de la tribu* in *Le Monde*, 28 July 1989.

<sup>7</sup> See the tribute by Tahar Ben Jelloun in *Le Monde*, 17 February 1995.

---

## Resisting repression in Nigeria: the lyric poetry of Femi Osofisan

### *Ode S Ogede*

Femi Osofisan, author of the singular book of poems *Minted Coins*,<sup>1</sup> which instantly won the Association of Nigerian Authors Award for 1987, may be better known for his work as a dramatist who has published over a dozen plays in Nigeria, but his work in the