# The Mediterranean Sea as a Utopian and Dystopian Space in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Partir*

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**Abstract**
*The Mediterranean cultural productions have enormously increased in recent years, mediated through fiction and non-fiction, cinematography and documentaries, and many other artistic forms. Consequently, the Mediterranean Sea has been subjected to multifaceted critical views and multidisciplinary discourses. Though different studies have demonstrated the discursive potentials and possibilities of the Sea, the relationship of the Mediterranean with Utopia, Utopianism and migration has not been given much critical attention it deserves in literary studies. This study problematizes the ambivalent character of the Sea as a utopia and dystopian space because it presents illusions of reality as it projects the dreamed Spanish landscape to be far and near. It employs Ashcroft's Postcolonial Utopianism to demonstrate how the Mediterranean generates a discourse of im/possibility premised on the transformative conceptions of future utopia through the agency of postcolonial memory in Tahar Ben Jelloun's Partir. The novel illustrates the anxieties of journeys that are provoked through the proximity of Morocco to Spain. This study discovers that the daily multiple gazes of potential Moroccan travelers at the Sea demonstrate the relationship between memory and conceived future in the text. The gazes constitute the catalyzing processes of the perception, perfection, and production of the postcolonial hope that inspires the adventure into terra incognito. The amalgamation of individual hopes results in the collective congestion of boats that*

*transforms the Mediterranean Sea from a "cape of good hope" to a "cemetery of drowned bodies". The study concludes that Ben Jelloun's text reflects the author's artistic ideology and his portrayal of the Mediterranean Sea as a key figure in the scramble for Europe through the waterways since the presence of the Sea reinforces the dichotomy between Africa and Europe.*

**Keywords**: *Postcolonial Utopianism, Utopian hope, Collective memory, Colonial history*

## Introduction

A critical work of this nature must begin by foregrounding what constitutes the Mediterranean questions and how they contribute to knowledge generation in cultural studies. The Mediterranean cultural productions have enormously increased in recent years, mediated through fiction and non-fiction, cinematography and documentaries, and many other artistic forms. This volume of literatures has given rise to what is presently referred to as Mediterranean studies in some Western universities. The Mediterranean discourse can be located in American, European, African, and Asian literatures, ancient and modern alike. Its modern creative writing has showcased an increased migratory consciousness of African youths who engage in desperate journeys to Europe through the Maghreb and the Mediterranean waterways.

It is important to understand why the Mediterranean Sea has been subjected to multifaceted critical views. In short, it has become many things to many peoples; it is perceived as a mythicized construction with ambivalent characteristics. From old and contemporary history, the Mediterranean has been a subject of varied interdisciplinary discourses and conversations. Its poetic ambivalence is implicated in the dynamism of its names. It has been described with coining epithets such as the "Friendly Sea", the "Faithful Sea", the "Bitter Sea", the "Corrupting Sea" among other nomenclatures (Abulafia xxxi). Recently, the "Sea of Deaths" has been added to its amalgam of names, metaphorically accounting for human tragedies of clandestine migration through the Mediterranean which has increased exponentially over the past two decades (Kassar & Dourgnon 11). Consequently, the sea "has practically

turned into a postmodern cemetery" (Gjergji 157). In addition, it is this last name that interests us in this work. Though, various literatures have examined the subject of migration through the Mediterranean Sea and its tragic consequences, it is migrant and travel writings that have dramatically and discursively captured this migratory phenomenon. This is given to the fact that literature is understood as "a privileged tool of establishing new discursivities not only in service of the dominated, but also in defense of the dominated and the losers" (Kuaszyk 301). However, most studies appear anthropocentric, they focus on the human without much attention to the non-human. It is needful to know that literary critical views can be based on the human and non-human components of any work of art. This discursive possibility explains why we have chosen to focus on the Mediterranean Sea as a key figure in the scramble for Europe through the waterways.

Our study problematizes the ambivalent character of the Mediterranean Sea as utopian and dystopian space in Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *Partir*. By utopian, we mean to say that the sea inspires hope and by dystopian, it is equally a replica of horror. The essential presence of the Sea reinforces the spatial dichotomy between Africa and Europe, and between us and them. The Mediterranean Sea, however, presents illusions of reality as it projects the dreamed Spanish landscape to be far and near; its endless currents incite hope and despair, faith and fear. We shall use Bill Ashcroft's Postcolonial Utopianism to demonstrate how the Mediterranean generates a discourse of im/possibility that is premised on the transformative conceptions of utopian hope in the future through the agency of postcolonial memory. The daily multiple gazes of potential Moroccan travelers on the Mediterranean Sea demonstrate the relationship between memory and their conceived Spanish future in the text. While the Mediterranean waters present a site for romanticization of the exoticized space, the migratory gazes constitute the catalyzing processes of the perception, perfection and production of the postcolonial hope that inspires the adventure into *terra incognito*. The travelers' utopian hope of displacement is partly constructed with the repressed rancor from Morocco's colonial history and some "bricks of hopelessness" from the dystopian nature of its society. Ben Jelloun's utopian hope, however, problematizes the imaginary territorialization of the Mediterranean as the dangerous journeys of many desperate Moroccans are represented as

retaliatory and reparative of Morocco's past colonial past. The amalgamation of individual hopes results in the collective congestion of boats because it appears that every young Moroccan or African has imbibed the feeling of fleeing to Europe. It is this desperate journey in overfilled boats that transforms the Mediterranean Sea from a "cape of good hope" to a cemetery of drowned bodies in Ben Jelloun's utopian and dystopian writing.

**Utopian and dystopian discourses**

For proper understanding, it is needful to trace a short history about utopian studies, thereby offering some conceptual clarifications. Since the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623) and Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1627) that inaugurated the epistemological and theoretical foundations for utopian imagination, the term *utopia* has been employed ubiquitously in social and literary studies to the point that Fredric Jameson, in his *Archaeologies of the Future*, describes utopia as "an unusual destiny of literary form" (xi) and whose space he defines as "an imaginary enclave within the real social space" (15). If "imaginary", it is an Eldorado, a vision of Voltaire's utopia which is an ideal society, where utility is "blended with charm, luxury with natural simplicity; comfort, good taste, an enlightened public-works policy, peace, happiness, liberty, equality, tolerance, wisdom, justice, deism." (Bottiglia 339) In his work, *The Safety Utopia*, Hans Boutellier justifies the utopian imagination by admitting that "the construction of utopias is motivated by dissatisfaction with the existing world. The torment of the existing world leads to the fantasy views on man and the world (Boutellier 36). In essence, it is the dystopian elements that construct the imaginary bricks of utopian worlds. In the case of Ben Jelloun, it's Morocco's dystopia that gives birth to the imaginative construction of Europe as an alternative better world. Gordin, Tilley and Prakash (2) explain that "whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly into a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future". It can be inferred that utopia and dystopia maintain a bond of ambiguity, continuity and symbiosis.

In this study, it will not be mainly a question of classic utopia or modern dystopia as a literary genre because Ben Jelloun's travel narratives do not correspond to the classical definitions of these genres. However, according to Ashcroft ("Spaces" 2), utopia is no longer a "literary or geographical place", but the spirit of hope itself, the essence of desire for

a better world. It is what Fabre (35) describes as "une catégorie de l'imagination" [category of the imagination] where utopia comes to be transformed in an imaginary activity from which it becomes difficult to isolate the components and specificities. This "category of the imagination" as a generic spirit refers to the concept of utopianism, and it is in this utopianist concept that our focus lies in Ben Jelloun's *Partir* where the phantasmal claim of the exotic places appears as a trope. And it is what differentiates the classical Utopia from other utopias and especially the postcolonial utopianism.

The utopian imaginative thinking is now theorized in postcolonial literature, elaborated in Ralph Pordzik's *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia*, which sees it as a new strategy for intervening in the given postcolonial and postexilic discourse (Pordzik 28). In Jain's ideas, utopianism and postcolonialism appear as "two counter-discourses of futurity" (Jain 108). If colonial utopia is recognized as a great idealism (Jain 112) based on the Western utopian fantasy for Africa or *terra incognito*, we must postulate that all postcolonial journeys are born from utopianism and contain a utopian strategy or what Jacques Derrida calls an "epistemological liberation" that allows us to learn from the immutable past as well as to reinterpret that past and imagine the future more skillfully (Jain 111). It should be noted that the utopian postcolonial literature is currently an emerging field that is interested in the utopian and dystopian writings of the peoples who have been affected by the imperial process (Dutton 34).

**Bill Ashcroft and postcolonial utopianism**

Ben Jelloun's utopianism is characteristic of postcolonial utopias, which, according to Ralph Pordzik, do not submit to the generic and cultural limits of the ways that transgress Western utopian traditions (Dutton 37). The diasporic writer uses discursive ambiguity, narrative irony, and postcolonial satire to launch what may be called counter-utopian rhetoric (Ngom 220) because his travel stories tacitly present us a *terra nullius*, which is an alternative and demystifying reality, difficult to frame conceptually in Western epistemologies, a kind of postcolonial futurism that Ronald Niezen (714) tries to problematize in his essay. And, to this extent, it is possible to attribute to Ben Jelloun's novels the potentiality of postcolonial literary heterotopies that are interested in positive and negative stereotypes of Africa, consciously employing them to construct

an effective counter-discourse at a political and representational level (Morosetti 49). It is his ambivalence that energizes the counter-discursive positionality of his stories. The post-colonial ambivalence explains the liminal life of the author and his characters who live in the "third space", a life that is shared between different cultures where identities intertwine and are negotiated (Abussamen and Neimneh 2). Ben Jelloun's double vision and the dual consciousness of his migrant characters, subjected to a theoretical analysis of postcolonial ambivalence, will illustrate the postcolonial situation that inspires the colonized and his art, "the subversion of history, the affective operation of memory and a creative vision of the future" (Ashcroft 94).

Although, postcolonial utopianism is inspired by theorists such as Sargent, Ashcroft, and Pordzik, we shall rely on Bill Ashcroft's theorization to analyze the utopian and dystopian elements of the ambivalent Mediterranean space in Ben Jelloun's *Partir*. This migrant text is concerned with young Moroccans' desperate journeys to Spain through the Mediterranean Sea. Our choice of Ashcroft's postcolonial utopianism is based on its conceptual fusion of utopian thinking with postcolonial memory and ambiguity because "while utopias are often set in the future, utopianism cannot exist without the operation of memory" (Ashcroft "Ambiguous" 9). This memory "is not about recovering the past that was present but about the production of possibility" (Ashcroft "Spaces" 6-7). In this study, we shall demonstrate that a discourse of im/possibility, which is omnipresent in all postcolonial literatures, is based on the transformative conceptualization of the utopian hope of the future, constructed with the aid of postcolonial memory and postcolonial narrative techniques such as ambivalence, double consciousness and satire. In doing so, the author illustrates, albeit covertly, that "literature has the capacity and ability to imagine a different world" (Ashcroft "Remembering" 705); he does not propose a material utopia, but shows us the "postcolonial utopian imagination [that] is especially fraught with dilemmas and improbabilities" (Niezen 728). According to Ashcroft ("Spaces" 2), postcolonial writing is "suffused with future thinking, with a utopian hope for the future, a belief in the reality of liberation, the possibility of justice and of equality, in the transformative power of the writing and at times in the potential global impact to be made by the postcolonial societies." His utopianism traces a different trajectory from the Marxist utopianism that dominated the utopian contemporary theory (Ashcroft "Ambiguous" 9), rejects the acceptance of European universalism as Western imperialism, and celebrates the rejection of grand

narratives' 'grand narratives and formless visions of the future (Niezen 717, 728). With the above explanations, it can be said that postcolonial utopianism has an inherent counter-discursive and deconstructive agenda since it embodies the desire for the transformation of the present and the construction of the future. It is needful to commence with justifying the ambivalence of the Mediterranean space in *Partir*, that is, how it contributes in constructing and deconstructing the utopian hope of realizing the myth of Europe as Eldorado.

**The Ambivalence of the Mediterranean, Romanticized Gazes and Appropriated Space**

There are recurring allusions to the Mediterranean waters in *Partir,* which are symbolic liaisons to the representation of imaginary territories and borders. The Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean are two waterways that link Morocco and Europe together, incidentally constituting intercontinental maritime borders and demonstrating the notion of the arbitrariness of geography and its production of imaginary borders (See Renan 18). In Ben Jelloun's text, the Mediterranean Sea is seen playing conspiratorial roles in the penetration of Europe through transgression of abstract borders, and it remains a subject of male and female gaze because "the sea is symbolic of wider opportunities (Muhr 194) for the young Moroccan gazers who "regardent la mer" (Ben Jelloun 11), and begin to receive the utopian impulse to travel to Europe at all cost. The great waters of the Mediterranean become an imagery space of inspiration and despair, analogous to Biblical Red Sea that separated the Israelites from the "Promised Land" whose crossing remained a *Sine qua non* for the appropriation of the axiomatic "land of milk and honey". Azel who is the protagonist of the novel is part of Tangier's community of sea gazers. Ben Jelloun (50) reports one of his numerous gazes in this way:

> Le paquebot s'alignait doucement le long du quai. Azel leva les yeux, aida les manœuvres à installer l'échelle. Des voyageurs quittaient le bateau en riant. Il eut envie d'y monter, de se faufiler et d'y rester.

The maritime horizon constitutes to Azel and other Moroccan sea gazers a seascape that incites a desire that entails a duty, aspiration that gives perspiration, and a calmness that releases tension. Such tension builds up and reflects on Azel's sad disposition, contrasted with the "voyageurs…en riant", a sign of fulfilment. The Sea creates this illusion of proximity and

possibility to Europe, meaning that without it, desperate journeys cannot be a contemplation of the Moroccan migrants. The evocation of sea elements such as liner and boat is indicative because of their relationship with spatial conquest. Olaoluwa (179) argues, "…ships in the histories of imperialism are crucial to the various experimental epochs", especially the depredation and exploitation of Spanish "Armada". Sea vessels that acted as a catalyst to the "middle passage" and "triangular commerce" now play a role of mechanism to transgressions of European borders. The sight of vessels suggests possibilities, so the schoolgirl, Malika's contemplations emanate from her dreaming of a better life abroad, culminating into what Mary Pratt (235) calls "traveler's rhetoric of destination and destiny".

Before seeing Spain physically, Azel is used to watching the sea, vessels and travelers embark and disembark. Malika, his neighbor, even travels in dreams. This psycho-travel remains a configuration of real travel, an antidote for impatience that is manifested in the exotic life of mock travelers in the homeland. The unconscious attitude which Homi Bhabha psychoanalytically calls "scopic drive" (Huddart 28), that is, the drive that represents the pleasure of 'seeing' produces the postcolonial anxiety/fantasy of traveling to Europe through the waters in characters such as Azel, Malika and the host of other jobless Moroccan youths. Water is seen as a source of life, that is the Mediterranean Sea facilitates a passage to European landscape and enables the Moroccan migrants to experience a 'paradisiacal' pleasure of Europe. In Ben Jelloun's *Les Yeux baissés*, Fathma calls the sea "étrange personnage" [strange character] of her dreams (Ben Jelloun 97) because it is the integral part of every Moroccan project of "brûler" [traveling clandestinely], playing a collaborative role in the exploration of the 'other'. The oxymoronic nature of "étrange personnage" mystifies the sea, unveils its unpredictability and its characteristic polarity. The Mediterranean water therefore becomes what Muhr (202) calls, "a symbol of spiritual trials", eventually leading to untimely death and grave of Moroccan youngsters in *Partir* which is typical of a novel of underground crossing of Moroccans who dream of a "world without borders". Ben Jelloun's poetics creates a symbiosis between the body and the borders that is more ideological than dialogical.

The Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean separate Morocco from Europe. Morocco's proximity to Europe and Spain particularly creates this irresistible panoramic contemplation that becomes romantic, erotic and psychological in Ben Jelloun's *Partir*. Coates agrees that space can also be an object of consumption becoming a touristic space of leisure. The esplanade of Boulevard Pasteur which gives an aerial view of the sea

provides the protagonist with this imaginary experience of amorous 'foreplay' through the contemplation of "les lumières de Tarifa". Azel takes a promenade along the coastline; he watches the vessels embark and disembark, likes to listen to engine noise and shouts from sailors, and plunges into reveries. Like her neighbor Azel, Malika visits also this "terrasse des Paresseux" from where she observes the port and the Spanish coasts before going to school. It is her daily repetitive adventure that energizes the utopian imagination of the European exotic space. Although sick and living with her sister, the daydream of crossing the Mediterranean remains immortal in Malika. She still locates a little terrace that gives overview of the sea. From this platform, Ben Jelloun (124) describes metaphorically Malika's 'homosexual relationship' with Mother Nature:

> Malika s'y installait et fermait les yeux. Le vent caressait ses cheveux qu'elle lâchait, elle se laissait emporter le plus loin possible sans faire d'effort, sans prononcer un cri ou un mot. Elle était heureuse de planer au-dessus d'une mer d'un bleu limpide.

The female character's body shows passivity as the receiver of the action of 'caressing' and 'carrying'. Without resistance, Malika reveals possible permission and evident gratification; her utopian impulse for Europe has attained a neurotic proportion. The morpho-syntactic permutation of narrated experience is romantic and erotic, culminating into an idyllic reverie of imaginary transition and relocation. The sea wears a coat of polarized ambivalence, creating a culture of hope and hopelessness, becoming a bridge to heaven and hell, reducing and elongating the distance to Spain at the same time. Other faceless characters engage in this romantic contemplation, like those found in le café Hafa. This quixotic observation without 'penetration' is analogous to possible admiration of a beautiful female body without touch. It leads to psychological and emotional torment of observers, and culminates into premeditated rape of the fantasized European body, symbolic of illegal penetration of European borders. They now avoid le café Hafa's platform that gives rise to this unrealistic and unconsummated romanticization of abroad; to them, Europe is a "territoire interdit" (Ben Jelloun 62), or blocked boundaries with electronic surveillance. When a border or body is enclosed, it acquires a nature of impenetrability and a risk of forceful penetration, which is the only action needed for the realization of utopian hope. This is what constitutes the travelers' "utopian strategy" (Jain 111) or their

"spiral of revolutionary hope" (Ashcroft "Futures" 105) in Ben Jelloun's text as we shall illustrate in the next section.

**Utopian Hope: Postcolonial Memory and the Future**

In *Partir,* the myth of Europe gives birth to and emanates from the utopian hope of African migrants, enabling what Alami (13) calls "transactional desire and the anxiety of crossing". Ben Jelloun's migrant writing demonstrates the utopian fantasies about Europe that becomes Africans' *terra nova* or *terra nullius;* he does not "propose fixed, rigid utopias but compose open models that enable the readers to create their own visions of a better society" (Kesler 91). By doing so, Ben Jelloun "suggests a certain criticism and skepticism towards Europe and its border politics of non-hospitality" (Frank 93); he, however, does not insulate Africa and Morocco from blames, though it is done covertly and poetically. The postcolonial utopianism of the writer entails an investigation into the dynamic operationality of the utopian imagination and hope of his characters.

Almost all characters (Azel, Malika, Noureddine, Siham and others) in *Partir* are obsessed with the social dreaming of displacement to Spain. This aligns with the fact that "as long as the border prevents transgression, the space beyond it remains a space of potentiality, which can only be occupied by imagination" (Urban 418) So, the daily multiple gazes of these potential Moroccan travelers on the Mediterranean Sea establish the relationship between utopian imagination and their conceived Spanish future in the text. While the Mediterranean waters present a site for the romance of the exoticized space, the migratory gazes constitute the catalyzing processes of the perception, perfection, and production of the postcolonial hope that inspires the adventure into *terra incognito*. The travelers' utopian hope of displacement is partly constructed with the repressed rancor from Morocco's colonial history and some "bricks of hopelessness" from the dystopian nature of its society.

Let us start with the disillusionment of Moroccan postcoloniality since "the construction of utopias is motivated by dissatisfaction with the existing world" (Boutellier 36). It is Azel's mother who trained him in higher education with the hope of giving him and herself a future, but he remains unemployed after several efforts to secure a job. He is heartbroken and hopeless. His episodic gaze at the Mediterranean, contemplations that feed his utopian imagination and keep his utopian hope alive only relieve him. The gazes equally grant him some psychological succor as he

assesses the Spanish exotic landscape through a daydream. The narrator presents his utopian imagination to buttress the relationship between space and psyche, movement and mentality, and dream and disillusion by saying:

> Azel, pendant ce temps, s'évadait en pensée. Il était maintenant installé à la terrasse d'un des grands cafés de la Plaza Mayor à Madrid. Il faisait beau, les gens étaient souriants, une jeune touriste allemande lui demandait son chemin, il l'invitait à prendre un verre…. (Ben Jelloun 28)

Though, he is corporally present in Moroccan Tangier, Azel gains access to Spanish scenery, to Spanish human and physical geography through the vehicle of imagination, having the ecstasy of a conqueror of contested landscapes, and inviting a female tourist to have a drink with him. The protagonist's ability to describe alien places such as Plaza Mayor shows his cartographical knowledge of Spanish territory, which could have been acquired through popular culture. He remains lost in this mental paradise until the voice of the recruiter of border crossers brought him back to Tangier, his space of departure. It is evident that he only sees his displacement as a practical plan and process of recovery from his postcolonial malaise in Tangier which Frank (87) describes as a "claustrophobic space in that the doors to the future remain closed and the hopelessness pervading the Moroccan characters has led to a general paralysis." In his valedictory epistolary ode to Morocco before his departure for Spain, a journey facilitated by his Spanish homosexual lover, Miguel who lives and works in Tangier, the protagonist writes about his raison d'être:

> Cher Pays,
> Aujourd'hui est un grand jour pour moi, j'ai enfin la possibilité, la chance de m'en aller, de te quitter, de ne plus respirer ton air, de ne plus subir les vexations et humiliations de ta police…ma terre n'a pas été clémente, ni avec moi ni avec beaucoup de jeunes de ma génération…. (Ben Jelloun 88-89)

With his passport and other traveling documents at hand, Azel's migration has been sealed. He now writes from the airport to his country. The letter is the proverbial last respect to a dead man (Morocco), a valedictory "honor" to his country which he ironically refers to as "cher pays". His departure is premeditated and premised on Morocco's inability to shelter

her citizens, provide for them and assure them of their future. The represented Morocco symbolizes a dystopian homeland whose atmosphere is ecologically biocidal and economy impoverishing. He alludes to the homosexual rape in police custody and casts blame on his country as a means of justifying his departure. His utopian imagination for Europe is not accidental; it grows from his everyday dystopian experiences and culminates into what Alami (6) calls "transit dreams". Let us return to the question of postcolonial memory and its relationship with utopian hope.

Ashcroft has emphasized the impossibility of utopian hope without the functionality of memory, though he admits that "memory is not about recovering a past but about the production of possibility." (Ashcroft "Futures" 100). In his writing, Ben Jelloun does not attempt a recovery of the past, but a "appropriation of the past and the unearthing of alternative versions of historical narratives" (Flannery 50). The words of Abbas, a Moroccan immigrant, reveal that before Moroccan independence, the Spanish were in Morocco as beggars, barbers, street sweepers, bus drivers, all badly dressed worse than Moroccans, without immigration papers. Few years after independence, Abbas was refused visa without any tangible reason despite long queue and indiscreet filling of documents at the Embassy. He said: "Alors, là, je me suis enervé, j'ai juré d'entrer dans leur pays sans aucun papier, anonyme, comme Superman…" (Ben Jelloun 190) Though economic factors are generally behind mass movement of people, Abbas' utopian dream for Europe can be termed retributive, revolutionary and revengeful, apart from being escapist and solipsistic. He narrates his ordeals in different countries of Europe: his sufferings, imprisonment, hunger, inhuman treatment, and sea travails. The epistolary subtext of the novel justifies these retributive journeys towards Spain and other European countries. In his diary, Miguel's father narrated how they ended up "quitter clandestinement l'Espagne pour le Maroc" (Ben Jelloun 247), without passport or permit in 1951. He praised the city of Tangier for its cosmopolitanism and splendor, because it was a melting pot of all peoples: Americans and Europeans inclusive. The discovery of Miguel's father's journal appears to be a moral sanction for utopian hope which can be fulfilled through clandestine migration.

Abbas is one of the illegal immigrants who has successfully relocated to Spain. Most of these undocumented migrants are ironically represented as criminals. All their criminalities and illegal trades are, however, signs of resistance to and appropriation of European territories,

being now annexed in the imaginary of postcolonial subjects and identities. Abbas' discourse on his travelling escapades in Europe and Islamo-Spanish relationship exposes this imaginary annexation of a Spanish landscape by Muslims and Maghrebians especially because they "pensent reconquérir ce que leurs ancêtres ont perdu" (Ben Jelloun 192) centuries past. Abd al-Wahab, a Moroccan immigrant and businessman in Barcelona, confirms this claim by his declaration as reports Ben Jelloun (286):

> Nous sommes ici dans le pays de nos ancêtres, ceux qu'Isabel la Catholique à expulsés après avoir fait ériger des bûchers où des hommes de foi, des musulmans, dont nous sommes les descendants, ont été brulés.

Our analysis reveals that postcolonial utopianism does not engage in the recovery, but in the appropriation of historical past through postcolonial memory. The African utopian fantasy for Europe is both counter-colonialism and counter-conquest since "narrative utopias serve as a way of both telling and making modern history" by "…critically dismantling already existent social and cultural norms and forms (Wegner 34). It is apparent that traditional history is being challenged through the character's claim that Spain is "le pays de nos ancêtres". Abbas' utopian imagination and impulse are fuelled by his collective memory of histories of conquest and imperialism. Although his dystopic experiences in Europe do not justify his utopian hope, he is fortunate and satisfied being in the country of his ancestors. Other migrants died in the Mediterranean Sea.

**Dystopian Elements of the Mediterranean Sea**

In the writing of the Moroccan diasporic writer, European borders and boundaries typify an exotic female body that is attractive and repulsive, open and hermetic, and offensive and defensive. The evocation of spatial imageries of the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean, constantly flowing, fleeing, and furious, suggests simplified penetration of the European landscape to Maghrebian and African clandestine migrants who end up drowned. The Mediterranean Sea as a spatial element becomes active not passive player, the space becomes a character in its own right to spare or take life. It is often said that it is dystopia that inspires utopia, but in Ben Jelloun's postcolonial utopianism, all spaces are potential utopias and dystopias. By this, we recognize the dystopian elements in the

characterization of the Mediterranean Sea, which does not appear chronological but cyclical in his travel narrative.

Ben Jelloun's *Partir* opens with a sad news that "la mer rejette les cadavres de quelques noyés" (Ben Jelloun 13), allusions to deaths of drowned crossers and Al Afia, a doyen of clandestine sea crossing to Europe through the Mediterranean. It is necessary to know that "parmi les corps mutilés, peut-être mangés par les requins, celui de Noureddine était encore intact" (Ben Jelloun 31) One of the unfortunate crossers is Azel's close cousin and bosom friend, Noureddine whose utopian desire for the Spanish landscape becomes dashed by the raging waves of the Mediterranean Sea. It demonstrates that dystopia is only a "utopia that has gone wrong or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 1). The young man is part of twenty-four drowned crossers that the Spanish Guardia Civil d'Almeria refused to rescue. His body is buried in company of others in a local cemetery. Noureddine ends up losing his life and 20000 dirhams paid to Al Afia. The Mediterranean is mirrored as a source of hope and life to few, it becomes a source of death to many. As Ringe (583) puts it, "the sea serves here a double purpose for the individual; it invites 'the soul to wander for a spell in abyss of solitude; to lose itself in the mazes of inward contemplation". The realistic elements of Ben Jelloun's discourse sanction his portrayal of the Sea as cruel and crafty because his story "follows a realist style of narrative, which deduces the possible world of representation from the conditions of the actual world" (Urban 424). He inadvertently maintains some ethical ambivalence as both Morocco and Spain proportionately share the blame for the fatal destinies of crossers.

To buttress the fact that "a utopian desire aminates dystopic text" (Prakad 2), we shall use the dystopia of Siham, Azel's girlfriend who eventually relocated to Spain. Siham and other Moroccans had attempted to transgress the borders and the narrator summarizes her experience in these words:

> Les agents de la Guardia Civil les attendaient à l'aube sur la plage, ils étaient camouflés comme en temps de guerre. Elle fut arrêtée, interrogée puis raccompagnée à Tanger où la police marocaine l'avait tabassée (Ben Jelloun 42)

Siham is also involved in these desperate journeys to Europe using the Mediterranean as a means of actualizing her utopian dream. However, her harsh experience, in the hands of the Spanish police, never deters her from

incubating other plans towards illegal crossing to Spain. It can be inferred that Ben Jelloun's novel provides "an opportunity to reconfigure the debate about immigration so that the task of the critic is focused on the fragmented subjectivities and vulnerabilities that emerge as a result of the horrendous practices experienced before, during, and after the crossing of the Straits" (Alami 6). Alternatively, it can be referred to what Shailja Patel calls "migrant attitudes", "the loud and proud diasporic voices that would speak out against systemic national and international expropriation of movement from non-white people" (Foster 110). The narrator's description of the agents of "la Guardia Civil" shows a sort of militarization of the Spanish borders. If the migrants succeed in crossing the sea without drowning, they have to contend with the tyranny of the Spanish police. The choice of the Mediterranean Sea as escape route to Europe despite its eminent dangers is firstly caused by widespread poverty in Morocco, and secondly by endless refusals of Spanish visas at embassy.

In his migrant text, Ben Jelloun expands the meaning of the word "brûler" which originally can be interpreted "to burn" to mean "migrate to Europe through a clandestine crossing of the Mediterranean" or to transgress the borders clandestinely. The constant usage of *brûler* as a verb in the text reinforces the connotative notion and constant motion of migratory clandestinity in the Maghreb and Morocco in particular. For lack of money for air travels and the probability of visa refusal, youths such as Noureddine, Siham attempt to *brûler* without success. The narrator reports that Hamou "a brûlé une partie de la mer dans une barque et une autre à la nage" (Ben Jelloun 195) [crossed part of the sea by boat and the other by swimming]. He ends up with pneumonia after successfully crossing to Spain. Hamou is lucky to have ended up with sickness. Some are drowned and their bodies mutilated by sharks. Few others are fortunate to cross over successfully but they have to face the wrath of the Spanish police with its modern gargets for close monitoring of the borders and waters.

The colossal failure of the law enforcement agents warrants the modernization of reinforcement against illegal crossing of borders. For example, a piece of media news is related by Ben Jelloun (48) who says:

> L'Espagne venait très récemment d'installer le long de ses plages un système de surveillance électronique, avec ultra infrarouge, armes automatiques, ultrason, ultra tout…Les clandestins pourraient être repérés avant même qu'ils décident de quitter le pays!

"La Guardia Civil", "electronic system of surveillance", and "automatic weapons" among others are imageries that existentialize the materiality and physicality of imagined borders, exclude and include visitors, thereby polarizing migrants into legal or illegal, wanted or unwanted, native and foreigner in a given space. These human and electronic agents are empowered by laws to maintain Spanish imagined territoriality and give its imaginary borders an air of impenetrability and invincibility. Unfortunately, they equally double the dystopic experiences of Moroccan migrants who attempt to use the Mediterranean as access to the Spanish countryside. The author's portrayal of fluid borders and vulnerable territories constitutes his means of problematizing the territorialization of the Mediterranean space.

**Problematizing the Territorialization of the Mediterranean Space**

Ben Jelloun uses his postcolonial utopianism to challenge the politics of borders and to underscore the poetics of "transnation" as Frank (80) admits that the novel is "a privileged place to examine border politics". Ashcroft ("Urbanism" 504) defines transnation as the constant movement of people within, around, and between the structures of the State, a movement that questions the primacy of the nation but also suggests the possibility of liberation even in the process of exclusion and displacement The politics of geography emanates from and leads to the Eurocentric appropriation and territorialization of spaces. Territorializing landscapes introduce the use of passports and visas which Hunter (33) calls "an indication of the loss of authority of the traveler, the imposition of the authority of the State"; it equally embodies the "celebration of nationalism and imperialism". Hegemonic appropriation of space might not have been possible if man has not understood the "power of maps" which Wood (71) believes, symbolizes the interest of their authors and heralds "the naturalization of the cultural", and "the *culturalization* of the natural". With the maps, there is a social construction of the border (Wood 19) or materialistic production of the borders that emanates from what Hyndman (316) refers to as the notion of "geopolitics of mobility" which assures that "international borders are more porous to capital than to displaced migrants like refugees".

Politicizing geography deliberately inscribes the power of choice to nations that determine who enters or who leaves, while guaranteeing the hermeticism of national borders and boundaries. It can be unequivocally said that all locations carry meanings and intentions of

designers, controllers, and users, but people are to some extent, capable of re-appropriating space by giving it meaning and using it in their ways. Ben Jelloun's postcolonial utopian discourse is, about appropriation of exotic space, illustrated through the poetics of clandestinity that give rise to undocumented immigrants such as Azel, Abbas, and others in Barrio Gótico who go underground and become an eternal fugitive, though constituting the immigrant inhabitants of Spain's La Goutte d'Or. This army of illegal Maghrebian immigrants who evade all attempts to repatriate them is representational of episodic battles of 'belonging' and 'exclusion' and 'reassertion of space', inherent in contested landscapes. Azel whose papers had expired refused to submit himself for repatriation to Morocco, like those Malian and Senegalese immigrants who were tricked into submission and eventual deportation by the Spanish authority (Ben Jelloun 274-275). Other characters such as a Nigerian prostitute, Abbas, Nazim, Soumaya, and all inhabitants of immigrant ghettos in Spain who refuse to go back to their homeland and resist being deported are laying claim to exotic interstitial spaces. This claim that incites their refusal to return home is linked to their utopian fantasy for Europe, but sustained by their collective memory from colonial experience that seeks a reparation from the West. Ben Jelloun's ethical ambivalence justifies the utopianism of his illegal immigrants whose actions he neither condemns nor encourages in his writing. He presents these *sans papiers* with all realistic crudeness by saying:

> Tu vois tous ces gars qui n'ont pas de travail, qui rôdent dans les gares, sur les grandes places, qui ont transformé le Barrio Chino en souk, qui ont fait du Barrio Gótico une médine sale, ils n'ont rien à faire, ils attendent, bricolent, d'ailleurs, j'en fais partie, mais moi, je suis plus malin, … (Ben Jelloun 173)

The lives of illegal Moroccan immigrants to Spain are summarized in the above passage: their frustration, joblessness, pick pocketing and life of fugitive. Their crimes are used as subversive practices for laying claim to the Spanish territory and for affirming their neglected presences in Europe. The representation of unsuccessful immigrants and their woes problematizes the utopian fascination that gives birth to the myth of Europe; however, their unfavorable exilic condition does not bring to an end this myth because of their postcolonial memory.

**Conclusion**

Ben Jelloun's Mediterranean discourse is inherent with border politics and poetics because his migrant text is postcolonially both narratorial and ideological. In his narratorial discourse "he oscillates between empathy and distance, compassion and critique, and neither condemns Europe and Morocco completely" (Frank 94). His ideological discourse "suggests a certain criticism and skepticism towards Europe and its border politics of non-hospitality" (Frank 93). These two positions are possible because of Ben Jelloun's hyphenated identity as a diasporic writer. It is the logic of his narrative that opens our eyes to his subtle politics and poetics. Europe's sacralization of territories results in the mass transgression of its maritime borders, an object of female and male gazes in his writing. We have linked these gazes to utopian fantasy, which can only be explained through postcolonial utopianism. These migratory contemplations constitute the catalyzing processes of the perception, perfection, and production of the postcolonial hope that inspires the adventure into Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. It is evident that Ben Jelloun's postcolonial utopianism makes a mockery of the dialectic between utopia and fantasy, between Africa and Europe, and between reality and illusion. He unsettles the utopian mythification of Europe by depicting the unpalatable conditions of African immigrants in Spain. In essence, Spain (Europe) is not different from Morocco (Africa) as both are capable of producing utopian and dystopian experiences.

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