

Challenging Silence: Poetics of Representation in Taher Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* and Carlos Liscano's *Truck of Fools*

**Ibrahim Sayed Fawzy
Fayoum University
Egypt**

1. Introduction

Political prison writers are the "writers of trauma whose works are marked by a primary testimony function" (Livescu 2013, 221). Prisoners have documented their incarceration experience since prisons existed. Paul Gready argues that being a political prisoner means being "variously written" and "contested through writing" (489). In her structure of torture, Elaine Scarry postulates that inflicted pain is objectified, denied as personal pain and read as fiction of state power (28). Political prison memoirs help former prisoners reconstruct their past and "restore their [destroyed] voice" (50). Furthermore, they give sense to the period of incarceration; a period that forms a gap in the political prisoners' personal history. Writing contradicts the notion that the experience of incarceration destroys the prisoners' world and does not help them form a real world because it helps them reintegrate themselves as political citizens. In *Truck of Fools* (2004), Carlos Liscano declares the importance of writing for political prisoners' journey of survival: "I won't know what to do with my life, except one thing, making a clean copy of my papers from prison: *La mansión del tirano, El informante, the diary of El informante, my poems, my notes. And I will dedicate myself to writing. [. . .] Writing, until further notice, will be the center of my life*" (119-120; italics in the original).

Indeed, resistance and survival are the most significant themes in political prison narratives since for political prisoners to resist is to survive. Prisoners of conscience dedicate themselves to uncover the inhumane conditions of prisons and to keep the experiences of their fellow inmates alive in the collective memory, so their sacrifices do not go in vain; political prison narratives are "testimony to the ultimate victory of truth over power" (Chergui 38). Political prisoners relate the act of writing to their search for freedom. Therefore, this paper aims to compare the representations of torture, body and voice in Taher Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2002) and Carlos Liscano's *Truck of Fools* (2004).

This paper borrows eclectic concepts from interdisciplinary studies; Erving Goffman's concept of "total institution," Elaine Scarry's comprehensive and detailed theoretical definition and analysis of torture and Judith Herman's study of trauma provide the framework for this paper.

2. Contextualization

2.1 Uruguay: The MLN- Tupamaros

The MLN-Tupamaros (The Movimiento de Liberación Nacional; National Liberation Movement, in English) was a Marxist urban guerrilla group formed in Uruguay in 1962 when the "Switzerland of South America" (Di Stefano 170), Uruguay, suffered from severe inflation, rising unemployment and political unrest. The name Tupamaro is derived from the well-known Inca rebel Tupac Amará who tried to set his people free from the Spanish in 1780 and 1781. The strikes of sugarcane and sugar beets cutters led by Raúl Sendic Antonaccio, a lawyer from Montevideo, gave rise to the Tupamaros that encouraged the young people's commitment to politics (166). Believing that actions speak louder than words, the Tupamaros adopted armed struggles as the only way to achieve their aim that was socialist revolution. The Tupamaros' creative tactics including military actions threatened the country's government as they incited *focos* (literally means central of attention); a term coined by Ernesto "Che" Guevara and formally theorized by Régis Debray in his seminal book *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (1967) to refer to armed struggles and strategic strikes, in an urbanized society. Inspired by Guevara, the Tupamaros believed that to carry forward a resistance, an organization does not have to "wait until all objective and subjective conditions exist", yet "the armed struggle (*focos*) can create them" (Wilson 55). Because they thought that the regime "served a handful of privileged people" (qtd. in Porzencanski 5), they sought to awaken the national awareness so as to combat the "bourgeois nation-state" and then moved forward to awaken the continental awareness by eliminating "the global imperialist system" (qtd. in Di Stefano 167). During the period that followed the coup d'état that took place on June 27, 1973, the military regime tortured, imprisoned, suppressed and oppressed the Tupamaros to the extent that made Uruguay seem as the "torture chamber of South America" (168). After the-

se thirteen years of military role, Uruguay moved peacefully towards democracy and Julio Maria Sanguinetti became the first democratically elected president of Uruguay in March 1985.

2.2 Morocco: *Sanawāt al-Ġamr wa ar-Raṣāṣ*¹

King Hassan II formed the first Moroccan constitution in 1962 that enabled him to manipulate and supervise both the government and the parliament. The political parties, thenceforth, encouraged people to go on strikes and demonstrate so as to achieve democracy, so Morocco witnessed "a bloody war between monarchy and the leftist political parties" since King Hassan II used violence and "oppression to stifle any opposing voice"(Elaissi 658). The 1970s started in Morocco with two successive failed coups led by Generals Maḍbūḥ in 1971 and Muḥammad Oufkir in 1972. The leaders of the coups were publicly executed and used as a spectacle for those who would dare to challenge the monarchy, yet the soldiers who participated in the coups whether knowingly or not were sent to Tazmamart², a notorious Moroccan detention camp. Also, the early 1970s witnessed many protests from students and opposition groups including 'Ila al-'mām led by Abraham Sirfāty, *Li-naḥdim al-sh'b* and 23 March movement headed by Muḥammad Karfāty; members of these leftist groups were arrested, tortured, mutilated, disappeared and persecuted for years. Although they called for an egalitarian and democratic Moroccan society, they were accused of constituting a threat to national security. Susan Slymovics in her article,

¹ Scholars disagree over the exact period that is called in Arabic *as-Sanawāt as-Sandā'*, *Sanawāt al-Ġamr wa ar-Raṣāṣ* (in English: The Years of Lead) (in French: Les Années de Plomb and Les Années Noires). Some scholars argue that this period is limited to King Hassan II's rule (1961-1999), while others think that this period started with the independence of Morocco in 1956.

² Tazmamart was a notorious clandestine prison in Morocco (1973-1991). It was located in south-eastern Morocco in the Atlas Mountains in what is now called Errachidia governorate. It was established in 1973 after the second coup d'état in 1972 "to make 'disappear' 58 soldiers and officers who participated in the two coups d'état" (El Guabli, 2020, 2). In the collective imagination, Tazmamart was an equivalent to "ghabra," meaning disappearance in Moroccan Arabic (El Guabli 2018, 172). Survivors of Tazmamart have authored very rich political prison literature. For more information about the Moroccan most infamous prison called Tazmamart and the chilling testimonial literature produced by Tazmamart survivors, listen to episode 50 entitled "Tazmamart" of Bulaq podcast co-hosted by Ursula Lindsey and Marcia Lynx Qualey at <https://www.sowt.com/ar/podcasts/episode/tazmamart> (June 20, 2020).

"The Argument from Silence: Morocco's Truth Commissions and Women Political Prisoners," states that "the death of King Hassan II on July 23, 1999, was a watershed moment [. . .] In 1990, King Hassan II established the Advisory Council on Human Rights [. . .] modeled on a similar French institution, to rehabilitate the regime's reputation for repression. These efforts intensified after the king's death" (88). On January 7, 2004, King Muḥammad VI established the non-judicial *Hay'at al-'Inṣāf wa al-Muṣalaḥa* (Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC), in English) to investigate the rampant human rights violations of the past.

Out of the fifty-eight men, who were imprisoned in the secret detention of Tazmamart, only twenty-eight survived to narrate their stories. The fifty-eight detainees were divided into two groups of twenty-nine each and housed in two cell blocks; cell block A and cell block B. Only three detainees survived in cell block B where Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2002) takes place. Before orders were given to evacuate Tazmamart in 1991, the detainees lived for eighteen years in which they "were dealt the same daily ration of dry bread and diluted coffee, heard the same stories, and took part in the same conflicts and struggles to make their whereabouts known to their families and the outside world" (Sellman 71). The international attention to the notorious prison of Tazmamart and its grave environment made the narratives written in Tazmamart or about it, described as "personal, collective and national," renowned in Morocco and around the world (71).

The first coup d'état took place on July 10, 1971 when King Hassan II was celebrating his forty-second birthday at Skhirat palace in the presence of the most prominent men in Morocco including businessmen, artists, army personnel and diplomats. General Muḥammed Maḍbūḥ and Colonel Muḥammed 'Ababū planned to oust King Hassan II from power; they tricked the cadets of the Ahermoumou military academy telling them that the king's life was endangered and ordered them to shoot anyone who might resist. Over a thousand inexperienced cadets found themselves caught in a lethal crossfire between the cadets who thought the king's life was in danger and the palace guards who were defending the king from the cadets' attack. Miraculously, the king escaped a certain death and in a matter of hours everything was under control. The second coup d'état took place on August 16, 1972 when King Hassan II was returning from France. Some army jet fighters

attacked the king's plane, yet the pilot managed to land safely and the king's life was miraculously saved as well. The 1972 coup d'état was plotted by the second important man in Morocco, General Oufkir, who was executed the same evening.

2.3 Two prolific writers: The Maghrebian Taber Ben Jelloun and the Uruguayan Carlos Liscano

Ben Jelloun is the most prolific and the most controversial contemporary Moroccan writer. He published *L'Enfant de Sable* (1985) (translated into English in 2000 by Alan Sheridan as *The Sand Child*) and *La Nuit Sacrée* (1987) (translated into English in 2000 by Alan Sheridan as *The Sacred Night*) that received the prestigious Goncourt Prize in 1987, a prize that brought him literary fame as well as a scathing criticism. The Goncourt-prize winning Ben Jelloun was accused of "the exotification of [his own] Moroccan themes to appeal to the whims of his western readership" (El Guabli 2016, 62). In 2001, he published *Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière*³, his semi-fictionalized memoir based on Aziz Binebine's experience in the secret detention camp of Tazmamart after the Skhirat coup d'état; it was followed by an English translation by Linda Cloverdale entitled *This Blinding Absence of Light*, in 2002, which won the prestigious IMPAC Prize in 2004. He was severely attacked for "stealing BineBine's story [. . .] [and] having benefited from the literary liberties he took with the account" (Orlando 57). He, also, lacked credibility as a human rights advocate in Morocco since he was also accused of "having failed to use his prominent literary status to pressure King Hassan II to release the victims of Tazmamart" who "remained imprisoned for another four years after he was awarded the Goncourt prize" (El Guabli 2016, 63). He, therefore, has detailed his own incarceration experience for eighteen months in a book entitled *The Last Friend* (2004), translated by Hazel Rowley and Kevin Michel Cape, to refute the accusations directed towards him especially after Aziz Binebine, as quoted in David Tresilian's review of Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* in *Al-Abram* weekly online, stated that this memoir "is Taher's, even if it has been much inspired by me and by my story" (3). In an open letter, Aziz Binebine⁴ wrote that Ben Jelloun "pressured him to talk

³ It was translated into more than six languages including Arabic and it is the only piece of Moroccan prison fiction that has received a major prize that helped it navigate a global market.

⁴ Aziz Binebine wrote his prison memoir *Tazmamart: Eighteen Years in Morocco's Secret Prison* that was translated into English in 2020 by Lulu Norman. Less poetic than Ben Jelloun's fictionalized memoir, Binebi-

and disavowed" the memoir (Lindsey and M. Lynx Qualey). Yet, Ben Jelloun asserts that Binebine begged him to write his story (Lewis 129).

Born in Montevideo in 1949, The Uruguayan Carlos Liscano is, according to Yenna Wu's classification of political prison writers, a "cell-made" writer ("Introduction" 2). During the thirteen years of military dictatorship (1972-1985), Liscano was incarcerated for being a member of the MLN-Tupamaros in 1972 when he was twenty-three years old and was released in 1985. He was imprisoned in *Libertad* Prison inaugurated in November 1972⁵. He began writing when he was in prison; he published novels, poems and short stories. His *El furgón de los locos* (2001), Translated into English by Elizabeth Hampsten as *Truck of Fools* (2004), is one of the first Latin-American literary works to be translated into English. In most of Liscano's narratives, resentment predominates, a Kafkaesque character resonates, absurdity prevails and impossibility is the existential condition of inevitably trapped characters (Johansson 9). A prolific writer, Liscano wrote a lot of books including *La mansión del tirano* (1992) (in English, the tyrant's house), *El escritor y el otro* (2007) (in English, the writer and the other), *Ejercicio de impunidad: El caso Gelman* (2009) (in English, exercising impunity: the case of Gelman), *Memorias de la guerra reciente* (1988) (in English, memories of the recent war), *El método y otros juguetes carcelarios* (1987) (in English, the prison method and other toys) and *El informante* (1997) (in English, the informant).

3. *Blinding absence of light inside a truck of fools: Torture, body and voice*

Nadine Gordimer states that Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* is "terrible and beautiful to read, since it asserts the failure of tyranny in a victim's epiphany of survi-

ne's memoir does tell us little that is unknown about the failed coup and achingly highlights the psychological cruelties inflicted by the prisoners of Tazmamart themselves on one another.

⁵ In his article entitled "A Life Without Object(s)", Carlos Liscano describes *Libertad* Prison as follows:

Libertad Prison consisted of a building and a group of five sheds. The building, ten meters above the ground on ninety-six columns, was divided into five floors divided into two wings. Sheds were divided into two sections each. No one in the building could communicate with anyone in the sheds. Each floor was isolated from the others. Each section within a floor was separated from other sections, each wing separate from the other. Counting floors, sheds, sections, and wings, a thousand prisoners were divided among some thirty units unconnected to one another. [. . .] The landscape was a wilderness of metal and bars, populated by soldiers, dogs, truncheons, and regulations. [. . .] The prison looked like an artificial satellite on top of its columns, immobile on the planet Earth, set apart from society and nature. (2-4)

val"(cover). Taher Ben Jelloun's semi-fictionalized memoir *This Blinding Absence of Light* sed considerable controversy when it was first published. It is based on real events, the testimony of a Tazmamart survivor called Aziz Binebine who spent eighteen years in the darkness of the Moroccan infamous detention camp for participating in the failed Skhirat coup d'état in 1971. The memoir traces the journey of suffering, resistance and survival of an ex-inmate called Salim, meaning sound and healthy, in Arabic. It is through the eyes of the narrator/survivor that the author portrays eighteen years of incarceration. Salim, throughout the memoir, is not only an eye witness but a fabulous storyteller in this dark universe; he helps his mates overcome their pain. This memoir presents the daily life of the living dead buried in the tombs of Tazmamart, their inhumane suffering, their resistance as well as their epiphany of survival. The prisoners of Tazmamart strived to survive; some talked, prayed, hoped and survived. Yet, most went mad, gave up hope and died. Ben Jelloun's memoir is characterized by smooth, emotionally charged narration as well as vivid images of agony, suffering, hunger and torture. The structure is neither chronological nor linear. Ben Jelloun constructs a first-person narrator by appropriating the "I" of Tazmamart survivor Salim/Aziz Binebine to stand for the collective experience of the victims of Tazmamart who disappeared forever and could not narrate their stories.

Indeed, *Truck of Fools* is a compelling narrative of human survival, hope and life in prison, and an essay about torture. Carlos Liscano reconstructs his experience of captivity for thirteen years during the Uruguayan dictatorship to uncover the dark side of authoritarian regimes and the unlimited resistance of the subaltern. Liscano was not lost but the truck of fools safely took him to the road of freedom, hope and innovation. A description of the strange ability to survive the direst circumstances, Liscano's memoir is a series of numbered fragments divided into three chapters, namely "Two Urns in One Car," "Body and Self" and "Sit and Wait for What Comes." These chapters are preceded by a page as a prologue in which Liscano remembers a moment when he is in an army barracks, hooded. The torturer finds that the prisoner's body is the weakest part where he can shove his tusks. Liscano develops a narrative strategy that has to do with the use of the present tense to focus on the body, so the reader seems to be witnessing something that is happening before his/her eyes, facing a body that is being tortured; in short numbered chapters, Liscano

writes down fragmented, clear scenes. Sometimes, we read the same detail as his memory of suffering and pain flows on his blank sheets. Liscano is not only Liscano but represents all Tupamaros or Uruguayan political prisoners or, if we go further, all Latin American political prisoners.

In *This Blinding Absence of Light*, Salim had no previous knowledge of the planned 1971 Skhirat coup. At the very beginning of his incarceration, he considered the night when the coup took place and he was arrested as the night when his life stopped and became meaningless. On July 10, 1970, Salim was eradicated from life with neither past nor memory. Hence, to resist behind the prison walls and to make his life move again, he had to learn how to forget and detach himself from his past life outside the prison. Salim reminisces this night:

On the night of July 10, 1970, I became ageless. I have grown neither older nor younger. I have lost my age. You can no longer read it in my face. In fact, I am no longer here to give my age a face. I came to a standstill over in nothingness, where time is abolished, tossed back to the wind, handed over to that vast beach of white sheet rippling in a light breeze, given up to the sky drained of its stars, its images, the childhood dreams that found refuge there, emptied of everything, even God. I crossed over there to learn forgetfulness, but I never succeeded in being completely within nothingness, not even in thought. (Ben Jelloun 5)

In a highly elaborate style, *This Blinding Absence of Light* recreates the deeply personal suffering of a man who turned from the state of humanity into a state of limbo deprived of both life and death, yet he depended on his mental and spiritual faculties to survive the harrowing conditions of Tazmamart and found solace in spiritual meditation, detachment and the ignorance of his painful past. Salim realized that his survival depended mostly on his ability to abdicate the sounds, colors, and desires of life, and the avoidance of thinking about the injustice of his incarceration for a crime he had not committed. Moreover, he realized that he had not to let emotions such as hope, hatred, love and passion insert his cell as such emotions would waste his efforts to resist.

In effect, Liscano realizes that hope, strength and self-awareness came out of suffering. Liscano puts it this way: "I would realize how physical pain is a door to self-knowledge" (68). In the harrowing conditions behind prison high walls, the body is the

prisoners' most precious object and survival becomes the sole objective. "[I]t [was] through that [Liscano experienced] pain," Eugenio Di Stefano finds out, "but it [was] also through the pain of the body that he [learnt] to grow"(172). Body, per se, was a means of resistance "because of its infinite capacity for resistance" (66). In addition to the body, dignity sustained Liscano and helped him endure and survive the prolonged trauma of captivity (Liscano 66). Liscano asserts that neither the blind ideology nor the ideas help the political prisoners survive; it is their innate dignity that keeps them sane.

Poignantly written, *This Blinding Absence of Light* illustrates that the prisoners of Tazmamart were devastated mentally and physically, yet their dignity was what was left for them in the face of humiliation. The guards were ordered to break the prisoners down by devastating their dignity. Salim, however, was aware of the importance of keeping his dignity to survive as "[k]eeping one's dignity is an absolute necessity" (Ben Jelloun 23). The prisoners were taken from Kenitra civil prison to Tazmamart blindfolded with a black cloth and handcuffed. They were stripped of their possessions and were cursed. The prisoners became nothing but numbers as the policemen replaced the prisoners' names with numbers. The prisoners insisted on calling each other by their names and this was their first and main mechanism of resistance in order to keep their dignity.

Salim's resentment towards his father who betrayed his son and abandoned his wife is echoed throughout the narrative. Salim's father and mother were totally different characters. Gender roles are reversed since the "masculinization of his mother is juxtaposed with the feminization of the father" (El Guabli 2016, 75). When Salim's father, King Hassan II's jester, realized that his son was among the rebels who sought to kill his master, he condemned his son, considered him dead and organized a symbolic funeral for him. This weird reaction of Salim's father shows how he willingly chose to abdicate his masculinity in favor of complete submission to the king's will; his father, who is described as "the dandy of Marrakech [and] the Don Juanesque seducer" (Ben Jelloun 25), felt no responsibilities towards his many children and cared only about the quality of his perfumes and his accessories. On the other hand, his mother put her femininity aside, played the role of the father and took the responsibility of upbringing her children. The will to resist differs from a person to another. Salim comprehended this fact well as he says: " We did not all have the same

needs or the same will to resist" (61), and considered resistance "a duty not an obligation" (23). The prisoners' subjectivities are reflected in their resistance mechanisms and their tendency to preserve their identities. Yenna Wu finds out that prisoners' survival strategies differ in accordance with their educational and social backgrounds and their personalities as well ("Reviving Muted Voices" 32). As for Salim, he learned resistance from his mother:

I am only a man, like all others, with the will not to give in. That's all. A will that is firm, ruthless and uncompromising. Where does it come from? From a long way back. From childhood. *From my mother, whom I always saw struggling to raise my brothers and sisters and me. Never giving up. Never flagging for an instant.* (Ben Jelloun 23; my emphasis)

Although Liscano did not resent his father, his father was of little importance to him since he felt that his father was awkward despite being strong; he never understood much (Liscano 21). On the contrary, he loved his mother who was strong, clever and gentle. "My mother is better than my father," confesses Liscano (20). However, Liscano "shut down, like a stone" when he knew that his father committed suicide because he could not complete his life after his wife's death (29), Liscano decided: "I will dedicate to him all my tenderness, my gratitude for having worked to raise us. He was a good man. He took care of me, protected me. He did what a father ought" (30). Surely, his mother motivated him to resist; he told Cholo González, his cellmate, when he insisted on completing the Spanish lesson though he knew his mother had died, that his mother "wanted [him] to go on without breaking down" (27). During his incarceration, Liscano learnt of his mother's death and, years later, of his father's suicide, so he decided that the burial of his parents' bodies would be his main goal that motivated him to survive. Indirectly, according to Patrick Dove, the fate of Liscano's parents is similar to that of the many disappeared Latin-Americans in the 1970s (239). A decade after his release, upon his return from exile, the transfer of the two urns including his parents' bones constituted the last somber image that closed Liscano's long process of mourning: "I have done my duty, the duty of burying my own dead. It was what I owed my parents, and myself. I feel a great peace. Although I have often thought I should do this, I did not know that doing so would bring me peace" (Liscano 45).

Silence is the objective correlative of death; silence is paradoxically a form of torture and a mechanism of resistance. When we hear the word Muqāwama (resistance), we immediately think of something filled with action and movement or all kinds of violence and protest. However, silence, de facto, can be turned into an act of resistance. Salim describes the types of silences he experienced behind the high walls of Tazmamart:

The silence of night. It was necessary for us. The silence of the companion who was slowly leaving us. The silence we observed as a sign of mourning. The silence of blood circulating sluggishly. The silence that told us where the scorpions were. The silence of images we ran and reran through our minds. The silence of the guards that expressed weariness and routine. The silence of the shadow of memories burned to ashes. The silence of a leaden sky from which almost no sign could reach us. The silence of absence, the blinding absence of life. The hardest, most unbearable silence was that of light. A powerful and manifold silence. There was the silence of the night, always the same, and then there were the silences of light. A long and endless absence. (Ben Jelloun 51)

At the very beginning, Salim, a non-fervent Muslim, states that he "searched for the black stone that cleanses the soul of death" (Ben Jelloun 1). It becomes clear that the most important strategy of survival around which the inmates' daily lives revolved was their religious faith. Their detention in underground cells like tombs and the breaths of death that hit them every day through the death of one of them led to their religious faith. Every prisoner felt that he would die soon. In other words, throughout Ben Jelloun's semi-fictionalized memoir, any one of the prisoners might die at any moment so he must have been ready to meet Allah. Therefore, there are many references in *This Blinding Absence of Light* to the black stone which is in the Ka'ba.

"In torture one wants to die," writes Liscano, "begs the torturer to kill. The torturer says, 'You want us to kill you. But we won't'" (48). Taher Ben Jelloun employs photographic techniques in portraying the fragmented scenes of death. The prisoners were deprived of seeing the light of the sun except when one of the prisoners dies. They were allowed to see the sunlight when they buried one of their cellmates. Hence, death had a contradictory meaning as it brought happiness to them though they were saying one of their mates off forever. Hamid, number 12, was the first prisoner whose soul left Tazmamart; he lost his sanity and isolated himself and summoned death that "came for him when he went into a

trance and bashed his head against the wall several times. He gave a long cry; then his voice and breath were forever stilled" (Ben Jelloun 9). Driss was being fed by Salim who chewed bread and gave it to him in small mouthfuls, followed by a sip of water, yet he refused to eat anything to the degree that "[h]is withered legs were curled up and clamped to his chest" and he became "a curious little object so deformed by disease that there was nothing human about him anymore" (11-12).

"Baba, the Saharawi who joined our group one evening [accused of saying the Sahara was not Moroccan]," narrates Salim, "froze to death" (Ben Jelloun 31). Poor Larbi went on a hunger strike before his death, so he became too thin, "[h]is eyes were bloodshot and bulged from their sockets [and] [t]here was foam at the corners of his mouth. In [his] bony face [one] could read all the hatred and distress in the world" (36). Traumatized Rushdie died of the incurable disease of hatred. He lost his mind and surrendered; all he wanted was to "slaughter everyone: the guards, the judge, the lawyers, the royal family, all those behind his incarceration" (39). Mustapha, number 8, was "stung by a scorpion," so all the scorpions assembled over his decomposing body (55-56). Moh went mad. At mealtimes, instead of eating, he recalled his mother in his mind, talked to her and imagined that he was feeding her, so "he had no more strength, no more voice. He was letting himself die" (60). Abdelkader let himself die and committed suicide by swallowing something sharp after Salim had stopped telling stories because of "the deterioration of [Salim's] mental as well as physical abilities" (75-77). Majid, number 6, hanged himself. "He had tied his clothes to make a rope," recounts Salim, "wrapped it around his neck, tightened it with all his strength, attached the end of his shirt to the ventilation grille, and lain down on the floor, pushing his feet against the door until he throttled himself" (92).

Additionally, the memoir monitors grotesque images of death that casts its shadows over Tazmamort⁶, to use Ahmed Marzouki's pun. Ironically, Bourras died of constipation and he could not "expel his excrement" that was "growing as hard as concrete," so he "perforated his rectum"(Ben Jelloun 97-98). Sebban, who joined the prisoners in the early

⁶ The word *Tazmamort* is composed of the first half of the Amazigh word *Tazmamart* and the French word *mort*, meaning death.

1980s, died of the gangrene that spread rapidly in his body. "I saw worms come out of the soles of his feet," remembers Salim, "[t]here were so many cockroaches it was hard to clear them off the body" (119). Unable to see what he was eating, Abdelmalek "was poisoned by thousands of roach eggs" since there were so many cockroaches that "laid their eggs among the bread crumbs" (136). While Abdullah died of continuous diarrhea, Fellah "died after excruciating agony" because he was unable to pee anymore (155). Mohammed and Icho died after long "illnesses that made them cough until they choked" (162). Prisoners of Tazmamart realized that death is the only savior who would put an end to their ordeal. Unlike other prisoners, Salim resisted nothingness and death through repressing his memory; he states: "It took me some time to realize that the enemy was memory. Anyone who summoned up his past would promptly die" (17).

Salim was aware of the importance of maintaining his sanity in the face of the carceral system absurdity. Hence, he understood that he needed to construct "personal mental hygiene" (Livescu 2011, 192). "Inner discipline and a good daily dose of art," contends Simona Livescu, "represent the recipe for establishing mental fortitude [and practicing them constantly] is the indomitable secret of maintaining psychological and physical survival" (195). Salim depended heavily on his literary memory to survive and help other fellow prisoners survive their traumatic experiences. During Salim's childhood, his father loved books and usually recited poetry and stories, so Salim grew up with a rich literary memory. Salim recited Camus's *L'Étranger* and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. He, also, fabricated tales from *The Arabian Nights* since his fellow inmates had begged him to narrate stories from *'Alf Līlah wa Līlah (The Arabian Nights)* though he had not read it before. Salim uses storytelling as a strategy of survival and relief for himself as well as his fellow prisoners.

Brahim El Guabli argues that Ben Jelloun's "work is 'deeply steeped' in his Moroccan linguistic and cultural heritage" (2016, 79). The narrative begins with Salim's emphasis on the importance of the black stone for his spiritual journey of survival. Additionally, "[t]he novel insinuates parallels between the story of the king in the novel and King Shahrayār" (79). The unfaithfulness of King Shahrayār's wife caused him to take revenge on every young woman; the betrayal of King Hassan II's leaders and soldiers caused his vindictive imprisonment of the soldiers. Sheherazade storytelling enabled her to survive

and stopped King Shahrayār's assassination of young women. Similarly, Salim's father used storytelling to make the King's maltreatment of his people palatable and Salim used storytelling to survive the abyss of Tazmamart (79).

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) stated: "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock" (qtd. in El Guabli 2016, 72). In Islam, among the ruler's obligations are being just and treating his people in conformity with the teachings of Islam. Yet, the king, as represented in Ben Jelloun's semi-fictionalized memoir, was a moody and vengeful character whose behavior echoed his lack of peace of mind because of the numerous violations of human rights committed by his regime. King Hassan II is depicted in the memoir in "the earthliest terms possible" that deconstruct the myth of the paternal ruler and contradicts the king's sacred image. Brahim El Guabli, in his article entitled "Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière: The Politics of Novelizing Human Rights Violations in the Former Colonizer's Language," gives an example from Ben Jelloun's memoir that shows how the king is described as an ordinary character, not as the God's deputy on the earth:

In the novel [*This Blinding Absence of Light*], Atta, one of the prisoners, is taken from his cell for a secret audience with the king. The latter informs Atta of his willingness to trade his freedom for the names of the two officers who supposedly raped his concubine. (72).

Erving Goffman, in his book *Asylums* (1961), defines total institutions, including prisons as "place[s] of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administrated round of life" (xiii). "The handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people," argues Goffman, "is the key fact of total institution" (6). Prison, as a total institution, dominates the events in *Truck of Fools*; captivity per se was really traumatic for a twenty-three-year-old man whose suffering began the moment of his arrest: "At two o'clock in the morning the military comes to get me [Liscano] at my house. They get me out of bed, barefoot and in an undershirt, put a hood on my head, tie my hands behind my back, and set me out on the sidewalk, facing the wall. Then they throw me into a pickup and off we go" (Liscano 23).

Truck of Fools portrays the structure of prison in detail to clearly show its negative effect on the prisoner. Liscano describes narrow cells, metal gates, shackles, darkness, etc. to highlight that prison remains connected to the psyche of the prisoner even after release. In his article, "A Life Without Object(s)," Carlos Liscano writes that prisons are the land of no; there were no clocks, chairs, keys, lights, neckties, trousers, money, radios, televisions, etc (5). However, "there were rules," writes Liscano, "prisoners must walk always with their hands behind their backs and be identified by a number on the gray uniform, and on shirts, sheets, football pants, the number by which they were known, called, punished. Prisoners had no head of hair" (4). Additionally, in *Truck of Fools*, Liscano describes torture, its tools and its executors that make the prisoner psychologically destroyed; Liscano states:

Everyone has an idea about torture. Obviously if one knows he might be arrested, he's thought about it. But no one can imagine the details. The details have to do with intimate knowledge of the body, not the human body in general, but one's own. (48)

In the same vein, Tazmamart was not a mere secret political prison but a man-made hell, eternal darkness and a narrow cell that was "under ten feet long and half a wide. Most of all, it was low, only about five feet high" (Ben Jelloun 3). In Tazmamart, prisoners had no life, no family, no friends, no dreams and no names. Also, they "had no beds, not even a bale of hay [. . .] that animals sleep on," yet each one of them had only two sturdy and light grey blankets with a hospital smell (4). The twenty-three prisoners in cell block B were confined in separate cells; each cell had two holes: The one "in the ground that served as a toilet" and the one "over the iron door" that "let in air" (8). Their food was stale bread that was "as white as quicklime" and cannot be cut or broken, starches "cooked in water without oil or spices," and a crummy coffee with a taste that is worse than "sock juice" (34-35).

Within total institutions, "[t]wo different social and cultural worlds develop, jogging alongside each other with points of official contact but little mutual penetrations" (Goffman 9). In total institutions, there is a major distinction between inmates (a large managed group) and the staff (a small supervisory group); "each grouping tends to conceive of the other in terms of narrow hostile stereotypes" (7). Political prisoners are aware that the

outside world is a larger prison and life outside prison walls brought them behind the high walls of prisons. Hence, many political prisoners tend to erase the state-inmate dichotomy. Salim eliminated hierarchy-based interactions inside prison; he helped the guards bury the dead bodies of his fellow inmates and addressed the guards as equal participants not as perpetrators. According to Marca Grace Duncan, "imprisonment offers an opportunity to renounce arrogance and separateness" (1227). Sympathized with his torturer to some extent, Liscano shows that torturers envy political prisoners since the torturers do not have any dignity, any human, cultural, moral or ethical value (75). Hence, Liscano annihilated the dichotomy between the victim and the victimizer; the torturer became the sole reference of the tortured who has lost everything: "Each prisoner is assigned a *responsable*, who 'responsible' or in charge of him, usually a captain if the prisoner is 'important'. [. . .] My captain has illusions of being just" (58; italics in the original). In *This Blinding Absence of Light*, After 18 years of imprisonment, Salim was sent to a psychiatrist to check his sanity; his brief answers showed that he felt at peace with his torturers as well as his father:

"How do you feel about the army?"
"I don't feel anything."
"Any resentment, desire for revenge?"
"No."
"What do you think of your family?"
"Family's family"
"What do you think of your father?"
"He's someone who loves his children, but he isn't a father."
"Do you resent him?"
"No, not at all."
"What will you do when you leave here?"
"No idea. Perhaps take care of my health." (Ben Jelloun 182)

In *This Blinding Absence of Light*, the Kmandar, director of the prison, and his guards are presented through the memoir as submissive tools in the hands of the authoritarian regime of King Hassan II; their ultimate goal was to crush the prisoners' will and identities. Guards did not have "complete power over" the prisoners, but they also "had in their tebooks a list of mistreatments to inflict on [the prisoners] whenever they pleased" (15). The Chinese practices of punishment and torture applied in the Mao's Laogai camps (forced hard labor camps) were also brutally applied in the Moroccan prisons (86). The Kman-

dar's personality illustrates how he was a sadist character and reflects the violence that swept Morocco during this period:

He was born to serve, to carry out all assignments, from the most ordinary to the most monstrous of tasks. Without any doubts. He received orders and implemented them with a metallic firmness. *Before being put in charge of us, he had already slit the throats of several wretches, buried others alive, tortured opponents of the regime* with the application of a specialist. He had lost an eye in a car accident. It was God's will, he said. That's all. (45; my emphasis)

Additionally, Salim describes the two guards who were particularly mean: Fantass and Hamidouche. Fantass was a nasty, bad-tempered man who used to speak using only vulgar, insulting words. Oddly, he returned after a two-month disappearance, wept and asked the prisoners to forgive him:

I hated you because I'd been taught to hate. I hoped you'd die slow, painful deaths. I deserve to go to hell for the evil I did to you. God has punished me! He just snatched away my two grown children, killed instantly in a brand-new car. [. . .] I have nothing more to do here below. [. . .] It's all over for me. Help me to go by forgiving me! (45)

Fantass's previous confession, before he died of a hunger strike, directly takes us to Carlos Liscano's three questions about the perpetrators' life outside prison walls, namely "[w]hen they go home, what do they tell their wives, their girlfriends, children, parents, and friends? [. . .] Where does he come from? How does an individual become that?" (70-71). "The torturer is as oneself," argues Liscano, "speaks the same language, [and] shares the same values and prejudices" (70-71), so it is perplexing how an individual can torture another human being for no reason, how the torturer, with hands stained with blood, can continue his social life with family and friends, how the torturer can get rid of feeling guilty and overcome his fear of the consequences of his harrowing deeds, and how the torturer can live and reconcile his two opposing personalities: the malicious one inside the prison and the normal one outside it. Dreadfully, if those torturers are human beings like all of us, so we may be torturers one day as "human beings are capable of absolute evil, of hurting others for sport, of allowing a person to die in torment" (72). Delving into the torturer's life to investigate what turns an individual into a torturer is out of the scope of this study,

yet in political prisons, some torturers (guards) might have been brain-washed and they torture political prisoners out of the "human being's shinning capacity for indescribable acts of loyalty and sacrifice" (72). Therefore, they think that they are getting rid of and turing those who are considered harmful to society and a threat to its stability. Carlos Liscano states that there were guards who followed "orders one after another, all the same to [them]. [They were] not responsible, [their] superiors were the ones who turned [them] into villain[s]" (71). In *Truck of Fools*, Liscano uses irony to carry out his dangerous attempt to understand the torturer's attitude. The following are examples of irony used in *Truck of o/s*: "The means did not matter, they killed because they decided to kill. But death in torture was not planned" (49); "The torture room smells of dampness and tobacco. As a workplace it is inhospitable and insalubrious" (49); "After a while, long or short, the torturer gets bored and tries to put the prisoner in the tank. It is not an easy task. The prisoner resists"(52); "Tough job, torturing—takes strength, resolution, self-forgetfulness" (55).

The political prisoners of Tazmamart found solace in the dove that had landed in their darkness. It became a sign of life and hope. Immediately, it became their link with the world outside the prison walls as they gave it messages and treated it as a child who needed to learn many things like saying the name of Allah. They called it "*Hurriya*" (in English, freedom) since it came to their prison to give them a spiritual message that they had to survive to gain their freedom again. Judith Herman explains this strategy of survival:

Prisoners of conscience, who have a highly developed awareness of the strategies of control and resistance, generally understand that isolation is the danger to be avoided at all costs, and that there is no such thing as a small concession when the issue is preserving their connections with the outside world. As tenaciously as their captors seek to destroy their relationships, these prisoners tenaciously seek to maintain communication with a world outside the one in which they are confined. They deliberately practice evoking mental images of the people they love, in order to preserve their sense of connection. (81)

In the same vein, Salim deliberately evoked a mental image of his beloved mother, who taught him how to resist and survive, and spoke with her:

How to reassure my mother, tell her that I am fighting, resisting? How to let her know that this will to hold my head high and remain dignified —this willpower comes from her? I had confidence in her intuitions. So, mentally, I spoke to her,

in a letter I would perhaps write one day, on paper, with a pencil, a letter that would reach her messenger or even through the mail. (Ben Jelloun 52).

This Blinding Absence of Light presents a serious survival strategy that occurs in various cultural and political contexts, namely black humor, laughter and lightness of heart. This tactic of survival helps prisoners of Tazmamart be and remain humans under duress and get back at their torturers. In his article entitled "A Life Without Object(s)," Liscano asserts that irony and black humor are major tactics to reach "the world of the free" and keep their strength; prisoners mock everything even themselves and their morbid conditions (12). Prisoners of Tazmamart discerned the absurd part of their incarceration and mocked their perpetrators. "Laughter. We tried to laugh by telling old jokes," narrates Salim, "Our merriment was often forced, a kind of nervous stutter" (Ben Jelloun 61). Mustapha told them "puns, witticisms [and] gave everyone nicknames." (61). Salim narrates a telling episode when a dog was "condemned for five years in jail! [. . .] It seemed he had bitten a general who had arrived to inspect the barracks near the prison" (61). Although this episode was more grotesque than comic, it brought them laughter and they decided to choose a name for their new fellow; some wanted to name the dog after Kmandar, director of the prison, but they finally called it Ditto. The poor dog "went mad, probably from rabies" and died of hunger and exhaustion (62). In effect, this episode exposes the mental inferiority of prison authorities

Simona Livescu asserts that "consciousness, far from being destroyed while oppressed, can eventually access a higher level of awareness and freedom"(2011, 190). In the same vein, Judith Herman asserts that "people in captivity become adept practitioners of the arts of altered consciousness" (87). When the traumatized cannot deal with the reality of what actually happened, s/he employs fantasy to satisfy him/herself. Trance states —through prayer, chanting and hypnotic techniques— are characterized by "the ability to hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously" and "the ability to alter perception" (87). Salim recounts that he as well as his fellow inmates concentrated "so intensely that [they] slipped free from [their] bodies, and thus from their brain. [They] abandoned [their] bodies to the torturer and went off to forget all that in prayer or in some secret corner of the heart"(Ben Jelloun

2). Additionally, Salim describes the effects of trance states, how he used to enter a trance state and how toothaches frustrated his spiritual voyages:

When I was in the garden, I was happy. I felt unfettered by time, memory, injustice, and all the evil that had been done to us. But I could not get into my garden simply because I felt like going. I had to take the time to work myself free of my shell, to enter another world. It was not easy. Successful concentration demanded special conditions—silence was not enough. I never achieved complete fulfillment because I could not always forget my pain, especially during the period when I was losing my teeth. Not only were the toothaches excruciating but they made me fall back and lose the thread of my voyage toward an ideal spirituality. (103)

During prolonged captivity and isolation, Salim was "able to develop trance capabilities ordinarily seen only in extremely hypnotizable people, including the ability to form positive and negative hallucinations" (Herman 88). Salim describes his hallucinations used mainly to combat loneliness; a lot of his hallucinations were about spirituality. Sometimes, he would see a woman in the night giving him her back; he listened to her and followed her "in her pilgrimage around the seven saints of Marrakech, the guardian spirits of survivors, the poor and the dead" (Ben Jelloun 100). In the same vein, Liscano dedicated himself to inventing reality and situations that spontaneously brought him merriment; he flew high with his thoughts and made beautiful plans. Liscano mentions his plans after release:

If I were free tomorrow [,] I'd go home and take time to show my family how much I love them. I would like to do what I could have done and didn't, finish what I started and abandoned, repair what I did badly. I'd like to have books, read, learn. I know all there is to learn, and know I know nothing. I wish this moment would be over, now, to start over, study, learn. Above all, to begin writing. (73)

In her article, "Deviating from the Norm? Two Easts Testify to a Prison Aesthetics of Happiness," Livescu presents an aporetic survival strategy "in which the subconscious works counter to what is expected after sessions of violent treatment, identifying [a *modus felicitates*; a state of joy and happiness] in the least expected places on a convulsive earth"(188). "[T]he state itself," argues Livescu, "is so difficult to convey and ridiculous to accept" since aporetic survival cannot be shared by political prisoners unlike practical survival (196). Since a *modus felicitates* is the survivalist mental tactic "that takes the political prisoners out of psychological traumatic zone," linguistically representing this state in polit-

tical prison memoirs needs innovation and authorial efforts to be conveyed (188). This state "is the effect of bringing about a new identity, forged on renegotiating a different form of commitment to self, to other, to present community"(198). Salim recounts that, in the blinding absence of light in Tazmamart where he spent 18 years, he experienced moments of deep spiritual meditation that brought him joy. Salim narrates a heart-wrenching moment when his "gall bladder [went] crazy. It produce[d] too much pile, flooding [him] with this bitter liquid. [He was] saturated with bile. Everything about [him] smell[ed] bitter"(Ben Jelloun 48). He, therefore, resorted to self-induced vomiting; after several hours, he succeeded in purging his body in pain of detrimental bile secretions. After being rid of the poison that burned his esophagus, Salim describes his state that was close to ecstasy:

I feel light, famished, and prepare to attain ecstasy, that state in which nothing holds me back with any connection to either beings or objects. I leave everything behind, abandoning myself and my companions, who have no idea of the anguish I have just gone through. I am in superb solitude, where only the breeze can still waft across the terraces of my isolation. And then I experience a dazzling amazement, followed by great fatigue. There I am inaccessible. I fly like a joyous bird. I don't stray too far from where I have left my body, for fear they might take it away and bury it. The body is breathing quite slowly, it's true, and [did] seem to be dead or in a coma. (Ben Jelloun 49)

Strikingly, Salim experienced ecstatic feelings even during the most despairing moments since he understood that convincing himself that he was "no longer of the world" was the first step to survive the dark abyss of Tazmamart (Ben Jelloun 50). He decided to begin a new life and substitute his past memories with new ones since he "was born and died on July 10, 1971;" the day of his incarceration (19). In the same vein, Liscano got pleasure out of the most humiliating situations. "The prisoner," narrates Liscano, "urinates on himself. In the winter cold, urine running down his legs and wetting his pants gives an instant of pleasure"(64).

Resistance, behind the prison walls for those who are incarcerated for a very long period as in the case of Tazmamart, is fostered by the inmates' decision to face the timelessness of their incarceration. It should be noted that when the detainees were transferred from Kenitra civil prison to Tazmamart, they were not informed about the duration of their sentence. The atmosphere of Tazmamart made the prisoners conclude that their in-

carceration would be long and this was part of their agony before dying. The complete absence of light and the darkness the inmates live in have made it difficult for the inmates to differentiate between day and night. Karim, prisoner number 15, was obsessed with time. He had a marvelous ability to tell time within a minute, so he has become the prisoners' calendar and their "link with the life" outside the prison walls (Ben Jelloun 28). Karim's ability to know the time and tell it was his strategy to survive and, of course, he participated in the collective survival of the other inmates like Salim. This does not contradict the idea that 'time' in the novel is subjective and it is not governed by hours and minutes since its concept and definition differ from a prisoner to another. The perception of time differs according to the occasion within the same person. In *Truck of Fools*, Liscano relates that he was obsessed with time since his childhood; he learned to tell time the day of his sister's birth. In prison, Liscano became more desperate and passionate about time. He therefore decided "[to] do something positive, something for life, not [to] stand still, not [to] be beaten down by the grilling" (Liscano 24).

The prisoners overcome the prison institution by employing a strategy that is based on James Scott's concept of "hidden transcript" to strengthen their solidarity. Discourses "onstage" are defined as "the public transcript" that reflects ordinary relations between the strong who dominates and the weak who is dominated. Public transcripts alone do not tell the whole story since there are "hidden transcripts" that can be defined as the language of the weak or discourses that take place "offstage" behind the suspicious eyes of the dominant (Scott 3). Powerless inmates invent a language that can be just understood by their cellmates in order to express their hidden feelings safely. The hidden transcripts include Qur'an recitations, storytelling, dream interpretations, etc. In Tazmamart, Gharbi usually recites verses from Qur'an. Salim is the storyteller and the stories he tells are other prisoners' motivation to resist. Like AbdelKader who urges Salim to tell stories in order not to die. Salim tells his prison inmates stories, verses of poetry and films.

Elizabeth Hampsten in her note to *Truck of Fools* concludes that "[c]ertain male testers of testimonios have maintained that their life as political activists necessarily was as separated as possible from private life" (ix). *Truck of Fools* integrates personal and family memories; Liscano describes his life before during and after incarceration without directly

mentioning even once his past guerilla activity. Even though Eugenio Di Stefano argues that "there is no reference to Tupamaros ideology" and "the word Tupamaros is never mentioned" (172, 164), Liscano's main demand was justice and freedom related to his liberal ideology: "I still believe there are times one has the right to resist, to rebel violently against violence, against misery and lack of liberty"(Liscano 72). Liscano remembers some events and intentionally ignores others. For example, the reasons why he was incarcerated remain obscure as he does want his readers to "feel his pain"; however, he does not want them to "sympathize with the Tupamaros ideology" (Di Stefano 163-164). Obliquely, there is a reference to Tupamaros; Liscano blames himself for using counter-violence: "I don't pretend to be an innocent who does not understand and never understood violence, for I once was among the thousands of Latin American youths who believed that hunger, misery, exploitation, the preventable deaths of newborns, could only be eradicated with counter-violence" (72).

Liscano notices certain topics of torture such as the psychological journey of the torturer, the torture procedures, death by torture, the objectives of torture, fears of torture, the routine of torture and the pain of the tortured. Torture resembles an illness; it does not hurt everyone equally, and only the one who has suffered knows what it feels like (Liscano 48). Torture is a disease that you suffer alone, that you feel alone and you try to overcome alone. Torture has been fundamentally defined in its relation to interrogation and the need to obtain information. Thus, torture establishes a space between life and death whose duration can be virtually infinite. In torture, the body of the tortured is objectified and the language is destroyed. The victim is, then, exposed to a dehumanization that lies precisely in his/her inability to access language. For the tortured, the body is perceived as a stranger, another or an enemy. The relationship between the tortured and the language is broken and the latter retracts to a pre-linguistic stage; he just screams and moans (Scarry 43). The tortured's ear listens only to screams produced by the others. The screams, as non-articulated language, express the sensations of pain and configure a gap between the animal sound and the human voice. Elaine Scarry also poses the question of the appropriation of the ability of language and expression in the following terms:

Even when the torturers do not permanently eliminate the voice through mutilation or murder, they mine the work of pain by temporarily breaking off the voice, making it their own, making it speak their word, making it cry out when they want it to cry, be silent when they want its silence, turning it on and off, using its sound to abuse the one whose voice it is as well as other prisoners (54).

"Torture," postulates Scarry, "consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation" (28). Scarry adds that "[t]he connection between the physical act and the verbal act" is a connection between body and voice (28). Therefore, In addition to the bodily dimension of suffering, the practice of torture is articulated with the particular use of language for purposes of domination. Interrogation is a constitutive instance of torture masked in the need to extract information and it is an integral part of torture techniques. In this way, it is possible to establish that the practice of torture is constituted in relation to the body and the voice. Interrogation is like a game played by the torturer and the tortured. Olga, the dog-mad woman, outwitted her interrogators who "threatened to kill her dogs" since "she made the biggest fuss over the most minor issue to distract [the interrogators] from asking about the major ones" (Liscano 41). In the interrogation room, prisoners face two struggles; one against the torturers and the other against his own self. In the first struggle, the prisoners know that the information loses its value and becomes meaningless as long as they resist. However, when they surrender, they will be psychologically tortured by their own self (53-54) since "[t]he nature of confession is falsified by an idiom built on the word 'betrayal': in confession, one betrays oneself and all those aspects of the world [. . .] that the self is made up of" (Scarry 29). Liscano begins his memoir with a prologue that frames the entire narration:

For days, I've been in an army barrack, hooded to the shoulders; pants, T-shirt, undershorts, shoes all soaking wet. I am twenty-three years old. I don't know what day or what time it is. I know it is late at night. They have just brought me from the room where they torture; that's on the floor below, down the stairs to the left. You can hear screams, one person tortured, then another and another, all night. I don't think about anything. Or I think about my body. I don't think it; I feel my body. It's dirty, beaten up, tired, smelly, sleepy, and hungry. Just now, the world consists of my body and me. I don't say it to myself like that, but I know there is no one else but the two of us. It will be many years, almost thirty, before I can tell myself what it is I feel. Not tell myself "what I feel," but what it and I felt. (17; italics in the original)

The previous quotation shows that Liscano was turned into a "hooded" subject without a gaze, without relation to others, without a face, and without a voice. Liscano's world inside prison shrank to his body that became his most precious object, so when he decided to write, thirty years later, he wrote about his body in pain. Liscano waited for a long period of time to write his prison memoir aesthetically. Liscano says: "the voice opened up . . . wanted to speak, to tell, with or without literary quality"(121). Though Liscano states that he was unable to write his memoir in a poetic way, the readers easily find that he managed to narrate his harrowing conditions effectively and creatively. In the central section of *Truck of Fools*, there is no direct dialogue in the text itself between the victim and the victimizer. Therefore, the reader thinks that the torturer's voice is within the tortured's and it is a part of the tortured's life, his history and his language. The voice of the torturer and his jargon are quoted and integrated into the narrator's words:

Sometimes when they have no one to interrogate, nor know what to ask, torturers do 'a review'. The review consists in torturing again the same prisoners who have been interrogated dozens of times. Torturers ask about anything, 'just in case'. As they don't know what to ask, they ask at random. (57)

The difficulty of expressing pain does not silence the victim/witness, but rather throws him into the need to testify to what he has suffered. The writing of *The Truck of Fools* will be the result of finding a voice that focuses on various positions, namely the self, the body and the torturer:

It took twenty-seven years before I could find a voice that could speak of old times. One day the voice understood that the relationship between an isolated individual and the world has enough meaning and literary interest to be told, so I wrote, "The Language of Solitude," and thought that was all I was capable of saying. But another day, a year later, suddenly the voice opened up, took over, wanted to speak, to tell, with or without literary quality. And the voice wouldn't stop, told me to write, to recover events, sensations, feelings that I did not remember. (Liscano 121)

Liscano put the memories in order, something like making an album and choosing an image. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman postulates:

Prisoners of conscience, who have a highly developed awareness of the strategies of control and resistance, generally understand that isolation is the danger to be avoided at all costs, and that there is no such thing as a small concession when the

issue is preserving their connections with the outside world. As tenaciously as their captors seek to destroy their relationships, these prisoners tenaciously seek to maintain communication with a world outside the one in which they are confined. They deliberately practice evoking mental images of the people they love, in order to preserve their sense of connection. (81)

Seen or imagined, Liscano chose an image of his mother and father, a portrait of childhood or adulthood, an image that conveyed experience, but did not have the materiality of photography. Liscano recovered the memory of the father who returned home in his car after buying vegetables for sale: "He comes wrapped in gunny sacks covered with hoarfrost. He is a young man, under thirty, and my grandmother and mother have to help him get down because he is numb and cold" (31). Similarly, he remembered his mother as a merry child "running barefoot through the countryside in the rain" and carrying her shoes in her bag (28). In a context in which linguistic and affective expression are punished, the images of memory become the only element of flight from the context to the outside. The selective memory of the victim/witness/author went back to the parental home and the birth of his sister. During his childhood, little Liscano began to discover, know, count and calculate the world: "[T]hat's the sort of child I am, a child who his whole life can't help counting and calculating everything before him" (20).

"For the subaltern," contends Janet Hart, "opportunities to transform tight spaces into aesthetic productions, to aestheticize, thus become chances to accrue strength and resiliency" (504). In incarceration, the reality of torture, deprivation and isolation is to destroy the prisoner's identity and crush his/her dignity. In *Truck of Fools*, The prisoner with whom Liscano shared his cell wanted to learn writing and Liscano served as a teacher of Spanish. In the morning, Liscano explained the lesson and Cholo González, his cellmate, did the exercises. Then, in the afternoon, Liscano corrected the exercises. Cholo began writing about his work and they both told stories to each other. In the Central Prison, Liscano read books though it was difficult to find an isolated corner to concentrate while reading. Prisoners told stories, played football, made jokes, danced and had a party for the prisoner whose wife had given birth to a baby girl.

4. Conclusion

This paper has offered a comparison of Taher Ben Jelloun's semi-fictionalized memoir *This Blinding Absence of Light* and Carlos Liscano's non-linear memoir *Truck of Fools*. Political prison narratives are a form of resistance (Harlow 1987; Lyotard 1995) and a site of agency. Writing *Truck of Fools* and *This Blinding Absence of Light* is a strategy of resistance against injustice and oppression; both narratives announce judgment on torturers and events and document the harrowing conditions behind prison high walls. Both narrate the political prisoners' painful dilemma and reveal the complete monotony of the prisoners' daily life. In both narratives, torture and its resulting pain are acknowledged and made visible through the narrators' voices that cannot be "bypassed" (Scarry 7). Away from the traditional hero of resistance literature, both narratives try to reinvent the political prisoner "as one with the people living an antiheroic life under oppressive regimes, rather than as yet another category of [alienated] 'intellectuals'" (Abou-bakr 285). The title, *Truck of Fools*, raises many questions and suggests many denotations: Are political prisoners fools because they adopt blind ideologies? Are they fools because they think they can change the world? These questions are a result of the absence of Liscano's political ideology and the insistence "on the primacy of the body and dignity [. . .] [that eliminate] the 'ideological' distinction between the imprisoned Tupamaro and the imprisoned common criminal" (Di Stefano 172-173). Additionally, Liscano considers political prisoners fools because their ideology becomes meaningless behind prison walls and does not help them to survive. Liscano sat and waited for the truck of fools that would take them to "the absurd journey to liberty" (Liscano 118), so they might become fools due to the absurdity of their journey to freedom. Hope is born from the womb of suffering. After surviving the traumatic experience of captivity, political prisoners, therefore, become mellow as Liscano writes: "[I]n prison I became an adult, in prison I became a writer" ("A Life Without Object(s)" 14). In effect, *This Blinding Absence of Light* and *Truck of Fools* describe the various coping mechanisms used by political prisoners to keep their sanity; farce is used as a means of resistance and clandestine prison culture takes a variety of forms, such as signals, tapping languages, Qur'an recitations, etc. Black comedy is used to extract laughter out of hostile situations. According to Elizabeth Oswald, laughter and singing, as tactics of resistance, "served two uses in prison— opposition to the authorities and spiritual renewal of the prisoner himself"

(qtd. in El Guabli 2018, 193). Such mechanisms of resistance and strategies of survival and many others helped the prisoners in both memoirs maintain not only their precious lives but also their more precious sanity during the darkest years of their lives. Through language, both Liscano and Ben Jelloun managed to create a voice against the silencing of torture and pain.

© Ibrahim Sayed Fawzy

Bibliography

- Abou-bakr, Randa. "The Political Prisoner as Antihero: The Prison Poetry of Wole Soyinka and 'Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2009, pp. 261-286.
- Ben Jelloun, Taher. *This Blinding Absence of Light*. Trans. Linda Coverdale. The New Press, 2002.
- Chergui, Azeddine. "The Poetics of Resistance and Memory in Moroccan Prison Writings" *Langues et Littératures*, vol. xxv, 2016, pp. 37-57.
- Debray, Régis. *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*. Translated by Bobbye Ortiz. Penguin Books Ltd, 1968.
- Di Stefano, Eugenio. "Remembering Pain in Uruguay." *Human rights, Suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*, edited by Yenna Wu and Simona Livescu. Lexington Books, 2011, pp.163-184.
- Dove, Patrick. "The Spoken Animal: Politics, Language and History in Carlos Liscano's *Truck of Fools*." *A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America*, vol.5, no.1, Fall 2007, pp. 236-242.
- Duncan, Marca Grace. "'Cradled on the Sea:' Positive Images of Prison and Theories of Punishment." *California Law Review*, vol.76 no.6, 1988, pp. 1201-1247.
- Elaissi, Hanane. "The Rise of Feminist Consciousness in Morocco during the Lead Years". *International Journal of Education and Research*, vol.3, no.2, 2015, pp. 651-666.
- El Guabli, Brahim. "The 'Hidden Transcript' of Resistance in Moroccan Tazmamart Prison Writings. *The Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 22, no.1, 2014, pp. 170–207.
- ."Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumière: The Politics of Novelizing Human Rights Violations in the Former Colonizer's Language." *Francosphères*, vol.5, no.1, 2016. pp. 59-80.
- . "The Absent Perpetrators: Morocco's Failed Accountability, Tazmamart Literature and the Survivors' Testimony for their Jailers (1973-1991)." *Violence: An International Journal*, vol. 1, no.1, 2020, pp. 80– 101.
- Goffman, Erving. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Doubleday Co., 1961.
- Gready, Paul. "Autobiography and the power of writing: Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol, 19, no.3, 1993, pp. 498-523.
- Hampsten, Elizabeth. "Translator's Note." *Truck of Fools* by Carlos Liscano and translated by Elizabeth Hampsten. Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, pp. vii-x.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance and Literature*. Methuen, 1987.
- Hart, Janet. "Tales from the Walled City: Aesthetics of Political Prison Culture in Post-War Greece." *Society and History*, vol. 41, no.3, 1999, pp. 482-509
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books, 1992.
- Johansson, Maria Teresa. "Desafección, duelo y carácter indeleble en el testimonio El furgón de los locos de Carlos Liscano." *Taller de Letras*, no. 62, 2018, pp. 9-24.
- Lewis, Mary Anne. *The Maghreb Goes Abroad: The "Worlding" of Postcolonial North African Francophone Literature and Film in Global Market*. PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2013.

- Liscano, Carlos. *Truck of Fools*. Trans. Elizabeth Hampsten. Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.
- . "A Life Without Object(s)." *Truck of Fools* by Carlos Liscano and translated by Elizabeth Hampsten. Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, pp. 1-14.
- Livescu, Simona. "Deviating from the Norm? Two Easts Testify to a Prison Aesthetics of Happiness." *Human rights, Suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*, edited by Yenna Wu and Simona Livescu. Lexington Books, 2011, pp.185-205.
- . *Francophonie and Human Rights: Diasporic Networks Narrate Social Suffering*. PhD diss. Los Angeles: University of California, 2013.
- Olson, Gary A. and Jean-François Lyotard. "Resisting a Discourse of Mastery: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard." *JAC*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1995, pp. 391-410.
- Orlando, Valerie. *Francophone Voices of the 'New' Morocco in Film and Print: (Re)presenting a Society in Transition*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- Porzencanski, Arturo C. *Uruguay's Tupamaros: The Urban Guerrilla*. Praeger Publishers, Inc, 1973.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale University Press, 1990.
- Sellman, Johanna. "Memoirs from Tazmamrt: Writing Strategies and Alternative Frameworks of Judgment." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2006, pp. 71-92.
- Slymovics, Susan. "The Argument from Silence: Morocco's Truth Commission and Women Political Prisoners." *Human rights, Suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*, edited by Yenna Wu and Simona Livescu. Lexington Books, 2011, pp. 87-106.
- Tresilian, David. "This Blinding Absence of Light." *Al-Abram Weekly Online*. April 12-18, 2001. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2001/529/bo6.htm>. Accessed May 21, 2018.
- Wilson, Major Carlos. *The Tupamaros: The Unmentionables*. Braden, 1974.
- Wu, Yenna. "Introduction." *Human rights, Suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*, edited by Yenna Wu and Simona Livescu. Lexington Books, 2011, pp.1-16.
- . "Reviving Muted Voices: Rhizomatous Forces in Political Prison Literature." *Human rights, Suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*, edited by Yenna Wu and Simona Livescu. Lexington Books, 2011, pp.17-46.
- "Tazmamrt." *Bulaq Podcast*. Swot. Co-hosted by Ursula Lindsey and Marcia Lynx Qualey, episode 50, June 20, 2020. <https://www.sowt.com/ar/podcasts/episode/tazmamart>.