

Silenced Tongues, Speaking Bodies: The Representation of Postcolonial Bodies in Incarceration in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of postcolonial bodies in incarceration in postcolonial Morocco in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light*. This representation is explored in light of two different literary theories and concepts: Julia Kristeva's "abject bodies", and Arthur Frank's "disciplined bodies". The first concept "abject bodies" mirrors the postcolonial oppressive regime's desired representation of the political detainees' bodies as raw and primitive, loathsome and excluded, and dehumanized and desexualized. Such degrading representation triggers feelings of humiliation, estrangement, denial, and alienation on the part of the prisoners, creating an identity crisis and a self and other dilemma. However, the second concept "disciplined bodies" serves as a tool of resistance, since the prisoners introduce a representation-counter of their bodies that defies the one prescribed and depicted by the state. By practicing self-control and regimentation over their bodies, the prisoners are able to reach a state of spiritual transcendence through their permeable bodies, a state that helps them escape their corporeal reality of suffering and abjection into the sublime ethereal realms of meditation, emancipation, renewal, inspiration, and ultimate power.

Keywords: Bodies; abject; disciplined; postcolonial; identity; oppression; incarceration.

تمثيل الأجساد السجينة في فترة ما بعد الاستعمار في المغرب في رواية الطاهر بن جلون "تلك العتمة الباهرة"

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ملخص

تبحث هذه الورقة في تمثيل الأجساد السجينة في فترة ما بعد الاستعمار في المغرب في رواية الطاهر بن جلون "تلك العتمة الباهرة". يتم استكشاف هذا التمثيل في ضوء نظريتين ومفهومين أدبيين مختلفين: "الأجسام الدنيئة" لجوليا كريستيفا و "الأجساد المنضبطة" لأثر فرانك. يعكس المفهوم الأول "الأجساد الدنيئة" التمثيل والتصور المرغوب به من قبل نظام ما بعد الاستعمار القمعي لأجساد المعتقلين السياسيين على أنها لا تزال خام وبدائية، بغضبة ومستبعدة، ومجردة من الإنسانية ومن الرغبات الجنسية. كذلك يستفز هذا التمثيل المهيمن مشاعر الإذلال والغربة والإنكار والانسلاخ لدى السجناء، مما يخلق أزمة هوية ومعضلة تتعلق بتعريف الذات والآخر. ومع ذلك، فإن المفهوم الثاني "الأجساد المنضبطة" يوفر ويستخدم كأداة للمقاومة؛ حيث يقدم السجناء تمثيلاً مضاداً لأجسادهم يتحدى التمثيل الذي تحدده الدولة وتصوره، من خلال ممارسة ضبط النفس والرقابة على أجسادهم. يتمكن السجناء من الوصول إلى حالة من السمو الروحي من خلال أجسادهم القابلة للاختراق، وهي حالة تساعد على الهروب من واقعهم المادي والجسدي المليء بالمعاناة والدناءة إلى العوالم الأثيرية السامية الممتلئة بالتأمل والتحرر، التجديد والإلهام والقوة المطلقة.

الكلمات الدالة: الجسد، دنيء، منضبط، ما بعد الاستعمار، الهوية، الاستبداد، السجن.



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The human body has always been central to literary themes and studies. It occupies such a special position in literature because it is not considered as merely a vessel which contains the mind and soul; rather, the body reveals, generates, and determines a variety of set of values, behaviours, concepts and relationships such as sex, race, social class, custom, norm, morality, identity, and politics. It can never be neutralized from the surrounding environment, dominating ideas and philosophies, and political, historical, cultural and social contexts. Not only is the human body affected by them, but it does influence all of them as well. Gender, race, and the politics of skin color make us conceive the world from a certain perspective, and similarly, because of them, the world corresponds to us from a specific angle. Therefore, the body plays a great role in the production of meaning, the construction of social and political discourses, and decoding both the conscious and unconscious realms of mind. The concept of the “body” doesn’t refer to material entities only, but to some deeper ideas and abstract meanings as well; it is exactly as how J. Bourke describes it when she states that “the concept ‘body’ is not interchangeable with physiology. The body is always more than a sum of its corporal parts” (2014: 476). It is something far beyond being a mere “container for feeling and acting,[the body is] a way of thinking as well” (2014: 481). Raymond W. Gibbs expresses the same idea when he defines “cognition” as “what happens when the body meets the world” (1999: 153).

Because of the crucial role the body plays in the construction of any work of art (including sculpture, statues, sketches, films, novels, poems... etc.), it is not surprising that postcolonial theory, in particular, gives more attention to and celebrates the human body and glorifies its role in conveying great depth of feeling and sensations, some major themes such as power, identity, oppression, trauma, and the very essence of the postcolonial situation to the reader. Since it isn’t easy to capture and tame the minds and souls of indigenous people, the body has always been used, by the former colonial power and the current oppressive postcolonial regime, as a gate to both (the mind and soul), to reach the unreachable, and control the intangible, since “it is the body which is the inescapable, visible sign of their oppression and denigration” (Ashcroft et al., 1995: 321). So by exposing the “inescapable” flesh to physical, sexual, and psychological violence, the perpetrators are actually trying to rewrite the body, estrange it from what and who it used to represent, and consequently subjugate the human beings who feel any bonds with it. Therefore, the postcolonial theory deals with the body as a text which can be erased, rewritten, encoded, and deciphered, and as the real field of struggle and resistance between the colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, and the foreign and native. The aboriginal body becomes the destructor or saviour for both the tyrant and the victim; the more it can resist degradation, imposed violence, offensive assaults, the discriminatory gaze Fanon talks about in his discussion of an inferiority complex, and imposed illusions and distorted feelings, the more it empowers the oppressed, bringing them closer to victory, and weakens the oppressors, bringing them closer to defeat. Thus, in postcolonial literature, “the body has the last word” (Dash, 1989: 332).

If postcolonial literature employs the body in a unique way to condemn oppression and present the silenced world of the oppressed, I am not exaggerating to say that postcolonial carceral literature, in particular, is in the first place a body narrative. The postcolonial prison is the place where mistreatment, reproduction, possession, imprinting, and numbering of bodies are pushed to the limit. The body becomes the center of the prisoner’s life, a life that revolves around pain, frequent beating, torture, injuries, diseases and malnutrition, a “bare life” in the Agambenian sense, a life naked of everything but full of corporeal awareness. Solitary confinement makes it even worse; prisoners are not allowed any contact with the other prisoners or the out world, books are forbidden; thus, time passes slowly and the prisoner becomes preoccupied and obsessed with his body, unconsciously exaggerating its pain, suffering and trauma. No doubt, postcolonial political prisoners are usually confined in the worst of conditions, in prisons not only outside of the normal law, but also with exceptional measures and “a special kind of law (like the law of war)” (Agamben, 2005: 4), or rather with an absence of laws. Such is the “state of exception” Agamben introduces in his discussion of biopolitics, a state of confinement that doesn’t have reformatory or corrective purposes, but spiteful and vindictive desires, a state that aims at the exclusion of prisoners from political, social, and even normal human biological and physiological life. Thus, postcolonial political prisoners are restricted to a life of *Muselmann*, which is a term coined to refer to captives who “suffered from starvation and exhaustion, becoming resigned to their death, making them unresponsive to their environment” (Jayathilake, 2018: 608), a life that undermines life- death, and human- inhuman dichotomies. The state of exclusion, lack of communication, and the imposed silencing of tongues the

prisoners suffer from lead them to seek catharsis in creative writing of their prison experiences- writing body narratives.

Taking into consideration that postcolonial carceral literature is, in the first place, body- narratives, and that this kind of literature has been understudied, this paper aims at exploring Tahar Ben Jelloun's representation of postcolonial bodies in incarceration in his novel *This Blinding Absence of Light* in light of two different literary theories and concepts: Julia Kristeva's "abject bodies", and Arthur Frank's "disciplined bodies". The first concept "abject bodies" mirrors the postcolonial oppressive regime's desired representation of the political detainees' bodies as raw and primitive, loathsome and excluded, and dehumanized and desexualized. However, the second concept "disciplined bodies" serves as a tool of resistance, since the prisoners introduce a counter- representation of their bodies that defies the one prescribed and depicted by the state. Such exploration of incarcerated postcolonial bodies in the novel will relate the human body to several literary themes such as identity, dehumanization, oppression, trauma, and spirituality.

This Blinding Absence of Light

Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* takes place in postcolonial Morocco, in the notorious secret prison of Tazmamart, which was especially built for political prisoners who participated in the first failed coup d'état against king Hassan II in 1971. The novel opens in one of the solitary confinement cells where the narrator describes the horrific conditions of their incarceration, and gives insight to the state violence and repression during the "Years of Lead" or the "Years of Embers"- the 1970s and the 1980s. After the failure of the military coup attempt which took place in the palace of Skhirat where the king was celebrating his birthday, the "traitor soldiers" were seized, sent first to the prison of Kenitra for two years, then to Tazmamart, a prison with extremely harsh inhuman conditions, a hell in the desert. Tazmamart consisted of solitary cells or "tombs" as the narrator better describes them, since they were built underground in total darkness, without any source of even dim light. Each "tomb" or "pit" was ten feet long and five feet wide with such a low ceiling that prevented the occupant of the cell from standing up, an air vent, and a hole in the floor that served as the lavatory. The corporeal punishment was beyond what the human mind can comprehend or even imagine: the prisoners were not allowed to see sunlight in eighteen years, except on sad occasions when they were asked to bury one of their comrades, they were denied any kind of medical treatment and consequently a peaceful and dignified death, their meal portions which consisted of only "starchy food" were rationed to the minimum that could only keep them alive, their water was not only rationed but also undrinkable, the air unbreathable, they were lightly clad when they were arrested and were not given any extra clothes, so their bodies were exposed to the cold of winter and the heat of summer, they were stung by scorpions brought by the guards, and eaten alive by thousands of cockroaches which they could feel but not see in the complete darkness.

Thus, Tazmamart was a place where political detainees disappeared in the belly of the earth and vanished into the darkness. They were condemned to a very slow and agonizing death, a death that was gulped everyday drop by drop, slowly, painfully. Death came late enough to prolong their suffering, much later than most of them wanted. Quick and peaceful death was something called upon in every prayer, wished for in every breath, since death would have put an end to their hunger, exhaustion, shivering out of being cold throughout eighteen winters, and disordered and incorrectly- functioning bodies. Though *This Blinding Absence of Light* is a fictional work of art, it does give the reader real accounts of what had actually happened in Tazmamart, since the narrative itself is based on the testimony of one of the former occupants of the prison, a narrative that stands as testimonial literature that resurrects memories from inside this gloomy place which doesn't exist today, a place of endless suffering, extreme corporeal pain, and exclusion from everything classified as human.

Abjected Bodies- The Concept

The term "abjection" is used in literary theory and studies to refer to a state of being an outcast, excluded, rejected and loathed. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection happens when an individual feels a breakdown in the meaning of his existence, belonging, or identity. Such a breakdown occurs, in particular, in horror narratives when one can't establish a clear distinction between what he considers as the subject (what or who he believes himself to be) and object (any other different and independent entity). Thus, abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in- between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982: 4). It is a state where boundaries between animal/ human, physical/ mental, self/ other, internal/ external, primitive/ civilized, conscious/ unconscious, criminal/ hero

are blurred, a state which “draws [us] toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982: 2). It is a way of defining the self depending on a process of separation; we define ourselves by what we are not; thus, the abject is the “me that is not me”. Such basis on which we depend to comprehend and define the very essence of our existence, identity and being is also the very basis which generates racism, bullying and oppression, because by defining ourselves by what we are not, we are in fact rendering other things and beings as disgusting, loathsome, impure, immoral, or illegal- we are rejecting or excluding them. The abject, according to Kristeva, refers also to the pre- lingual response to traumatic experiences and other disgusting stimuli (sewage, an open wound, shit... etc.) when the body reacts involuntarily by producing bodily fluids such as sweat, vomit, mucus, and saliva which we also reject and exclude when we define ourselves, saying that : well, that’s me, but it isn’t me.

Abjected Bodies- Application in the Novel

A close reading of *This Blinding Absence of Light* situates abjection as the overwhelming, prevailing state and mode throughout the novel. The postcolonial situation itself which highlights an incomplete process of decolonization is the first aspect of abjection that makes indigenous people raise questions concerning their identity, feelings of estrangement, and the self and other dilemma. The incarcerated narrator and his comrades had served in an army that defends a country where “they don’t respect light, or day, or night, or children, or women, or [a] poor mother who must have died from waiting for a missing son to come home” (72), at a time of “general paranoia [, when] they were locking up students, often brilliant ones, simply for voicing the wrong opinions” (83). Ironically enough, “right” and “wrong” in a postcolonial state are empty words, usually filled up with meaning according to the perceptions and wishes of the ruling oppressive regime. This regime which is considered as abject by its own Moroccan citizens since it doesn’t represent anything pure (neither independence nor colonization, neither Moroccan nor French), and whose army consists of “illiterate noncoms shouting their orders in a garbled language midway between French and Arabic” (108), also excludes and abjects intellectuals to suppress their dissent by locking them up and inflicting all kinds of imaginable pain on their bodies, thus, reducing them to raw corporeal entities, depicted as lacking thinking capacities and as awaiting to be numbered, stamped, reproduced, deciphered, and re- written. By so doing, the postcolonial state is actually silencing tongues, but losing control over the seemingly- easily- controlled bodies, because the body is more capable of telling the untold, reveal the hidden, and record the unseen. In other words, the body will act one day as a knife that penetrates the traumatic silence of the oppressed, and one that will be stabbed in the waist of an oppressive regime, revealing its crimes, corruption, and oppression and consequently leading to its imminent downfall. In this way, the body acts as the oppressors’ unnoticed “other”.

The marginalized bodies of the fifty- eight convicts who participated in the failed coup d’état were subjected to different dimensions of abjection. They were denied any classification, under any category, whatsoever; they don’t belong to the living, nor to the dead, they are not loyal soldiers, nor traitors, they don’t look exactly as monsters, nor like human beings, they are denied any access to their past or to any hope in a future. They live in the “in- between” where the meaning of existence and identity collapses; they are cast off to the furthest edge of life where the incarcerated living lead “bare lives” in underground tombs fit only for the dead, away from the center of life, away from the core of death- decentered bodies. The prisoners “came to a standstill over in nothingness, where time is abolished, tossed back to the wind” (5); they were thrown to the oblivion, to the underworld of complete absence of light, light that symbolizes time, life, hope, civilization, knowledge and clear vision. And because all creatures naturally depend on light to keep track of time with which every cell of our bodies interacts, to deprive prisoners from sunlight is to hinder them from adjusting to the rhythm of life, blending normally with the universe, and getting involved in the world of the living to which they supposedly belong. Moreover, light reduces depression and melancholy, and helps us establish a work/ life balance, and since every source of light was banned in Tazmamart, prisoners became non- action- oriented bodies; time stopped in their world and they “became ageless” (5)- eternal bodies, eternal manuscripts. In addition, the human visual ability results from the interaction of three elements: light, eyes, the brain, so complete absence of light means sensory deprivation which leads to lack of awareness and consequently to a collapse in meaning- abjection. The narrator emphasizes this point when he laments his inability to see and to comprehend the world around him: “I had become a blind man. And how could you convince me otherwise? I saw without

seeing. I imagined more than I saw” (30).

Not only were the political detainees in Tazmamart made to face and conceive their new world with imposed blindness, but they were also surrounded by factors that forced them to abject and disable the other senses as well. The suffocating space of their solitary cells, where they had to stay crouched if they wanted to sleep or stand up, and which had a hole in the floor that served as the lavatory, darkened their lives, shaded their senses, and blurred the very meaning of their existence, identity and humanity. The cramped cells resembled tombs for the dead or cages for the underworld ghosts and creatures if they existed, but not at all a dwelling place for humans or even animals. The cells stank like a sewer because of lack of water and consequently cleanliness, the hole in the floor filled with human bodily waste, and dozens of illnesses that attacked every limb, causing bodies to rot while still alive. So abjection of the five senses was vital for survival in such a place that smelled only of blood, urine, shit, sweat, disease and death, a place where prisoners had to live in the dilemma of “being there without being there. Shutting down [their] five senses, directing them elsewhere, giving them another life, as though [they] had been thrown into that grave without them” (3). Obviously, the captives were trying to redefine the meaning of their life, existence, identity and humanity by detaching themselves from their own senses, thus, acknowledging their new selves by separating the inseparable, rendering it as abject, since abject is “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (Kristeva, 1982: 4). By abjecting the five senses, the men are actually abjecting their bodily fluids in the first place, ejecting them from their bodies, yet considering them as disgusting and loathsome, and as a result excluding them when defining themselves by referring to them as “the me that is not me”- abject.

The episode in which one of the watchdogs of the prison was introduced to one of the solitary cells and imprisoned with political detainees because he had bitten one of the generals shows the extent to which the oppressive regime has gone crazy, dehumanizing its dissidents, abjecting them to the extreme, and blurring human/ animal binaries. The dog got a five- year-sentence and was condemned to the very harsh and brutal conditions the men were confined in- complete darkness, hunger, thirst, suffocating cell- cramped and airless, and no- touch- torture. While leading the dog to its underground dungeon, the guard in charge was swearing, cursing and scolding the dog, asserting that he was about to “share the fate of those who tried to kill Sidna” (61). So according to the guards, surely representatives of the political regime in the novel, it was the dog that was being subjected to degrading conditions and treatment in being confined with the men, and not vice versa. The prisoners seem to have this notion planted in the back of their heads as well, especially when they held a meeting to find a suitable name for the dog, while they were reduced to mere numbers, not allowed to call each other by their names. No doubt, to have a name is to have identity, dignity, and a free soul, “to have a name is a privilege” (Varatharajah, 2015), so by naming the dog, the men set him free, positioning him in a higher rank. Ironically enough, the dog was called “Ditto” with a capital “D” while the narrator was reminding himself: “the one thing I must not forget is my name. I need it. I’ll keep it as a testament, a secret in the gloomy grave where I bear the fateful number: 7” (18). By giving the dog a name, the narrator was foreshadowing his freedom which was drawing nigh, for after only one month of his imprisonment, Ditto went mad and soon embraced his freedom through death. In fact, it was the prisoners who were enslaved more and more by the incident, since they had to wait for one whole week before the guards cleaned and disinfected the dog’s stinky cell where his excrement had piled up, getting a justification for that delay as, and “between two groans, ‘Kmandar’s orders!’” (63).

If what drove Ditto mad was the intended and well- studied absence of his basic needs as a living creature- light, enough space where he could move and play, water, food (he was allowed only one meal a day which consisted of noodles cooked in water, with no meat at all), then humans have more reasons to forsake their minds in such conditions- rendering them as abject, since humans have unique thinking capacities, aspiring souls, acute memory and imagination, and critical vision and philosophy; creatures with such extensive abilities and superior characteristics can’t live in such a limited environment. So by denying the existence of all these godly- endowed- human- merits in the prisoners, ignoring all their mental, emotional, spiritual and physical needs, and reducing them to needy and always- in- want bodies, the repressive state machinery was actually trying to produce human animal bodies- or bodies “becoming- animal” in Deleuze and Guattari’s jargon. The political detainees were pushed to leave the territory of humanity to a much inferior and minor one, where they didn’t have

a stable sense of identity; their bodies became “‘hybrid’ between the human and the animal” (Punter, 2000: 120), since the men frequently left their cells to go in mental voyages to the nostalgic realm of the past, and then back to the corporeal realm of suffering, deprivation, and deformed, distorted, and rotten bodies. Such voyages reinforced the feelings of exclusion, denial, deprivation, estrangement, and abjection the men experienced and with which their wandering minds cluttered. By emptying the bodies of those dissidents in detention from human life and characteristics, the oppressive postcolonial regime wanted to show them as raw and primitive, and being prepared to be civilized in the hope that they would conform and adapt to what the state welcomed as “positive values”.

Too much solitude leads to over- obsession with an overwhelming thought or feeling, and when the prisoner’s body is confined to a very limited physical space, but at the same time dipped in an ocean of pain, disease, and abjection, the body becomes the main generator of feelings and ideas; it becomes a way of thinking- thinking via the body. And because “a healthy mind lives in a healthy body”, mutilated, defiled, “becoming- animal”, abjected, hybrid, and tormented bodies produce distorted images and identities, and consequently hysteria and madness, resulting from converting “body” into “mind”. Therefore, prisoners who went mad “entered the house of pain and sorrow by leaving [their] mind- or what remained of it- at the prison gates” (8). Thus, the mind gets entrapped in the physical incompleteness of the incarcerated deformed body, and in its marginalized, metamorphized, and unstable physical, psychological and sexual identity. Among the many cases mentioned in the novel for prisoners who lost their mind and reason, Majid’s is probably the most significant. He chose to end his life by committing “naked suicide”; he removed all his clothes, tied them together to make a rope which he used to strangle himself to death. A scene of strangulation and nakedness evokes an image of autoerotic asphyxia in which strangulation is used as a means of arousing the sexual desire during a self- induced masturbation, thus, achieving a point of sexual climax. Nakedness also symbolizes rebirth and resurrection, revival of a stolen life from an abject body, and awakening of senses, feelings, and sexual desires that were deactivated and suppressed for very long. The prison penal policies denied the prisoners any sexual activity whether legitimate or illegitimate, depriving them of their sexual needs and desires and transforming them to “desexualized bodies”. In fact, long before they were arrested after the failed coup d’état, their sexuality had been controlled and their sexual relationships had been closely- watched by the army:

I thought as well about how people can get nervous when they haven’t had their coffee-or when they’ve had too much of it. I stopped getting the jitters a long time ago. It seems they put a bromide or some other sedative into our morning drink here so that our genitals don’t act up. A cook had already told me that in Ahermemou. Once a week they poured some white powder into the big coffeepot, but never on the day before we went on leave. I knew this. The army sticks its nose everywhere. Nothing was supposed to escape its notice. Even when you were on the outside, with your family or in some whorehouse, the army was watching. You belonged to it in peacetime as in wartime. Where we were now, our bodies were meant to fall apart piece by piece. In my case, my penis was the first thing to go. I had forgotten all about it and had no trouble ignoring its existence and condition from then on. Which led me to reflect at length on sexuality in general and ours- in Morocco-in particular. (106)

The only prisoner, Lhoucine, who dared break the rules and have sex with his wife in Kenitra before being moved to Tazmamart, was symbolically punished for it by death. The doctor of the prison took a liking to him and arranged a meeting between the prisoner and his wife in which they made love and she conceived a child. In one dark, gloomy night when the narrator was in a bad, skeptical mood, he taunted Lhoucine about the fact that his son was born nine months and ten days after the hospital visit, hinting that his wife had betrayed him with the doctor who arranged the visit and that Lhoucine couldn’t be the real father of his son. The psychological consequences of these taunts were devastating: Lhoucine was consumed by skepticism and doubts, stopped eating and speaking to everyone, lost his faith and certainty, and “was letting himself waste away” (144). His tragic death plays a key role in the novel in asserting the oppressors’ framing of the prisoners’ bodies as “desexualized”, and as abject bodies with abject sexual needs and desires, and whoever dares challenge this framework shall wait his punishment- his death.

The political detainees in Tazmamart faced a complex identity crisis since they were subjected to multi- layered abjection that encompassed their social lives and networks, their role in building a nation, and their past memories and hopes for a

future. The meaning of their lives was on the brink of collapse since their situation defied any classification of who they were, who they are, and who they will be. The postcolonial fetish that ruled the country then classified them as traitors, their army superiors classified them as loyal because they were resisting an oppressive regime and its idol tyrant and because a good soldier always follows orders, and they themselves were lost between the two classifications, unable to determine to which one they belonged. Those simple and naïve cadets and soldiers had been misled by their superiors on the day of the failed coup d'état, having been told that they were going to the king's palace in Skhirat to defend him against traitors who came to attend his birthday party disguised as guests. Others got into the military trucks without even knowing where they were going and why, and the majority of them didn't fire a single shot. The situation they were in raised uncertainty among the prisoners, bringing into question the dilemma of their fissured identities- fissured bodies: "who were we? What was our status? Were we disloyal soldiers? Political prisoners? Victims of injustice?" (90). Not only were those fissured bodies considered as abject by the postcolonial oppressive machinery, but also by some of their family members and social networks as well. Realizing that those detainees would never come back to their past normal lives and that they would spend a lifetime in incarceration, their fiancées abandoned them, regarding them as dead, or better as a memory of someone that had never existed- abject. The prisoners were there in the lives of those women and not there at the same time- "the me that's not me", abject. Knowing that their fiancées had left them for other men reinforced the men's feelings of humiliation, estrangement and alienation from life.

If a breakdown of a short- term relationship like engagement can cause so much pain, isolation and uncertainty, then what can abjection by a father figure cause? The narrator's father who was the jester, entertainer, and a close friend of the king, thanks to his quick wit and the many works of great Arab poets he learnt by heart, was a slave of the palace and his sovereign and was someone who craved for the satisfaction of the powerful in the country by trying to make them laugh. Such father was so ashamed that his son was a participant in the failed coup d'état and was more than willing to abject his son so that the postcolonial autocrat would be pleased: "I disown this unworthy son, I consign him to public condemnation, to eternal obliteration, I strip my name from him, I throw him into the gutter so that rats and mad dogs can rip out his heart, his eyes, his liver, and tear him into pieces to be thrown into the sea of utter oblivion" (26). Father figures in literature are usually symbolic of virility, clarity, power, and independability which were all symbolically withdrawn from the narrator the moment his father turned away from him in revulsion, considering him as abject, and offering him as a human scapegoat to ensure the continuation of his position in the royal palace at whatever cost. The narrator knew later on that his father had helped most of his brothers and sisters get scholarships and government jobs on one condition: his abject incarcerated son's name never be mentioned in his presence. Obviously, the relationship between father and son mirrors that of the postcolonial regime and Moroccans; an irresponsible father who abjects his son to gain the consent of a tyrant and an oppressive regime that subjugates its citizens, suppresses any dissent, and excludes intellectuals and nonconformists to please the West; such regime acted as a continuation of the French colonization of Morocco through political oppression, its hybrid identity, and the degrading life conditions during the Years of Lead. Thus, the prisoners didn't have a clear identity; they were neither traitors nor loyal soldiers, they belonged to a past that didn't belong to them; they were lost between different worlds, different classifications, an outcast, an abject.

Disciplined Bodies- The Concept

In *For a Sociology of the Body: an Analytical Review*, Arthur W. Frank presents the concept of the "disciplined body" as a body constructed through self- control and regimentation to reach a state of spiritual transcendence or "rationalization of monastic order" (Frank, 1991: 54). By exercising some kind of mental domination over the body, a domination that imposes a set of constraints over the material and mortal physicality, an individual becomes more capable of enduring corporeal pain, transforming it into powerful energy that helps direct the self from the lowly mundane world of suffering and lack to that pure and lofty of the spirit, religion, and God, where the tormented self feels more relevant. Thus, disciplined bodies are permeable and porous; they act like a gate through which one can pass to the realm of the elevated mind and sublime spirit. Such process of transcendence has a purifying and ennobling influence on the conscious thinking subject, since his body becomes the site of amalgamation with the divine. According to Frank, a disciplined body can be known

through its responses to four dimensions: control, desire, other- relatedness, and self- relatedness. With regard to control, the disciplined body is predictable and not contingent; to desire, it is lacking and not producing; to other- relatedness, it is monadic and not dyadic, and to self- relatedness, it is dissociated and not associated. So, by escaping the boundaries of the body which has connections with animality and by stepping outside its corporeality, one comes to realize “what we may be able to do with our bodies and also, necessarily, what we may be able to do without them” (Punter, 2000: 122).

Disciplined Bodies- Application in the Novel

The reader of *This Blinding Absence of Light* gets hooked on one reasonable question while proceeding throughout the novel: how did twenty- eight of the political detainees manage to survive eighteen years of imprisonment in the hell of Tazmamart when the guards thought that none of the prisoners would be able to make it through even just one year? In fact, the prisoners who understood that their incarcerated bodies presented a new formula of dominance, and who were able to impose some kind of control over them won in the end, thus, turning their bodies into “disciplined bodies” that can float free of the existential world of trauma, pain, and oppression, and hover instead in that of the transcendental, relishing its boons and glory. As such, developing the body into a disciplined version served as a technique of survival in that horrible place; the prisoners controlled their bodies in different ways to serve different ends. At times, they controlled their breathing, movement, and consequently the silence in the dungeon, creating an uncomfortable, eerie, and haunting atmosphere that drove the guards mad, since “silence plus darkness made a recipe favorable to the appearance of djinns” (40). A combination of silence and darkness not only seduces mythical creatures to appear, but invokes deity, mystery, and death as well. By so doing, the detainees were able to control not only their own bodies, but the bodies of their perpetrators as well who tried to restore the prisoners to their corporeality by shouting, swearing, threatening, and banging on the doors of the cells with the butts of their weapons; it is exactly as how Frank puts it when he states that “bodies pursue ends which are their own, but in so doing, they reproduce structures which require further resistance” (1991: 60). Discovering that their disciplined bodies were capable of producing new structures in the prison and steering the bodily behavior of the other, the detainees came to realize that their bodies became the center of power inside the prison, a realization that helped new types of framing to be born. At other times, they took charge of their emotions, filtering them, neutralizing them, producing bodies that lack any feelings whether positive or negative, because both were fatal in their situation. Positive feelings of love and nostalgia to a past that would never come back made the prisoners desperate, reinforced their sense of abjection, humiliation and loss, fed on their flesh and blood, and drained them to death, sucking up life from their bodies. Negative feelings of hatred and desires of revenge were no much better; they were “a trap: you begin by opening yourself to hatred, which then fatally poisons your blood” (149), since vengeance is a hatred- driven response, a response that “[smells] strongly of death” (149).

When incarcerated disciplined bodies willingly abandon their past, with all its good and bad memories, they reach a state of psychological balance, mental clarity, and spiritual lucidity and awakening. Wanting to protect himself against the unwanted intrusion of an irrelevant past, the narrator invented a new identity for himself, estranging his present from his past, and dealing with memories as if he were just an observer, intruder, and complete stranger. Thus, his past no longer bothered him; he considered himself as a man with no past, a man who was born a grown- up, a convict in detention: “I believe in the present, but I no longer have a past. Each day that passes is a day that dies without a trace, without a sound, without color. Every morning I am a newborn baby” (125). No past means no childhood, no adolescence, no maturity, no family, no friendship, no fiancée, no irretrievable love, no sense of lost freedom, no feelings of estrangement or depression, and consequently no emotional needs or physical desires; thus, the prisoner grew calmer as he conceived his body as lacking, a corporeal lack that leads to mental and spiritual attentiveness. Therefore, whenever a series of past memories and images started to pop out in the solitude of his cell, the narrator would deliberately dissociate himself from it, watching the memories as if he was watching a film whose main protagonist was a complete stranger from another part of the world, a stranger whom he didn’t even recognize and who didn’t concern him. The way the narrator treated the past version of himself reflects Frank’s vision of the disciplined body with regard to the self- relatedness dimension, since the “disciplined body is dissociated from itself” (1991: 56), and not associated. Though it was not an easy task, the narrator succeeded most of the time in achieving such separation from the self, but when memories became obsessive, and indulging in the past irresistible,

he tended to bang his head repeatedly against a wall until it “became swollen, but also light, since it had been emptied of so many, many memories” (20). In fact, the act of voluntary bumping of one’s head against a wall resonates deep spiritual practices in Sufism or Tasawwuf where practitioners beat themselves and strike their own heads with swords in what they call Councils of Adhikr or Azzikr. Worshippers crave such spiritual, self-inflicted pain to fall in trance and consequently achieve a high level of spirituality that endows them with an experience of transcendence towards a unity with the divine. Thus, the narrator, like the Sufists, was trying to cleanse his soul by hurting his flesh, and by maiming the head which represents the balance between the physical, mental and spiritual, the practitioner is actually outweighing his spiritual side, and subordinating his physical one; the body, as such, becomes the site of domination and the practice of regimentation- a disciplined body.

If sacred self-inflicted pain was one way the narrator used to reach a state of transcendence towards the higher world of the sublime, then detachment from the body was another. The narrator used to “[leave his] cell on tiptoe. Abandoning the carcass of [his] body” (103), apply some level of concentration, and then he would find himself a free soul going on pilgrimage to Mecca, keeping his eyes on the Black Stone, and visiting Medina as well. The imaginary journey to Mecca metaphorically symbolizes the narrator’s quest towards spiritual renewal, enlightenment, and epiphany, since Mecca is the center of holiness and spirituality in Islam, and the place where Prophet Mohammad received his first revelations. Like the early Muslims who were subjected to bodily abuse and torture in Mecca and who, through tolerance and their sense of spiritual plenitude, built their own nation of love and tranquility, the narrator forsake his deformed body, and his nomadic, wandering and lost soul finally took refuge in the ultimate destination of spiritual meditation, inspiration, and power- Mecca. In his journey, the narrator’s disciplined body got fixated on the most sacred structure in Islam, the Kaaba, and more specifically on the Black Stone, since “it was that black stone- the stone of the beginning, the one that still shows Abraham’s footprints, the one whose memory is linked with the memory of the world- that saved [him]” (46). The Kaaba is the “House of God”, and those who visit the holy shrine are his guests, those guests come from all over the world; they are treated equally: you can see blacks and whites, the sick and healthy, the poor and rich performing the same rituals, seeking heavenly deliverance from the earthly ruin; no one is excluded, no one is abjected. Thus, the narrator found in this sacred place what he mostly missed in his filthy, dark underground world of abjection. The Black Stone is used in the novel as a very significant symbol as well. According to the Islamic tradition, the stone belongs to paradise as it was given to Adam upon his expulsion from Jannah (heaven), and it is said that the stone was originally white, but it turned to black by absorbing the sins of those who sought forgiveness by touching or kissing it. Therefore, the Black Stone objectifies salvation, embodies a link between the heavenly and earthly worlds, and symbolizes the last resort for the exhausted, burdened and abjected bodies, a resort to which they can escape by disciplining their corporeal part and unleash their spiritual one, thus, reaching a state of ethereal upliftment. Such spiritual growth attained through disciplining the body helped the detainees not only survive, but also overcome and defeat physical suffering and pain; “I am no longer of this world, even if my feet are still freezing on this damp cement floor... No- I feel no pain. I am certain that I feel no pain. I do not feel anything anymore” (50). The spiritual voyages to the holy places of Islam and his disciplined body endowed the narrator with extraordinary strength, will, and an undefeatable sense of peace that ironically exceeded in power and effect the same sense he experienced before his incarceration:

In my life from before, not only did I sleep badly, but I dreamed very little. During the first months in prison, I lost both sleep and dreams. After I broke with the past and hope, I slept normally, except for nights of piercing cold when we had to stay awake to keep from freezing to death. And I dreamed. All my nights were packed with dreams. (126)

Dreams represent a hybrid stage between the conscious and unconscious, revelation and imagination, physical and spiritual, and human and divine. Muslims believe that dreams happen when the spirit detaches itself from the body upon falling asleep; such detachment frees the soul from its corporeal imprisonment, sending it back to where it belongs, to the metaphysical world where spirits meet. As such, dreams act as a medium of communication with the dead, saints and prophets, and symbolize a process of pure transcendence from the physical to the spiritual where we can experience the unexperientable, since we exist in two opposite worlds at the same time; our half-conscious sleeping bodies are still chained

up in the earthly material world, while our souls are roaming freely in the incorporeal ethereal realm before our bodies and souls reunite once again through awakening. The narrator, who restored a great deal of control over his miserable, messy life in Tazmamart by disciplining his body, spent most of his long prison sentence in the spiritual world rather than the physical one; while awake, he went on voyages to Mecca and Medina, and while asleep, he dreamt of the three prophets: Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad. In his dreams, Moses listened while he complained of injustice, political corruption, and abuse of power; Jesus embraced him with sympathy and affection, and Mohammad reassured and advised him, filling his dark cell with light. Since dreams are an intermediary between two worlds and a time of spiritual transcendence, and since prophets are symbols of human excellence and spiritual guidance, then having the privilege of meeting the messengers of God in his dreams bestowed peace on the narrator, assured him that he was on the right spiritual path, and promised him with happiness, if not in this world, then in the hereafter. Through dreams, he met the three great prophets of Islam, and through concentration, he was transported from his cell to the city of Marrakech where he visited the tombs of the seven saints who were “a lesson in renunciation, an apprenticeship in solitude and the elevation of the soul” (101). The narrator’s pilgrimage around the seven saints of Marrakech endowed him with the spiritual treasure of clear vision of truth and reality about the outside world from which he was excluded, since the shadow of his mother visited and talked to him in the silence of his cell after his pilgrimage, informing him that she was seriously ill, a fact confirmed after his release from Tazmamart.

Birds?! In underground tombs? How did different types of birds find their own way into the underground dungeon when even light was denied any access? No doubt, birds are used in the novel as a supernatural phenomenon with great spiritual symbolism. Birds belong to the upper world of freedom, omniscient knowledge, clear vision, eternity, and the divine. They stand for the elevation, upliftment, and transcendence of the soul that separates itself from the body, lifting up into the skies, defying gravity. Birds also symbolize the metamorphosis of an astray man into a true believer and pious worshipper whose soul passes beyond the limits of his corporeal body which was previously engrossed in worldly lusts and pleasures, a body that is now disciplined and permeable, and one through which the soul can pass towards the ethereal worlds of peace and emancipation. Having turned up to spirituality as a refuge in his incarceration, the narrator who had missed up his prayers when he was a free man and was making up for that by performing extra daily prayers in his cell was frequently visited by the sacred sparrow of Marrakech called Tebebt. The bird would come and wait for the prisoner to finish his prayers, then it would sing each time a different song, conveying information about the weather, the guards, what was happening and what was about to happen in the prison. Through time and experience, the narrator became professional in decoding those songs, driving the guards mad by describing what the weather was like or telling them which guard was going on sick leave. The astonished guards who couldn’t find any logical interpretation for what was happening accused the detainees that they “were djinns, unholy people who must have made a pact with the devil” (124). Not only the sparrow, but also a dove that the prisoners called Hourria (Freedom) found its way into the underground dark pit and “showed no agitation or desire to leave” (94). Unlike Tebebt who was coming exclusively for the narrator, the dove was shared equally by all the detainees, moving from cell to cell, assuring the prisoners, adding flavor to their life, and sparkling their gloomy days with its joyful presence. The dove which is a symbol for peace, innocence, purity, and love acts as a message carrier as well; thus, it represents soothing divine revelations that bestow ease, love and support upon those who are suffering. And because of the fact that “often there were birds” (137) in the dungeon and with little human communication, the narrator came to “understand the language of sparrows better than [he did] that of humans” (125), a symbolic sign of his belonging to the spiritual world rather than the corporeal, material one.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted a study of the representation of postcolonial bodies in incarceration in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *This Blinding Absence of Light*. It has focused on the oppressive regime’s attempts to suppress any dissent through emptying the bodies of the political detainees from human characteristics, dehumanizing, desexualizing, and excluding them, turning them into “object” bodies in the Kristevan sense. By objecting the bodies of the prisoners, the postcolonial oppressive machinery aims at showing those bodies as raw and primitive, and in need to be civilized, stamped, reproduced, deciphered and re-written by the state in a way that enables them to embrace the “positive values” of the civilized world. Such abjection creates

feelings of humiliation, estrangement, and alienation from life, and causes a breakdown in the meaning of the prisoner's sense of existence, belonging, and identity. The political detainees fight back by turning their bodies into "disciplined bodies" in the Frankian sense. They reconstruct and reproduce a new version of their bodies by exercising some kind of self-control and regimentation over them, thus, reaching a state of spiritual transcendence through mental concentration and domination over the body. By disciplining the body, the abjected prisoners are able to overcome and defeat physical suffering and pain, receive divine revelations, experience the unexperientable, and control the bodily behaviors of their oppressors; thus, the disciplined bodies of the detainees become the center of power inside the prison.

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