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Representations of the Disabled in Arab/Islamic Culture and Literature from North Africa and the Middle East

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
THE UNIVERSITHY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Timothy Brennan, Director

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-UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
United States of America

This is to certify that I have examined this copy of a doctoral thesis by

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February 28, 2002

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GRADUATE SCHOOL

FOR MY MOTHER AND FATHER

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I study the predicament of characters with disabilities in fiction, film and other media from the Arab/Islamic Post/Colonial societies of Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Egypt. It would be useful at this point to introduce a basic definition of the term "disability" as deployed within American body theory. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Thomson counters the absolute sense according to which "the prototypical disabled person posited in cultural representations never leaves a wheelchair, is totally blind, or profoundly deaf." Instead of this prototype or stereotype, Thomson proposes that "disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses ... temporary and permanent injuries and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity" (13).

I appreciate Thomson's move against "total" disability and her inclusion of partial impairment. Bearers of partial and invisible disabilities experience and assume their conditions differently both from the "healthy and normal" and from the totally disabled. A hearing-impaired person is in a liminal position with respect to the hearing and the Deaf. A near-sighted individual is different from people who have perfect vision or are totally blind. The question of partial, correctable disabilities, manageable and remediable ailments erupts at this juncture. Not all foreign aids are equally accepted by different societies. Partial and correctable impairments may constitute "invisible" disabilities. Certain aids can be stigmatized. Tooth-braces and eyeglasses, for example, are better

accepted than hearing aids in Tunisia. In *Stigma : Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman points out that when repair is possible, "what often results is not the acquisition of a fully normal status, but a transformation of self from someone with a particular blemish into someone with a record of having corrected a particular blemish" (9).

My definition of "disability" covers, develops and supplements the marks of difference listed by Thomson. Her reading of disability as visible difference and her concept of "acquired" disability are suggestive. In my study of disabilities from the Arab/Muslim world, I place a special focus on the concept of "acquired" disability and give it a novel sense. As I try to reconstruct cultural "causes" for numerous disabilities that figure in the various select texts, I supplement Thomson's note of "acquired" disabilities with concepts of culturally generated, gendered and engineered handicaps.

Regarding the geographic trajectory that my work explores, it is worth noting that The Arab/Muslim World extends far beyond the scope of this work, which leaves out numerous countries, such as Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya and Afghanistan, to name a few.[1] The selection of the countries covered in this project serves as a sample of what it means to be disabled in different yet similar parts in that area of the world. The Maghreb, which is the region I am the most familiar with, is included in large part. The texts and societies chosen from it represent various stages and versions of North African culture, for example, at its most colonial in the Algerian study, its most traditional in the Moroccan part (which is colonial too, but less saliently) and its most post-colonial in the

[1] A literary and cultural study of the predicament of the disabled in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan would reveal issues of urgent relevance to world culture. Searching for and studying various texts in which they figure (Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Men Under the Sun* for Palestine, for example), and documenting the

Tunisian chapter. Common denominators that link the various countries included are Islam and the Arabic language, even taking into consideration the fact that not all Muslims or Maghrebians are Arabs.[2] Another shared presence in North African societies is Egyptian culture, through the voices of its singers, actors and Quran reciters. The protagonist of the Algerian novel treated in this project testifies to the belief that large populations throughout the Arab World have in the special quality of everything Egyptian. He describes the voice of the Egyptian Quran reciter Sheikh Abd El Basset Abd Essamad as "the most beautiful voice in the world.[3] Only Egyptian films and the national versions of the Candid Camera show can compete with Western movies for viewers' attention and affection throughout North Africa.[4] An Egyptian film such as *al Kitkat*, the subject of another chapter in this work, promises to break stereotypes of visually disabled persons in the Arab/Islamic World and beyond through its problematization of common representations and mistreatments of the blind in the region. The Candid Camera episode that I chose for my Tunisian cultural disability study, shows societal attitudes to the disabled at their most spontaneous, interactive and dynamic. Although the effect that the show directors intended seems to be pure entertainment, the decisions that they make in staging their ready-made scenario betray their ableist oralism

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situations of the thousands of war disabled individuals, bomb and mine amputees living there, is an open project that invites pursuit.

[2] There is a large number of aboriginal North African Berbers as well as non-Muslim European christians and native Jewish minorities living in the region.

[3] *Tombéza*, 256.

[4] The apparent ambiguity is intended. I mean both films from Europe and the USA as well as the American Westerns. See *Tombéza* p. 269.

and audism, and backfire. In effect, the candid camera shows the street subverting the script.

The various societies that make up the Arab/Muslim World have common problems that may play out to different degrees from one community to another, yet come from similar sources. One particular shared issue is the gendered concept of honor and shame that we grow up on in Arab/Muslim societies. As we shall see in the Moroccan chapter, patriarchal fear of dishonor leads to the "imprisonment" of women within houses, their burial alive in other words, to evoke the well-known pre-Islamic practice. In contemporary Bahrain (to go beyond the scope of the dissertation for the sake of example), a princess may find herself in a predicament of a similar nature, to a different degree. As the film *The Princess and the Marine* relates, the young woman lived in a palace and could come and go, to school and to Western style shops. Yet, she did not have the degree or quality of freedom that she wanted to make her own choices and move without surveillance. As a consequence, she felt that she was a prisoner. Mimouni documents how educated and even working young women in North African societies who, unlike many women across the Arab/Muslim World, can go out to school and work, still feel imprisoned. They live waiting for marriage, their way out in a society where unmarried women *d'un certain âge* are looked down upon, and *divorcées* scorned.[5] In their social envirnoments, there is only a limited number of places where women can go without risking suspicious accusing looks and slander. In North African societies, there are still no genuinely mixed coffee shops where a girl can go, sit down by herself and

[5] Mimouni describes girls in his society in the following terms: "elles ne vivent que dans l'attente de ce moment [marriage], pas un seul instant, elles n'hésiteront à quitter leur emploi, leurs amies, leur petit monde pour aller se convoler en justes noces et se depêcher de se faire engrosser, au plus tard dans les six mois suivant les épousailles, à peine de se voir repudiées... Chez nous, une femme n'a qu'un statut : celui

read a book without experiencing negative gazes and words from onlookers. I argue and demonstrate in my literary study of Ben Jelloun's novel *The Sand Child*, that the seclusion of females in any form tends to have an extremely harmful impact on women with disabilities in Arab/Muslim societies, in part because they must lead even more secluded lives.

The diverse texts that this dissertation draws on cooperate and lead to complementary conclusions, largely because they represent societies with common issues and customs. For instance, a scene from the Egyptian film can help us understand a passage from a novel about Morocco or Algeria on the exercise of masculine power and honor over the female disabled body. To supplement my project as I introduce it, I will use at this point a scene from *al Kitkat* and a passage from a novel of Rachid Mimouni's *La Malédiction* that my dissertation does not include or develop. The passage (which I mention in a footnote to the Moroccan chapter) describes a hospital patient who has just given birth to a baby and relates her story as follows:

> Un second berceau métallique accueillait un petit bout de femme qui souriait de toutes ses dents. Ses mollets soudés aux cuisses et ses moignons de bras lui donnaient l'allure d'un pingouin et son hilarité ne faisait que souligner son grotesque physique de monstre de foire.
>
> - Êtes-vous mariée? lui demanda Kader qui connaissait très bien son histoire.
>
> L'infirme n'eut aucune hésitation à recommencer son récit. Elle vivait reléguée dans un placard de la maison familiale, oubliée de tous. On cachait cet

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d'épouse. Hors cela, point de salut pour elle. Études, métier ne sont que passe-temps, moyens de patienter. Il n'y a de respectable que la femme mariée" (*Tombéza*, 143-4).

objet de honte. On lui donnait à manger comme on le fait pour un chien. Le fiancé de la soeur aînée n'avait découvert son existence qu'au début de la nuit de noces, alors qu'il attendait de pénétrer dans la chambre de la promise. Il s'était exercé sur elle avant de rejoindre celle qui portait la robe blanche.

- Et tu ne t'es pas défendue?

Elle montra ses moignons pour toute réponse.

- Tu n'as pas crié pour appeler au secours?
- Non, avoua-t-elle avec une franchise désarmante (75).

It may seem that the abuse of the apparently mentally and physically different girl is a more or less ordinary rape story and that her aggression is merely an individual act on the part of her sister's husband-to-be. The real and deeper reason behind her experience, however, is a specifically cultural one. Let us remember a scene from the Egyptian film and connect. It is one of the few scenes in which we see the blind protagonist angry. He is walking home through *al Kitkat* alleys when, suddenly, he hears his son's voice. Husni stops by the closed door and overhears the intimate conversation that is taking place between Yusuf and his girlfriend. Yusuf shares with her his frustrations, desires to leave the country and his sense of failure. He says "I couldn't even be a man with you." Upon hearing this, the father gets angry, curses his son and walks away. He grew up believing that one of the most shameful and dishonorable things that could happen in the world is for a man to lose, albeit temporarily, his masculine power over a female body or his reproductive ability. This scene can help us make sense more fully of the quoted comment on North African society. In Mimouni's work, *le pingouin*'s story as her doctor calls her (152) alternatively with *l'infirme* or the disabled (75, 209), tells us about her

society's gendered customs and their impact on her fellow men and women, particularly females like her who find themselves reduced to objects of shame and experimentation. The context of the aggression is the Arabian wedding night as many people still live it back East. The bridegroom is under pressure, feels performance anxiety and is possibly afraid to fail in his masculinity test. Up to our times in the Arab/Muslim world, particularly among people of rural background and sexist mentality, it is still customary on wedding nights to see members of the newlyweds' families wait around for the proof of the bride's innocence and the groom's virility. Both man and woman are victims in the passage from *The Curse*. Society has dictated the man's monstrous act of abuse by placing a high value on man's sexual and reproductive ability while devaluing the disabled female's body. We can imagine what went through the groom's mind when he saw his bride's hidden sister. He saw her for the first time on his night. At first sight, he proceeded to his act, for other reasons besides his virility test anxiety. He must have known that he would not be punished for his deed, forgotten as the young woman was. Besides, he must have thought that she was unmarriageable in any case and would not need her honor. Therefore, all he could see in her was an Arabian one time stand field for him to shed first blood. He would move on to her sister next, the able-bodied and normal-looking bride who naturally, shared the disabled woman's wound as a female with the difference, however, that in view of her good looks and health, society regarded her nevertheless as a field, but a fertile one. Such a preferential treatment translates into the ceremony and celebration that confer a respected status on her transition into womanhood whereas her disabled sister is abandoned and disrespected without a consequence. Based on textual evidence, *le pingouin*'s disability is of a motor nature. She cannot move. It is

possible to read her state as a metaphor for the general condition of other females in her society. Mimouni uses the term *malédiction* in *Tombéza* to describe the common predicament of women in his culture. His insight reveals a praiseworthy sensibility, honesty and capacity to imagine what it means and feels like to be a North African/Arab/Muslim woman. These qualities are shared by several Arab writers, such as Mahfouz, Aslan and Ben Jelloun. The Egyptian writer Ibrahim Aslan deserves credit for the rare degree of sympathy that he shows for women and the honesty with which he unveils the masculine mind throughout his novella *Malik al Hazin.* He has his male character *Yusuf* (who has not seen an Arab film in ten years) admit that he wants to have only a one time stand with the un/married female neighbor, *Fatma,* who was longing for his friendship and love.[6] The director who adapted Aslan's work into a movie, Daoud Abd El Sayed, writes a better scenario in the film. The relationship between *Yusuf* and *Fatma* seems to be more of a friendship in the film than in the original fiction. In *La Malédiction* as well, Mimouni documents the lack of friendship between Arab/Muslim men and women when he notes the change of the status of his female character *Louisa,* whose mother carried the curse of being able to give birth to no more than an only daughter, upon the death of her parents: "Entourée de ses parents, elle était une respectable fille de famille. Mais l'orpheline qui habitait seule devenait l'objet de toutes les convoitises." Having experienced numerous indecent intentions, *Louisa* comments: "Je me rendis compte alors que chez nous, il ne peut exister de relation amicale entre un homme et une femme" (142).

[6] Based on such a literary example, it is worth pointing out that what constitutes an Arabian one time stand versus the Western equivalent as we gather from the cinema and media, is a Shahrayaryan suspicion of women and obsession with "innocence," that is blood or the lack thereof, according to their conception of

Ben Jelloun's statement about women's shared wound through his *porte-parole* Fatima in *l'Enfant de sable* (58) partially expresses Mimouni's sense of women's curse: "Pauvres femmes! Votre malédiction, c'est cette membrane ... Quelle obscure mais implacable necéssite a conduit la nature à vous doter de ce catastrophique hymen? Tout aurait été si simple sans cela. ... Une petite membrane qui fonde une civilization" (*Tombéza*, 34-5). In the name of honor, women have been denied fundamental rights and liberties throughout various times and places in the Arab/Muslim World. Wedding night customs have been instituted by male dominated communities as an ultimate system of surveillance, control and punishment. Under the pretext of guarding the honor of the fathers on such nights, girls have been denied freedom of movement. It is possible to read *le pingouin*'s immobility as a metaphor for the seclusion of her fellow female citizens, particularly in times of fanaticism - for the curse in *La Malédiction* is fundamentalism. She voices their shared plights. She is eloquent indeed. The hospital decided to expel her, but keep her baby under medical surveillance. A nurse contacted her family in order for them to take her home, but they would not come for her. A period of time later, the doctor visits the hospital patients and finds that *le pingouin* is always still there. He teases her:

> L'infirme était toujours là, tout aussi *diserte* [which means *eloquent*, emphasis mine].
>
> - Tu as l'intention d'habiter chez nous? s'enquit Kader [the doctor's name].

---

what it means for a female to be innocent. Hence, the purposes of the experiment are often to test a woman, *know* whether she is innocent and prove her guilty.

- Je partirai le jour où mon fils sera capable de me porter dans ses bras (209).

The disabled woman knows how to take a tease, "talks back" to her doctor and strikes a realistic note when she says that she will leave the hospital when her son is able to carry her in his arms. It turns out that she has never been mentally incompetent. Her laughter, her *hilarité* as her doctor describes it, might mislead one into thinking her developmentally retarded. Her retort to her doctor, however, suggests that she might have known all along that a possible way out for her could be a son. Perhaps, that is one of the reasons why she did not scream during her aggression. It is her society that was developmentally retarded. What her age has made of innocence is comparable to the newly American society of the 19th century. It seems from her decision to wait for her son to carry her, also, that a wheelchair was out of the question for the disabled woman. It would have secured *le pingouin* or *monstre de foire* (75) as Mimouni himself describes her, a certain degree of humanity, independence and dignity if it were imaginable for her community to provide her with a supportive means of transportation and allow her to move. In this sense, *l'infirme* is not a metaphor. *Le pingouin* represents the condition of real disabled men and women in her area of the world, which is by far different from that of their fellow human beings with disabilities in the First World.

The idea of this project has been suggested to me by the recent developments in disability studies and rights in contemporary American culture. The accomplishments in the field can be traced to the initial writings about the negative representations of disabled persons in fiction and mass media. Activist scholarship criticized the engineering of a public space that was inaccessible to the physically impaired. Disability rights activism is

to be credited for trying to analyze and correct the mistreatments of the disabled by the able-bodied. Concrete achievements have been realized. Nowadays in the United States, wheelchair access to buildings and sign-language interpretation at public events are landmarks in a continuing process of social reform. The counsels and services available to the disabled in the United States are a continuously improving and inspiring model that has been accomplished through the work done by and for people with disabilities over the last decade.

In comparison to individuals with disabilities in the United States, impaired people in Islamic postcolonial countries generally fare worse. They lack a large number of the services and facilities available for the disabled in the United States. The disabled of North Africa and the Middle East continue to experience a range of abuses documented in past American society. Their able-bodied caretakers, both in their social and literary milieux, tend to misrepresent and mistreat them. There is a noticeable lack of extensive studies of the numerous postcolonial Arab Islamic characters with disabilities that North African and Middle Eastern fiction writers and film directors portray. By contrast, studies of the representations of disabled characters in English language fiction, film and larger media abound. I venture that there may be a connection in Arab Islamic societies between the belatedness in the literary study of the fictional disabled and the shortcoming in the servicing of real, functional disabled people. A motive of this writing project is a hope to see the post-colonial disabled better accepted, represented, informed, advised, serviced, employed, integrated and honored. I urge our Muslim societies to get to know the American culture for what it is in essence, a nation based on hard work, diversity and help in adversity. The American counseling and servicing of the disabled is

more Quranic than the treatment of the handicapped in Muslim societies, particularly in light of the Islamic dictum "religion/faith is advice." The quality of disability counseling and servicing that we find in the United States reflects American society's high level of understanding and sensitivity regarding the needs of the disabled. We need to emulate the American spirit and achievement in the field of disability treatment.

As represented in the selected cultural works, individuals with physical disabilities in Islamic postcolonial societies tend at varying levels to be unprotected, marginalized and abused, physically and linguistically. How can we explain the mistreatment that disabled characters experience in Muslim societies? Who is abusing them?

The various types of harm that the disabled suffer in their home Islamic communities reduce their culture to a contradiction in terms, for according to Muslims' formative text, the *Quran,* the mistreatment of the disabled is un-Islamic. As we read in the selected fictional accounts, fellow Muslims, relatives and neighbors, who have abandoned their Islamic obligation to read the *Quran* attentively and failed to apply its teachings regarding the treatment of lesser able community members, abuse the handicapped characters. The *Quran* deserters are part and parcel of their societies, and some of the reasons behind their abandonment of the scriptures can be read into their mixed contexts of local and Western cultures.

The colonial encounter has opened the indigenous societies to a number of Western influences and changes. In their post-independence era, Middle Eastern and North African governments have maintained close ties with their ex-colonizers. Their Western educated authorities have been working on modernizing their countries in an

attempt to meet the requirements of surviving in the global market and to satisfy the local pressures of populations fascinated by and imitative of everything Western, particularly European and American media products and clothing trends. The local authorities have been trying to modernize their countries through the application of European models in various sectors of local life, such as housing and transportation. The local agents of profitable modernization and westernization have been instituting changes in their native culture's lifestyle that spell harm for the disabled. We find examples of such style makeovers and their impact on disabled individuals in the select cultural works, such as the Egyptian film *al Kitkat*. Agents of change and profit, ranging from the local housing developer to the Egyptian ministry of transportation, appear to go about their business without sufficient regard, if any, for the disabled among their fellow Muslims.[7] Feeling his way without a guide, *Sheikh Husni* risks getting lost in the traffic of motor vehicles and drugs.

One consequence of the colonial encounter has been the privileging, by many locals, of materialistic Western education over their Islamic legacy and Quranic teachings, in a large part out of a desire to gain independence and profit, as well as to develop and catch up with the level of their colonizers' material knowledge and achievement. Such a privileging has shaped the post-colonial eras of many Muslim countries. Yet the formative nature of Islam's Holy Book continues to be felt in modern Islamic societies. Accordingly, the contexts in which our disabled characters live are complex mixtures of elements from Islamic and Western cultures. In order for us to

[7] Once upon a time, a Muslim Caliph decreed a guide, that is a pair of human seeing eyes, for every blind man in town. That is definitely a better scenario than the way many post-colonial blind persons live, as we see through *al Kitkat*, for example.

appreciate what it feels like to be a physically disabled postcolonial Arab/Muslim, we need to try to draw lines between the local and foreign elements that affect him/her within their intricately mixed home culture, and to assess the impact that westernizing social alterations and deviations from Quranic teachings have on them. The cultural works that I have selected promise to help in such an attempt.

Certain settings in the select works of film and fiction give us a measure of the combined character of the environments where disabled individuals live and the impact that some changes have on them. In one film, we see European style housing development projects change the way of life of a historic Egyptian neighborhood, to the detriment of the blind protagonist, Sheikh Husni. In another cultural work, a Moroccan novel, the living space of disabled persons and other marginal communities, a large piece of ground called "the square," is "cleaned up [by modernizing local authorities] in order to build a musical fountain, where, every Sunday, jets of water will play to the accompaniment of the bo-bo-pa-pa of Beethoven's 5th Symphony."[8] In another North African city, Tunis, French educated Tunisian cameramen use a television show imported from Europe, *Camera Cachée*, to laugh at deafness.

The materialistic and westernizing tendencies that dominate throughout a large number of postcolonial Islamic societies, on numerous occasions with a negative impact on the disabled, go hand in hand with a certain abuse and abandonment of Quranic teachings regarding social relations and the treatment of the disabled. Often, the abuse of Quranic principles takes the form of a harmful alteration in the practice of Islamic customs. For an example, derived from my personal observations of Tunisian society, the

[8] *L'Enfant de Sable*, 103.

consumption of alcohol, which is forbidden in Islamic principle, has become for many Muslims a part of the celebration of religious holidays.

Able-bodied Muslims often fall short in the fulfillment of their Islamic obligation to protect and support disabled community members. They seem to forget their traditional Arab Islamic values and styles and choose (under aesthetic pretexts occasionally) materialistic and often unnecessary Western imports at any cost. Such a cost entails, in many cases, the sacrifice of disabled community members. In one scenario, the Beethoven fountain represents an unnecessary or misplaced change calculated to attract European and local tourists by showing a Western face and sound at the expense of the special inhabitants of the space. In another case, a blind Egyptian man is tricked into drug abuse by a number of his neighbors, in order to make him sell his house to a local developer interested in demolishing it and building in its place a modern and profitable European style apartment complex. The entrepreneurial neighbor shows no mercy toward the blind man and does not genuinely concern himself with the future of his victim.

We see family and community members who are Muslims in name mistreat disabled characters. Their conduct, particularly toward the disabled, is un-Islamic. They are forgetful of Quranic teachings and have a selective Islamic memory. They remember to celebrate and work on preserving the religious and traditional holidays, yet they neglect the spirit of the sacred moments, however. They institute practices that target and oppress disabled individuals with greater severity. The Egyptian film documents an example of such a practice: the smoking of *hashish* to crown the Quranic recitation ceremonies performed following burials and funeral services. Such a betrayal is a

symptom of a divided and selective Islamic memory. Instead of remembering the Quranic teachings to put out their hands to the blind and disabled, Muslims often distort the language of the *Quran* in their references to and treatments of disabilities. The Arabic Quranic expression "summun, bukmun, umyun" or "deaf," "dumb" and "blind" in English translation, is often misunderstood and misquoted in Tunisian everyday language. As we shall see in the chapter about *al Quran*, the expression in its original sense does not mean that the physically blind or deaf are mentally, intellectually or emotionally "dumb." Yet, the *Kitkat* neighbors corrupt the Quranic concept of physical blindness when they tease Sheikh Husni about his disability and call him "blind" without regard for his feelings. Some of them underestimate him and insult his intelligence as they try to dispossess him, in a materialistic self-serving manner, of what he cherishes the most, his father's house. They forget the Quranic teachings and abandon the disabled at an intersection of local and alien unserviceable cultures. The word "intersection" captures concretely certain handicapping aspects of the environment in which disabled Arabs and Muslims find themselves. In societies that profess Islam, a religion that urges upon its faithful the duty to guide the blind, the sight-impaired are unguided and misled. Sweeping traffic increases and changes challenge them as their community members leave them to their own devices to negotiate their ways. We need to say to their credit that they navigate their societies well indeed.

Disabled characters manage their predicaments and claim their roles with a vengeance. They tell their stories as a form of vindication on behalf of other disabled people. Combined traditional and postcolonial oppression confounds the experiences of the disabled and enriches their spirits. They develop into self-taught social experts who

are knowledgeable of the diverse cultural values that enable their lives and the negative elements that restrict them. They use education and language as empowering tools to stage their revolts. They rebel against the physical and linguistic mistreatments their societies devise to contain them. They often prescribe a healing collection of the best elements in Islamic and Western cultures. They counsel their communities to revive Islamic teachings with respect to the disabled and to combine the Quranic guiding principles with the latest and most helpful of disability services and technological devices that we could learn and adopt from the Western world.

If we follow the examples of the various cultural workers, the characters and authors that we encounter in this project and read the *Quran*, Muslims' Holy Book, we will find that it contains repeated mentions of disabilities and that it urges upon community members the obligation to respect and support disabled individuals. In seeking better service for the disabled in our culture, I attempt to revive a shared religious and Quranic code of conduct and way of life, based on acceptance and mercy. I will reread the *Qur'ān*, in order to draw from the source a sense of the beliefs and teachings that are supposed to regulate relations between able-bodied and disabled. *Al Qur'ān* is alive in the present study of selected Islamic literature, film and other media. By encouraging intelligent literacy and literary interpretation, *al Qur'ān,* a word which in Arabic means exactly that, *reading,* is open to new readings that suggest new meanings and applications. One such a possible project would be an applied reading of *al Qur'ān* with respect to disability issues, and that is what I will attempt next, in the first chapter of this dissertation.

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Compassionating

To delight the eyes of the readers, Arabic transcriptions of the expression in varieties of Islamic calligraphic art :

Al Qur'ãn's Teachings with Respect to the Disabled

My study of the social treatments of disabled persons in Arab-Islamic cultures as represented in Middle Eastern film and North African fiction invites a reading of *al Qur'ãn* for its stories of disabilities. Al *Qur'ãn* is alive in the film and fiction we will be reading. The societies treated in the select works are by name Islamic. Muslim's holy text is repeatedly evoked in the disability scenes featured in the select texts. Accordingly, the cultural works invite us to read *al Qur'ãn* and apply it in the present literary study and film/media critique. The various authors attempt to raise the readers' awareness of un-Islamic treatment of the disabled in Arab Islamic societies and to make a statement on the deviation of such practices from Quranic principle.

The disabled are continually present in the sacred text. Yet, they are almost absent in the writings of Islam scholars. The Quranic sense of disability has not yet received a sufficient degree of study. The plights of the disabled as represented by various cultural workers in Islamic film and fiction (particularly of the postcolonial era) do not seem to attract any extensive writing. The laudable work of *Fedwa Malti Douglas* is a noteworthy exception.

If we read a*l Qur'ãn*, we find that it is filled with references to disability, largely in the metaphorical sense. There are also verses about physical disabilities and how to relate to the disabled. Allah urges upon His readers the obligation to respect, help and protect the physically disabled. Yet, as the various select cultural works document, the disabled tend to be mistreated in Islamic societies. Why are the disabled often

disrespected and hurt in Islamic societies? That is apparently because their able-bodied co-nationals do not read the *Qur'ān* and/or do not act on its teachings. They either choose to ignore its clear meanings or hold them unimportant or less important than other matters of personal comfort and material profit. They inhabit contexts of changing values where the *Qur'ān* is neglected and forgotten. Combinations of human nature and culture, human forgetfulness and selfish drives exacerbated by the fact of living in economies of scarcity, are all factors that may explain in part the abandonment of the *Qur'ān* and its verses that encourage and teach humane feelings and merciful behaviors toward other community members, particularly the disabled.

The Quranic verses about disability seem to be forgotten and altered in the minds of Muslims when dealing with disabled individuals. When they see and interact with disabled characters, the able-bodied Muslims do not seem to remember the Quranic verses advising the faithful to respect and help the disabled. The Quranic sense of disabilities does not seem to be well read. It is not attentively examined in Islamic scholarship. Muslims seem to be oblivious and confused as to certain fine distinctions that God establishes between various kinds of disabilities, physical and moral-metaphorical disabilities. God refers to the morally disabled in metaphorical terms as the "deaf," "dumb" and "blind." In extreme cases, deliberate misunderstanding on the part of able-bodied individuals can be suspected. Certain individuals seem to remember dimly the verses about metaphorical disabilities and for self-serving motives, confound them with those about physical impairments. This manifests itself in ways of treating the physically challenged as if they were absolutely disabled and unintelligent, as able-bodied Muslim Egyptians treat the blind protagonist in *al Kitkat*. The able-bodied

Muslim family members in Ben Jelloun's fiction appear to have a stake in keeping the female disabled character illiterate and limited in mobility. In such instances, able-bodied Muslims treat disabled individuals as if they were absolutely unable to understand or act. They insult their intelligence as they betray them. By depriving them of the light of knowledge and information, able-bodied Muslims risk reducing their physically disabled co-nationals to the state of those whom God refers to as morally and hopelessly "deaf," "dumb" and "blind," the metaphorically disabled. This metaphoric expression is often heard in Arabic social language, such as Tunisian conversation. As we shall see, its use borders on abuse because Tunisian Muslims tend to misunderstand and deform it.

In the *Qur'ān*, God clearly distinguishes between those who are metaphorically disabled and those who are physically disabled. In the Quranic sense, "deaf," "dumb" and "blind" are the unbelievers who turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to Allah's words. Such disabilities have the moral connotation of an avoidable and largely self-willed failure to use the God-given senses, to hear, see and speak Islam's clear and peaceful messages. The belief in and understanding of God's words are according to *al Qur'ān* the essential measures of ability and disability. One of Allah's primary messages in *al Qur'ān* is that His blessings and powers are unquestionable (as demonstrated for instance in the nature that God created and its power to nourish and destroy the human senses by His will and for His reasons). God's anger is provoked by the naysayers' stubbornly deaf and blind refusal to see and hear His sayings correctly. God punishes those who obstinately reject and corrupt God's blessings and messages by refusing to employ their senses and sensibilities to useful and peaceful ends. Divine punishment consists in further disabling them, metaphorically speaking, from seeing God's meaning and finding peace.

It is worth noting that mentions of metaphorical disabilities are more numerous than those of physical ones. By this token, Allah seems to be saying that He considers moral disabilities to be self-inflicted conditions. Nevertheless, it is thought provoking that God would use the "deaf, dumb, blind" as an example of what the unbelievers are like. This could be reason to question whether Allah's choice of such an example was motivated by a familiar sight, that of the physically disabled of the times being reduced to such a vicious state of ignorance and moral apathy. In times of forgotten scriptures, the disabled tend to lead shunned and beggarly lives. God holds it inexcusable and insensible to hold them in such states. In the eyes of Allah, the physically disabled are individuals who may be different from others in terms of bodily capacity and appearance but who are nonetheless equal to their fellow human beings in intelligence and merit. According to God, such vulnerable individuals deserve family protection, charity, teaching and social integration. In this light, the verses that God sent in respect of the physically disabled, should be read as a divine urging to immediately right the positions and situations of the disabled within their societies.

There exists in the *Qur'ān* another special category of physical disability, embodied in temporarily disabled chosen individuals. They are provisionally disabled for moral reasons, to tell a story and teach a lesson about God's plans, His power and mercy. This category of disabilities can be found in certain Quranic stories such as that of Zacharia's muteness and Jacob's blindness.

After the preceding introduction to the various Quranic senses of disabilities that we will encounter in this chapter, I prepare to start my close reading of disability related Quranic verses. I am by no means an Islamic expert; however, being a literate and literary

Muslim, I am able to re-read and write about *al Qur'ãn* for what it has to say about the disabled. Revisiting *al Qur'ãn* as one rereads a beloved poem reveals suggestive connections between disability scenes and issues, my area of focus.

I have come to this project of reading the Quran literarily from a disability perspective largely thanks to the American side of my education and experience. My encounter with the field of American disability studies and observation of the wide range of services and counsels available to the disabled in the United States, have inspired my readings and hopes. It is high time we combined the best of Quranic and Western teachings in service of our disabled in the developing Islamic world. In the treatment of their disabled individuals, Muslim societies need to combine the Quranic sense and quality of compassion, *rahma*, with the best of modern disability services and assistive technological devices that are accessible to the disabled in America.

Before we move to a close reading of Quranic verses that feature disability, it would be helpful to introduce the Holy Book. *Al Qur'ãn* is the Arabic language sacred book of Muslims, the followers of Islam. To translate the name of *al Qur'ãn*, القرآن (*al* being the Arabic definite article equivalent to "the"), the noun *Qur'ãn* derives from the Arabic verb *qara'a* meaning *to read*. The name of the Book means *reading*. Muslims, whether they are in Tunisia (North Africa) or Iran (the Middle East), tend to begin their education by memorizing and reading it. The word *Islam* has the combined meaning of peace and submission to God. The verb *aslama* means to modestly submit to the faith and

will of *Allah*  , the name of God in Arabic. The noun *sala¯m* means peace, hence the Islamic greeting *assalamu alaikum*, in translation "peace upon you"

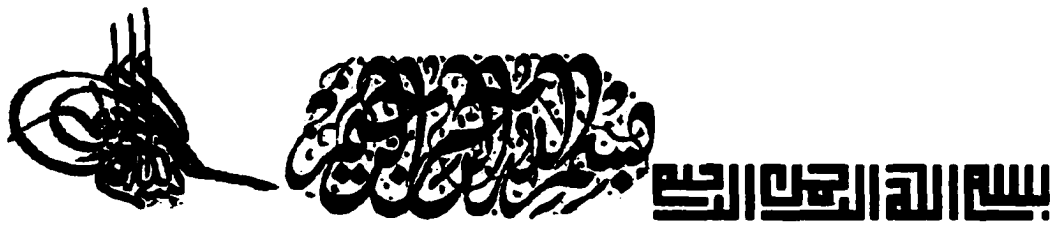
or "peace and Allah's mercy upon you" *assalamu alaikum wa rahmatu Allah* :

The Qur'ān is composed of units of verses. The Arabic name for a Quranic verse is *aya*. It has several meanings such as "miracle, wonder, sign." This range of meaning translates well the advent of the Book. In fact, Muslims believe *al Qur'ān* to be the miracle that Allah chose for His prophet or messenger *Mohamed*  Allah's Prayer and Peace upon him (an expression that a Muslim is supposed to utter at every mention of the prophet). In transliterated Arabic it reads *Salla Allah wa Sallama 'alayhi*  . Most previous prophets had to perform distinctive miracles to persuade their people of the truthfulness of their messages of faith. For example, Moses (or *Mousa* in Arabic) spoke with God and Jesus (or *Isa*) healed the blind. The miracle of

the messenger *Mohamed* (SAS) is a reader's Book. Each unit of verses is called a *sura*, translated as "chapter." The order of chapters has been preserved as written the first time in the 600s AD and is the same in all editions. At the end of my quotes, I will indicate the number of the chapter in the Qur'ăn and that of the verse within it. I will mainly use N.J. Dawood's translation of the Book. Occasionally, I opt for a different translation, for instance that of A.Y. Ali, titled *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ăn*, M.H. Shakir's translation or a Saudi Arabian English translation of and commentary on the Qur'ăn that is an attempted combination and revision of previous best translations, particularly that of A.Y. Ali. The Presidency of Islamic Researchers, IFTA, Call and Guidance has conducted this project and printed the work by royal decree at King Fahd Holy Qur-an printing complex in al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia. My choice will be based on my evaluation of the success of either version in rendering the original Arabic meaning. I will also suggest my own translation of terms where I perceive a shade of meaning to be lost or altered. The reader is encouraged to consult two or more translations of *al Qur'ăn*. Any independent work of collecting and combining the best of different translations promises to be rewarded by a greater approximation and appreciation of the original meaning. Invited to this work are speakers of foreign languages as well as native Arabic speakers who will certainly benefit given the richness of the Quranic classical version of the Arabic language.

Worth noting is the expression that opens every chapter in *al Qur'ăn*: "In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful" (as translated by M.H. Shakir). Given the importance of compassion in Islam and its relevance to disability issues, the next part will be an attempt to explain the root meanings of the Islamic expression of invoking God's

name and his mercy, and its rich implications. In Arabic, it is pronounced *Bism 'l-lah al-Rahman Al-Rrahim*  . N.J. Dawood translates it as "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." The Arabic adjectives share a common root, the noun *rahma*, meaning "mercy" and "compassion." The differences in the translation of an Arab(ic) expression that is as old as *al Qur'ãn* (and even older)[9] come from the translators' efforts to capture the nuances of the original expressions and their challenged attempts to find English equivalents to "*rahman, rahim*" that share a "mercy" root. The above quoted translations are the most common ones in English versions of *al Qur'ãn*. It seems that translators have experienced difficulties in their searches for perfectly faithful linguistic equivalents. Although less frequently encountered than "compassionate," the English adjective "compassionating" (used for example by Whitman to describe his own spirit in "Song of Myself") can be a graceful match to *rahim*. The poetic adjective of Whitman, (a Quran liker beside all he can appreciate), inspires a happy and successful translation of the Arabic sacred phrase: "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Compassionating."



The difference in meaning between *rahman* and *rahim* is subtle and complementary. *Rahman*, compassionate, could be explained as "doing, giving mercy,"

[9] The Quranic story of Solomon states that the prophet's message to Balqis, the Queen of Sheba or Saba, began with the expression *Bism Allah Arrahman Arrahim*. A knowledge of Hebrew would be necessary to see if the expressions in the Torah and Hebrew language Bible share a close linguistic root as the Arabic

and compassionating, *rahim*, as "feeling, showing mercy." An Arabic language book about the Quranic statement and Islamic saying *Bism Allah Arrahman Arrahim*, known in noun form abbreviation as *Basmalah*, includes attempts to distinguish between the meanings of the two divine attributes. The book is written by Basyuni Ibrahim and is titled in my English translation: *The Basmalah between the School of the Sign and the School of the Expression.* In Arabic, it reads: *al-Basmalah bayna ahlal-ibara wa-ahl al-ishara.* This book has largely suggested what will follow of my attempts to explain the meanings of the *rahma*-derived expressions. The author, Basyuni, draws on the work of a Sufi figure named al Qushairi who wrote creatively and exhaustively about the meanings of the *Basmalah* phrase. Basyuni quotes a saying of al Qushairi explaining a difference between *rahman* and *rahim*. Its meaning in my English translation is: "*rahman*, [Beneficent] by what he does for [offers to] them [humans] and *rahim*, [Merciful, Compassionating] by what he wards off from them" (p. 75).

Al Qur'ãn itself is the best place to explore diverse nuances of Allah's mercy, to see what the word *rahma* means and what manifest blessings it is associated with. *Al Qur'ãn* includes a chapter named *The Merciful* (Dawood) or *The Beneficent* in Shakir, whom I choose to quote. The *sura* begins:

> The Beneficent God,
>
> Taught the Quran.
>
> He created man,
>
> Taught him the mode of expression.

---

adjectives do and if a reading of the Hebrew words may help distinguish the complementary meanings of the attributes.

ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنُ ۝١ عَلَّمَ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَ ۝٢ خَلَقَ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ ۝٣ عَلَّمَهُ ٱلۡبَيَانَ ۝٤
ٱلشَّمۡسُ وَٱلۡقَمَرُ بِحُسۡبَانٍ ۝٥ وَٱلنَّجۡمُ وَٱلشَّجَرُ يَسۡجُدَانِ ۝٦ وَٱلسَّمَآءَ
رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ ٱلۡمِيزَانَ ۝٧ أَلَّا تَطۡغَوۡاْ فِي ٱلۡمِيزَانِ ۝٨ وَأَقِيمُواْ ٱلۡوَزۡنَ
بِٱلۡقِسۡطِ وَلَا تُخۡسِرُواْ ٱلۡمِيزَانَ ۝٩ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلۡأَنَامِ ۝١٠ فِيهَا
فَٰكِهَةٞ وَٱلنَّخۡلُ ذَاتُ ٱلۡأَكۡمَامِ ۝١١ وَٱلۡحَبُّ ذُو ٱلۡعَصۡفِ وَٱلرَّيۡحَانُ ۝١٢

(*al Qur'ān*, 55 : 1-4. Shakir p. 533)

An association between teaching, learning and mercy stands out clear in the written verses. This sense is pointed out in Basyuni's book (p. 36). A measure of Allah's mercy and compassion is His endowment of humankind with the faculty of reason and the ability to learn. Allah has offered humans the gift of reason and reading as a way of warding the ills of ignorance off them. To grasp the fine distinction pointed out in Qushairi the Sufi's line, it will suffice to picture humanity without the endowment of intelligent and creative literacy, reading and communicative writing. I chose Shakir's translation because his "mode of expression" is more faithful to the original scope than Dawood's translation of *bayan* into "articulate speech." "Expression" is more general and open to other forms of human reasoning and communication such as writing.

I move to illustrate the value that *al Qur'ān* places on human reading, teaching and writing. Such a value inspires my connections of disability and literacy issues in my subsequent study of media, film and fiction in Islamic societies. It is also part of my argument that the disabled of the Islamic world tend to be kept unable to read or write by their able-bodied caretakers and that such a practice is unmerciful and unscriptural. Those

who commit such a misdeed seem not to read *al Qur'ān.* The activity of reading is the subject of one of the most widely recited Quranic chapters, the very first verses revealed of *al Qur'ān.* It begins with the imperative verb "Read!" Accordingly, "Read!" is the first word that Allah revealed to the Prophet, Muslims and all human beings (since Allah's audience in the Book is humankind). The chapter is known under many titles. It is called "Surat Al-'Alaq" or the chapter of "the Clot of Congealed Blood" which God mentions as a reminder of the miracle of creation. It is also known as the "Read" chapter. I am using N.J. Dawood's translation alongside that of Ali and Shakir. Ali recognizes and includes the way Arabs and Muslims refer to the Chapter popularly as "The Read Chapter" or "Surat Iqra'." The title is more common among the people, especially the illiterate. It takes up the word, *iqra'* that begins the well-known chapter as well as the *Basmalah* expression, "[By] the Name of Your God," in a combination that highlights the association between divine blessing and reading, the latter being an act that is enabled by Allah's creative grace. The word is similar across all the various Arabic dialects to designate the act of reading. Formally, the sura is called the "Alaq" or "Blood Clot" chapter. "Alaq" is a more writerly classical Arabic word. Besides, Ali renders the word as "Proclaim!" alternatively. Thus, he captures the public, oral and communal nature of the message. Ali's parenthetical notes and alternative expressions are marks of a flexible and open translation. These devices suggestively voice his awareness of implicit shades of meaning and other possible interpretations, readings and translations of the divine words. Dawood, however, settles for one possibility in translating the word "Iqraa," as "Recite."

Next is Dawood's translation of the chapter. It will be followed by Ali's version as well as Shakir's translation, to further support the translation of *Iqraa* as "Read," the meaning that Allah intended.

CLOTS OF BLOOD – AL -'ALAQ

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

RECITE IN the name of your Lord who created – created man from clots of blood.

Recite ! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who by the pen taught man what he did not know. (*al Qur'ãn*, 96 - Dawood, 429).

It is worth noting that "*by* the pen" translates the original Arabic verse perfectly since the Arabic preposition for "by," pronounced *bi* (translateable both as "with" and "by"), clearly figures in the Quranic line. If we connect the latter pen *aya* to the previous quote from the *Rahman* chapter, namely the verses associating divine mercy with the miracle of creating human beings and teaching them eloquent expression, the Quranic value of human writing and reading becomes remarkable. The similarity in the terms that Allah uses in both short chapters is striking. Ali's translation of the "Read chapter" follows :

Iqraa, or Read ! or Proclaim !

Or 'Alaq, or The Clot of Congealed Blood

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Proclaim ! (or Read !)

In the name

Of thy Lord

Who created –

Created man, out of

A (mere) clot

Of congealed blood:

Read! By thy Lord

The most bountiful

He who taught

(The use of) the Pen,

Taught man that

Which he knew not.

Nay, but man doth

Tyrannize

In that he looketh

Upon himself as self-sufficient.

Verily, to thy Lord

Is the return (of all) (Ali, 1761).

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ ﴿١﴾ خَلَقَ الْإِنسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ ﴿٢﴾ اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ
الْأَكْرَمُ ﴿٣﴾ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ ﴿٤﴾ عَلَّمَ الْإِنسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ﴿٥﴾ كَلَّا
إِنَّ الْإِنسَانَ لَيَطْغَىٰ ﴿٦﴾ أَن رَّآهُ اسْتَغْنَىٰ ﴿٧﴾ إِنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الرُّجْعَىٰ
﴿٨﴾ أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يَنْهَىٰ ﴿٩﴾ عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّىٰ ﴿١٠﴾ أَرَأَيْتَ إِن كَانَ
عَلَى الْهُدَىٰ ﴿١١﴾ أَوْ أَمَرَ بِالتَّقْوَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾ أَرَأَيْتَ إِن كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿١٣﴾

It is worth noting that Shakir translates the Quranic word *Iqraa* as "Read." Shakir's version starts as follows:

> *Read* in the name of your Lord Who
>
> Created.
>
> He created man from a clot.
>
> Read and your Lord is Most Honorable [or Most Generous]
>
> Who taught (to write) with the pen,
>
> Taught man what he knew not.
>
> (*Qur'ãn*, 96: 1-5. Shakir p. 626. Italics mine).

Limited as it is, his translation is telling. It indicates a common practice of Quran reading or rather misreading, one that reduces its learning to rote memorization and uncomprehending recitation. Such an approach to al Qur'ãn is largely customary across the Islamic world. For the purpose of connecting disability and literacy issues, it would be of interest to announce that the subsequent film and literary critique will show the rote memorizing practices of *al Qur'ãn* to have a bearing on the disabled in Arab Islamic societies. It touches the blind in particular ways. The fact that such a practice tends to have negative consequences is creatively documented in select parts of Ben Jelloun's fiction as well as in the Egyptian film "al-Kitkat." Through these works, the authors, directors and protagonists argue for a creative *reading* of *al Qur'ãn*. The blind character in Ben Jelloun's *Sacred Night* proposes learning and *teaching* it to other society members as "a beautiful poem" (p. 72).

To supplement the literacy connections, we also read at the root of the expressions ***rahman*** and ***rahim***, the word ***rahm*** or ***rahim*** (pronounced with a shorter vowel sound). As

observed in *al Basmalah*, it evokes the identically spelled Arabic word having at least the two interrelated meanings of "womb" and "kin" or extended family bonds (p. 37). The protection of blood relations and help of family members are sacred values in *al Qur'ān.* The expression demonstrates, linguistically and meaningfully, that intimate associations link Allah's mercy, the miracle of creation, the gift of literacy and the divine intent of social relations based on family values and inter-communal help. To restate the relevant verses previously quoted but in my translation as combined with Shakir's, they read as follows:

The Merciful

Taught al Qur'ān

Created the human being

Taught him clear expression

Allah is merciful for creating humankind. He blessed man with the gift of life on earth and next offered him a companion. Families are created and each member is entrusted with the mission of caring for his or her relations. In this sense, Allah intended family and society to be a major source of mercy for the various members of the community, particularly those in greatest need of help. Allah has entrusted human beings to represent Him on earth. Part of their missions is the counseling and informing of the community members in need of assistance. People in positions of trust are expected to read on behalf and for vulnerable individuals as well as to teach and help them learn. In film and fiction, we will see such vulnerable individuals, the disabled, left to their own devices, struggling without counsel in an environment that does not accommodate their needs. They often cannot read and lack adequate access to literature. They are illiterate in many cases. As a

consequence, alternatives to their living conditions are limited. For an example, we can read the character of the protagonist's mother in *L'Enfant de sable*, Ben Jelloun's novel. Her illiteracy exacerbated her disability and doomed her to isolation:

> It was a long time since she had heard her husband's voice. She had blocked up her ears with hot wax. She had suffered, but preferred total silence to that souless, merciless, pitiless voice. Her madness had begun with that deafness; "a little death," she said, but at the time I understood neither her gesture nor her silence. Disfigured, she had abandoned everything. Since *she could neither read nor write*, she spent her time shut up in her dark room ... Her daughters had abandoned her [italics mine] (100).

The disabled characters and persons living in Islamic societies long for their kin to teach them faithfully and inform them truthfully about creative options for sharing their ways of knowing and for integrating themselves into their societies. They need their family and community members to remember well the words of *al Qur'ān*, their common spiritual source, and treat them as its verses inspire, mercifully and helpfully. They need their caretakers to allow the Book to (in)form their relations with correctness and integrity.

In fact, *al Qur'ān* is a formative text that plays a major role in shaping the speech and actions of Muslims. There exist in the every day reality of Islamic societies numerous examples of Muslim sayings and gestures inspired by *al Qur'ān* and formed to enable sympathetic communication between people. Such examples need to be encouraged and extended to different areas of social relations, particularly concerning the disabled since *al Qur'ān* teaches its followers to respect, protect, help and heal in special ways.

My attempt in the following part of this chapter is to draw lines between examples of Islamic and un-Islamic social language that we find in Muslim societies and that can have an impact on the disabled. The purpose of this attempt is to credit and encourage the use of Qur'ān informed and inspired conduct between Muslims in general and regarding the disabled in particular, while condemning and discouraging *Qur'ān*-deforming language that incorrectly paraphrases Quranic disability terms, such as Allah's expression "deaf," "dumb" and "blind" (or *summun, bukmun, umyun* in Quranic Arabic) as we will see. We will begin with the positive marks of the Qur'ān that Muslims have adopted in their everyday interactions and that they should make sure to extend to the disabled out of compassion. An example of such beneficial marks would be the *Basmalah* expression "in the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." To follow is an evocation of its manifestations in Islamic everyday social life combined with an attempt to explain its social meanings and implications.

The *Basmalah* expression has left a positive, ever-present and enduring mark on Islamic societies. It is associated with inspiring communal values in Muslim societies. The saying of the *Basmalah* phrase in every day social interaction across the Arab Islamic world is highly significant. Following Quranic teachings, Muslims use the phrase frequently. They often say it before eating. A particular Quranic verse says: "Gather and say the name of Allah over your food, He blesses it for you." Muslims evoke the naming phrase at the beginning of every task as well. That is their Arab Islamic manner of seeking divine blessing in their work and protection from any harm that may come their way. The saying has a communal dimension. In a familiar positive scenario from daily social reality in the contemporary Islamic world, people in Tunisia, for example, invite

each other to share food by saying: "Join in the name of Allah." When they see a person accidentally hurt him/herself (for example, by tripping in the street or cutting oneself while handling paper), they wish him/her immediate relief and healing by saying, "[May] the name of Allah be upon you." The spirit of the saying can be translated by stating that, based on *al Qur'ãn,* the name is very important for Muslims. In regard to a quote of the Sufi Qushairi that Basyuni includes in his aforementioned book *al Basmalah* (p. 71), it is worth noting that the phrase does not say "by Allah" but rather "[by/] in the Name of Allah. Underlying such a speech act is a belief that the blessing of Allah's name is so powerful that its utterance with faith promises to protect and heal.

The divine attribute has also inspired Muslims to choose good Islamic names for their children. Naming is an important act for Muslims. Next to *al Qur'ãn*, Islamic tradition is constituted by the Prophet Mohamed's sayings (SAWS). The collection of his sayings is known as *Hadith*. The Prophet is reported to have communicated a saying about choosing nice names for one's children and another saying forbidding name calling. The latter saying is pronounced as follows in Arabic: "*wa la tanabazu bil alqab,*" and it means: "Do not scold each other by calling names." For an example of a good Islamic name deriving from one of Allah's best known attributes is *Rahma*. It is a female name that may not be equally common in all Arab countries. Yet, it is easily found in Tunisia and particularly Egypt. Men's names beginning with *Abd* are numerous in the Islamic world. The word means "creature of" or "servant of," and it is followed by one of Allah's names. Common male names are '*Abd al-Razzaq* (Creature of the Endower), *Abd Essattar* (Creature of the Protector), *Abd al-Rahman* and *Abd al-Rahim*. This naming act is an expression of recognition for Allah's attributes and blessings as well as a hope and

promise that the new born will emulate the qualities of the One most merciful that he is named after.

Merciful and respectful names are important according to Islamic teachings. Good names are intended to form helpful and honorable relations between community members. Since in *al Qur'ãn,* vulnerable members of society, the disabled in particular, are to be treated with special care, it is sensible to infer that their fellow Muslims should not call them names, nor should they label them by their disabilities. In a novel by the Algerian Rachid Mimouni, a disabled protagonist living in his French colonial Algerian village, is called by his fellow Muslims an Arabized French and Frenchified Arab name derived from the French verb *tomber* meaning to fall. They called him *Tombéza.* The novel bears the name for a title.

Likewise, in *al Kitkat,* an Egyptian film titled after a historic area in Cairo, the sight-disabled protagonist is labeled by the expression *a'ma,* the Arabic word for "blind," and he revolts against that, questioning what is behind his community's use of the word in reference to his disability (see the chapter devoted to *al-Kitkat*). It could be argued that "blind" or *aama* is a word among others to name and describe a visible physical state of being. The word exists in *al Qur'ãn* even. Yet, and despite his awareness of this fact, *al-Kitkat*'s protagonist, Sheikh Husni, dislikes the various forms in which his friends use the old word because they are using it against its Quranic senses. He feels the prejudices that burdened the word and deformed its original meanings.

There exist other examples of uses of disability terms in Arab Islamic society that pervert their Quranic sense. One specific expression that is recurrent throughout *al Qur'ãn* and that translates as "deaf," "dumb" and "blind" (in plural form) has been

repeatedly misused in Tunisia. In transliterated Arabic it is pronounced as *summun, bukmun, umyun* : صـــم بكم عمي Originally, its first occurrence in *al Qur'ãn* is to be found in the second chapter, namely "the Cow Chapter," or *surat al baqara*. By virtue of its condensed and nuanced references to disabilities, the next quote representing the terms in question could serve as a sample of Quranic senses of disability that we find reiterated and echoed throughout the rest of the Book.

مَثَلُهُمْ كَمَثَلِ ٱلَّذِى ٱسْتَوْقَدَ نَارًا فَلَمَّآ أَضَآءَتْ مَا حَوْلَهُۥ ذَهَبَ ٱللَّهُ
بِنُورِهِمْ وَتَرَكَهُمْ فِى ظُلُمَٰتٍ لَّا يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٧﴾ صُمٌّۢ بُكْمٌ عُمْىٌ فَهُمْ لَا
يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٨﴾ أَوْ كَصَيِّبٍ مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فِيهِ ظُلُمَٰتٌ وَرَعْدٌ وَبَرْقٌ يَجْعَلُونَ
أَصَٰبِعَهُمْ فِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِم مِّنَ ٱلصَّوَٰعِقِ حَذَرَ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ مُحِيطٌۢ
بِٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٩﴾ يَكَادُ ٱلْبَرْقُ يَخْطَفُ أَبْصَٰرَهُمْ ۖ كُلَّمَآ أَضَآءَ لَهُم مَّشَوْا۟
فِيهِ وَإِذَآ أَظْلَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ قَامُوا۟ ۚ وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَذَهَبَ بِسَمْعِهِمْ وَأَبْصَٰرِهِمْ ۚ

According to Islamic rule, Muslims should say the *Basmalah* when they begin to read and quote from *al Qur'ãn*. As I render the passage in English, I use my translation of the expression this time.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Compassionating

Such are *those that barter guidance for error* : they profit nothing, nor are they on the right path [...] *they do not see. Deaf, dumb, and blind, they will never return to the right path* (*al Qur'ãn*, 2: 17).

> Or like those who, beneath a dark storm-cloud charged with thunder and lightning, thrust their fingers into their ears at the sound of every thunder-clap for fear of death [...]. The lightning almost snatches away their sight: whenever it flashes upon them they walk on, but as soon as it darkens they stand still. Indeed, *if God pleased, He could take away their hearing and their sight: God has power over all things.* (*al Qur'ān*, 2 : 18, Dawood, 11. Italics mine)

The expression, particularly the part that corresponds to "deaf, dumb" (that is *summun, bukmun*) can be occasionally heard in Tunisia. The Tunisian Arabic plural version of deaf or *summun* is *trosh* طرش, and of mute or *bukmun* is *bkakesh* بكاكش Nonetheless, the Quranic expression has become part of the popular idiom and tends to be used as spelled and pronounced in *al Qur'ān*. People in Tunisia would switch from dialectical to classical Arabic as they use the Quranic phrase. However, they usually use it to describe a person or group who fails to understand a statement. It is worth noting that oftentimes the expression comes out of the mouths of old women as the funny sounding "*sukkum bukkum*" or "*sukrum bukrum.*" This modification seems to follow a natural linguistic rule of minor effort. The tongues of illiterates or persons of limited literacy seem to have found the expression easier to pronounce deformed. The idiomatic use of this expression in Tunisian social language could serve as an example of *al Qur'ān*'s complex presence in Muslims' everyday language. However, regarding the example in question, the use of the Quranic expression largely deforms its original intent. It is used as a mild teasing reproach and/or as an insult. In most cases it is excessively harsh when used for an excusable human misunderstanding or feeling of bafflement. The context for its Quranic use should be considered. It is disproportionate to the original Quranic sense of the

expression and unfair to the person concerned to compare someone who temporarily fails to understand something in every day social interaction to the "unbelievers" of early Islam days whom Allah refers to in the Quranic verses. Moreover, in subsequent chapters of al Qur'ān, the same terms are used to compare the "heathens" to animals: "the unbelievers are like beasts, which call out to them as one may, can hear nothing but a shout and a cry. Deaf, dumb, and blind, they understand nothing" (*al Qur'ān*, 2: 168)

إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٦٨﴾ إِنَّمَا يَأْمُرُكُم بِٱلسُّوٓءِ وَٱلْفَحْشَآءِ وَأَن تَقُولُوا
عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٦٩﴾ وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱتَّبِعُوا مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ
نتبع ما الفينا عليه ءاباءنا اولو كان ءاباؤهم لا يعقلون شيئا ولا
يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٧٠﴾ وَمَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا كَمَثَلِ ٱلَّذِى يَنْعِقُ بِمَا لَا يَسْمَعُ إِلَّا
دُعَآءً وَنِدَآءً صُمٌّۢ بُكْمٌ عُمْىٌ فَهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٧١﴾ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا
كُلُوا مِن طَيِّبَٰتِ مَا رَزَقْنَٰكُمْ وَٱشْكُرُوا لِلَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿١٧٢﴾

I can only speculate as to why *summun bukmun* has easily become part of the Tunisian idiom. Perhaps the sound of the phrase plays a role in making it recitable to an Arab Muslim audience, as well as non-Arabs in America in fact.[10] As far as the Tunisian Quran audience is concerned, the explanation might be as well in the images that the listeners find themselves picturing as they hear the collective name "deaf, dumb and blind." The imagining of a community of such different individuals arouses curiosity (as mentioned in the *Candid Camera* chapter, a television *reportage* done by a Tunisian

[10] Apparently it has also been a memorable and inspiring line for Western Quran readers and listeners. Jazz musicians have used the phrase as a title for a sound work of jazz ensemble.

journalist about a Tunisian village of majority deaf mute population was an expression of such curiosity. The public received it with sensational interest. The deaf mutes were talked about by people in the streets for days. No follow-ups ensued. The deaf mutes were soon forgotten). The expression "deaf, dumb and blind" remains such a sensational picture that people would try to reconjure it every time they get a chance by repeating the phrase inappropriately. In most cases, the current uses of the expression in society are too strong for the occasions.

It is worth noting that Muslims' use of *al Qur'ãn* can be selective in negative ways. It would be beneficial for our societies if we read more of *al Qur'ãn* and used it to enrich our language and improve our relations. We need to revive more of the various Quranic verses that urge us to better understand, treat and service the physically disabled. This in turn, requires a close reading of the disability terms that we find in *al Qur'ãn*.
It is worth noting that physical disabilities figure on several occasions in al Qur'ãn, particularly blindness. The physically blind have a special place in Islam. That is possibly due to the fact that Allah values greatly the gift of sight that He has given living creatures. In a verse meant to remind humans of the divine gifts of sense, Allah begins with the ability to see. Allah also knows that, because they do not see, the blind can be easily un-seen, ignored, unspoken to by their seeing community members. It is in human nature, which Allah has created, to err. The prophet himself erred in this respect, as we shall see. In "the City" chapter, He says: "Have we not given him two eyes, a tongue, and two lips, and shown him the two paths?"[which means the path of good and right and that of wrong and evil] (90: 8).

لَآ أُقۡسِمُ بِهَٰذَا ٱلۡبَلَدِ ۝١ وَأَنتَ حِلُّۢ بِهَٰذَا ٱلۡبَلَدِ ۝٢ وَوَالِدٖ وَمَا
وَلَدَ ۝٣ لَقَدۡ خَلَقۡنَا ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ فِي كَبَدٍ ۝٤ أَيَحۡسَبُ أَن لَّن يَقۡدِرَ عَلَيۡهِ
أَحَدٞ ۝٥ يَقُولُ أَهۡلَكۡتُ مَالٗا لُّبَدًا ۝٦ أَيَحۡسَبُ أَن لَّمۡ يَرَهُۥٓ أَحَدٌ ۝٧
أَلَمۡ نَجۡعَل لَّهُۥ عَيۡنَيۡنِ ۝٨ وَلِسَانٗا وَشَفَتَيۡنِ ۝٩ وَهَدَيۡنَٰهُ ٱلنَّجۡدَيۡنِ
۝١٠ فَلَا ٱقۡتَحَمَ ٱلۡعَقَبَةَ ۝١١ وَمَآ أَدۡرَىٰكَ مَا ٱلۡعَقَبَةُ ۝١٢ فَكُّ رَقَبَةٍ ۝١٣

Islam is positively inclusive of the disabled in its teachings of good manners that regulate details of everyday life such as greeting. Among such rules of community life figures a teaching to greet the blind passer by in the street even though he or she cannot see and regardless of whether the persons involved know each other well or not. Human nature and societal culture combine to shape the treatment of the disabled. We can imagine the teaching to greet the blind to come from cases in which seeing persons passed by blind men from the community without greeting them. Such a lapse seems to be caused by a feeling of natural advantage over the blind and by societal factors. Societal codes of greeting are complex and often translate power dynamics. People greet each other for various reasons, simple and complicated. They may greet each other out of respect as well as out of fear. The greeting may be also the expression of ambitions of material gain and societal power. When the blind are marginal and removed from power positions within their societies, such as when they are generally poor and absent in the major employment fields of their times, that may make them "unimportant" in the eyes of some sighted community members. Accordingly, able-bodied acquaintances may choose not to bother greeting the blind person. They would feel empowered in their flouting of

the societal code by the belief that the blind person does not matter and that he cannot see or catch them. It is worth noting that the Egyptian film *al-Kitkat* includes a scene that warrants such a reading, creatively, (the shoulder-brushing encounter of Husni with a furtive neighbor's lover in the stairway).

In *al Qur'ãn*, Allah teaches the prophet Muhammad and the readers not to ignore the blind by any means. An entire Quranic chapter, albeit a short one, is devoted to "prophetic" mistakes made by Allah's messenger Muhammad in regards to a blind man. The mistreatment of the blind is centuries old and reaches at least as far back as the pre-Islamic period and the early days of Islam. An inclination not to see the blind is embedded in human nature (a relatively evil side of it) and tends to be exacerbated by culture in times of economic scarcity and need. The chapter which recounts the prophet's story with the blind man is titled *'Abasa* meaning "He Frowned." It reads:

> In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
>
> HE [Muhammad] FROWNED and turned his back when the blind man came towards him.
>
> How could you tell ? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been forewarned, and might have profited from Our warning.
>
> But to the wealthy you were all attention : although the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. Yet to him that came to you with zeal and awe, you paid no heed. (*Al Qur'ãn*, 80 : 1-8. Dawood, p. 418)

عَبَسَ وَتَوَلَّىٰٓ ۝١ أَن جَآءَهُ ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ ۝٢ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّهُۥ يَزَّكَّىٰٓ ۝٣ أَوْ
يَذَّكَّرُ فَتَنفَعَهُ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰٓ ۝٤ أَمَّا مَنِ ٱسْتَغْنَىٰ ۝٥ فَأَنتَ لَهُۥ تَصَدَّىٰ ۝٦
وَمَا عَلَيْكَ أَلَّا يَزَّكَّىٰ ۝٧ وَأَمَّا مَن جَآءَكَ يَسْعَىٰ ۝٨ وَهُوَ يَخْشَىٰ ۝٩
فَأَنتَ عَنْهُ تَلَهَّىٰ ۝١٠ كَلَّآ إِنَّهَا تَذْكِرَةٌ ۝١١ فَمَن شَآءَ ذَكَرَهُۥ ۝١٢
فِى صُحُفٍ مُّكَرَّمَةٍ ۝١٣ مَّرْفُوعَةٍ مُّطَهَّرَةٍ ۝١٤ بِأَيْدِى سَفَرَةٍ ۝١٥

There is controversy in Islamic exegesis as to who is rebuked in the verses, whether it is the Prophet or someone else in his presence. In an Arabic language book written by Quranic scholar Muhammad Sadiqi, the second opinion is developed. It is based on the idea that it is unlikely for the Prophet, being of such a modest character as he was, to have ignored the blind man. However, the view that it is the Prophet who is addressed is the more common one in popular circles. It is not to be as strongly rejected as in Sadiqi's book. Muhammad was a man and not a God. He was a human being who learned to develop his character. He accomplished a combination of firm and tender character through human trials and errors. It is for understandable reasons that the prophet ignored and dismissed the blind man who came to speak with him as he was talking to a person of importance, a seeing and able-bodied man of status at the juncture of pre-Islamic and early Islamic society. God points out the status and wealth of the Prophet's audience as determinants of favorable treatment on his part. This suggests linkages between disability and class. The prophet seems to have reasoned that, if persuaded to embrace Islam, the man of wealth and status could lend power to the new faith. Allah sent Muhammad as a model human being. An important lesson for him and

his Muslims as well as those living now, is the story of his experience with the blind poor man included in *al Qur'ān*. The message could serve as a warning in case a blind person is treated that way again in later times. It forewarns also that if the blind are kept uneducated, poor and "unimportant" in a given society, the risks of their being further mistreated will increase.

The Quranic verses quoted emphasize equality between humans. In the eyes of Allah, worth is based on a person's ability to understand the divine message and improve one's knowledge and character. The verses make it clear that God considers the blind man to be of mental abilities high enough to comprehend the new faith and converse with the prophet and his audience. Allah seems to be saying through the Quranic story of the prophet and the blind man that the humans He created equal should see each other according to the same moral criteria by which He judges his creatures. They should be willing to care for them and share with them family time. In the "Light" chapter, Allah says: "it shall be no offense for the blind, the lame, and the sick, to eat at your table" (24: 61).

لَّيْسَ عَلَى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ
وَلَا عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَن تَأْكُلُوا۟ مِنۢ بُيُوتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ ءَابَآئِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ
أُمَّهَٰتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ إِخْوَٰنِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَخَوَٰتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَعْمَٰمِكُمْ
أَوْ بُيُوتِ عَمَّٰتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَخْوَٰلِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ خَٰلَٰتِكُمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكْتُم
مَّفَاتِحَهُۥٓ أَوْ صَدِيقِكُمْ ۚ لَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ أَن تَأْكُلُوا۟ جَمِيعًا أَوْ أَشْتَاتًا ۚ

Al Qur'ān teaches its listeners and readers to help the blind integrate into their community life. Able-bodied persons should not shun the blind. In order to accomplish the process of integration, communication and education should be extended to the disabled. The blind are to be instructed and counseled when they express interest in learning. It is the duty of every community member, beginning with the prophet, to help them.

By documenting the human error of the prophet, Allah seems also to be sending a message of forgiveness to facilitate future reconciliations between diverse social groups including able-bodied and disabled persons. Mistakes such as the prophet's are bound to happen between people because human nature is prone to forgetfulness. Human being in Arabic is إنسان, pronounced *insan*, which derives from the verb *nasiya* نسي and the noun *nisyan* نسيان, respectively, meaning to forget and forgetfulness. Arabic speaking Muslims reiterate that God named the human being *insan* for his repeated forgetfulness. Such a natural disposition to forget moral and religious teachings and to need messengers can also be exacerbated by a number of cultural factors such as one's standing within the community's social hierarchy and political power structure. In this respect, the prophet's behavior was determined by his human nature as well as by his need of support for his new faith. Such stories are meant to serve as lessons for use in the improvement of imperfect social conditions. It is reported in Islamic tradition, the collection of sayings pertaining to the prophet's life, that Muhammad apologized through words and deeds to the blind man whom God reproached him for ignoring. After he received the divine verses about his error, he started to greet the blind man, named *Ibn Maktoum* ابن مكتوم by saying: "Welcome to whom Allah reproached me for" مرحبا بمن عاتبني

الله فيه The prophet appointed him to a number of positions such as being a leader of the prayers. He also occasionally delegated to him certain of his functions when he had to be absent. He employed the blind man at what he believed him able to do. He seems to have assigned him tasks that would not have involved for him any unreasonable difficulties owing to his sight disability. Indeed, the Qur'ān prescribes exempting the disabled from hard tasks and lightening their duties. In the "Victory" chapter, God says "it shall be no offense for [in my translation, "no embarrassment or shame on"] the blind, the lame, and the sick to stay behind," meaning away from the battles,[11] at that time waged to spread and fight for Islam (48 : 17).

يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُبَدِّلُوا۟ كَلَـٰمَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قُل لَّن تَتَّبِعُونَا كَذَٰلِكُمْ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ
فَسَيَقُولُونَ بَلْ تَحْسُدُونَنَا ۚ بَلْ كَانُوا۟ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٥﴾
قُل لِّلْمُخَلَّفِينَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ سَتُدْعَوْنَ إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ أُو۟لِى بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ
تُقَـٰتِلُونَهُمْ أَوْ يُسْلِمُونَ ۖ فَإِن تُطِيعُوا۟ يُؤْتِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا ۖ
وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ كَمَا تَوَلَّيْتُم مِّن قَبْلُ يُعَذِّبْكُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٦﴾ لَّيْسَ
عَلَى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ ۗ

[11] It is worth noting that an Egyptian film documents colonial government practice contrary to the Quranic clauses. The movie's title is *Shafika wa* (and) *Mitwalli* (the names of a sister and brother from an Egyptian village). It includes a scene in which a government official touring Egypt in search of native able men to fight for the British pressures the head of the protagonists' village to unearth and produce more men to enlist. The village chief retorts desperately : "that is all the men we have, we have given you even the lame and the one-eyed." This scene demonstrates an instance of human abuse of power to the effect of disregarding the Islamic scriptures, forcing the disabled to become able at fighting for their oppressors in harmful situations. A colonial relation of power is enacted through the colonizers' disrespect of indigenous religion and their coercion of native representatives to abandon and sacrifice their most vulnerable community members in violent ways that disrupt their course of life.
Given the unavailability of the film for viewing, this connection is included as a note meant to raise the readers' interest in the search, study and development of the film scene.

In post-colonial and post-Islamic Arab societies, the blind and disabled seem to have lost their destined privileges and places. In their home societies, they are objects of mixed treatments. They are absent from major professional fields and political positions. There are no deaf mute lawyers or blind ambassador women or men (it is curious that the dominant sister in Ben Jelloun's work imagines her brother as a consul and calls him as such, "le consul"). The prophet would not have thought them unfit to be taught to fulfill such missions. In the *Abasa* chapter, we find a clear indication that Allah does not approve of the dismissing of a knowledge seeking blind person from the company of important individuals that may teach him how to develop. In the eyes of God, the disabled are not hopeless cases, unlike the "deaf," "dumb" and "blind" that is the *summun, bukmun, umyun* that He mentions throughout *al Qur'ãn*. Allah uses the expression to designate people who are morally and intellectually disabled though sound of physical health. Their moral handicaps border on the incurable. To follow is a list of quotes to illustrate the Quranic frequency and sense of the expression. They address the Prophet: "can you make the deaf hear, or guide the blind or those in grievous error?"(43: 42). In two more different chapters, God directs a similar message to the Prophet and possibly also to any other person who attempts with insistence to change a type of people who are evocative of those described in the verses:

> You cannot make the dead hear you, nor can you make the deaf hear your call if they turn their backs and pay no heed ; nor can you guide the blind out of their error. None shall give ear to you save those who believe in Our revelations and are submissive to Our will (*al Qur'ãn*, 27 : 80 and 30 : 55).

وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَصُدُّونَهُمْ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾
حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءَنَا قَالَ يَٰلَيْتَ بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكَ بُعْدَ ٱلْمَشْرِقَيْنِ فَبِئْسَ ٱلْقَرِينُ
﴿٣٨﴾ وَلَن يَنفَعَكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ إِذ ظَّلَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ فِى ٱلْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ
﴿٣٩﴾ أَفَأَنتَ تُسْمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ أَوْ تَهْدِى ٱلْعُمْىَ وَمَن كَانَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ
﴿٤٠﴾ فَإِمَّا نَذْهَبَنَّ بِكَ فَإِنَّا مِنْهُم مُّنتَقِمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾ أَوْ نُرِيَنَّكَ ٱلَّذِى
وَعَدْنَٰهُمْ فَإِنَّا عَلَيْهِم مُّقْتَدِرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾ فَٱسْتَمْسِكْ بِٱلَّذِىٓ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ

فَإِذَآ أَصَابَ بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦٓ إِذَا هُمْ يَسْتَبْشِرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾ وَإِن كَانُوا۟
مِن قَبْلِ أَن يُنَزَّلَ عَلَيْهِم مِّن قَبْلِهِۦ لَمُبْلِسِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾ فَٱنظُرْ إِلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِ
رَحْمَتِ ٱللَّهِ كَيْفَ يُحْىِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَآ ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمُحْىِ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ ۖ وَهُوَ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٥٠﴾ وَلَئِنْ أَرْسَلْنَا رِيحًا فَرَأَوْهُ مُصْفَرًّا لَّظَلُّوا۟
مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾ فَإِنَّكَ لَا تُسْمِعُ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ وَلَا تُسْمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ
ٱلدُّعَآءَ إِذَا وَلَّوْا۟ مُدْبِرِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾ وَمَآ أَنتَ بِهَٰدِ ٱلْعُمْىِ عَن ضَلَٰلَتِهِمْ ۖ

The same verses occur in two Quranic chapters, respectively titled "the Ant" and "the Romans." The self willed intellectually and culturally retarded who prefer old ways from pre-Islamic times to the culture of Islam, rank in God's hierarchy of His creatures at the same level as uncomprehending animals:

The meanest beasts in God's sight are those that are deaf, dumb, and devoid of reason. Had God perceived any virtue in them, He would have surely endowed them with hearing. But even if He had made them hear, they would have turned away and refused to listen (*al Qur'ān*, 8: 18).

وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ سَمِعْنَا وَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٢١﴾ ۞ إِنَّ شَرَّ ٱلدَّوَآبِّ
عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلصُّمُّ ٱلْبُكْمُ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾ وَلَوْ عَلِمَ ٱللَّهُ فِيهِمْ
خَيْرًا لَّأَسْمَعَهُمْ ۖ وَلَوْ أَسْمَعَهُمْ لَتَوَلَّوا۟ وَّهُم مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ إِذَا دَعَاكُمْ لِمَا يُحْيِيكُمْ ۖ وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ
يَحُولُ بَيْنَ ٱلْمَرْءِ وَقَلْبِهِۦ وَأَنَّهُۥٓ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ فِتْنَةً لَّا
تُصِيبَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ مِنكُمْ خَآصَّةً ۖ وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٢٥﴾

مَن كَفَرَ بِٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ إِيمَٰنِهِۦٓ إِلَّا مَنْ أُكْرِهَ وَقَلْبُهُۥ مُطْمَئِنٌّ
بِٱلْإِيمَٰنِ وَلَٰكِن مَّن شَرَحَ بِٱلْكُفْرِ صَدْرًا فَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ مِّنَ
ٱللَّهِ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٠٦﴾ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمُ ٱسْتَحَبُّوا۟ ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا
عَلَى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٠٧﴾ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
ٱلَّذِينَ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَسَمْعِهِمْ وَأَبْصَٰرِهِمْ ۖ وَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
هُمُ ٱلْغَٰفِلُونَ ﴿١٠٨﴾ لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّهُمْ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

The purpose of such examples is to make the Qur'ān's readers and listeners see Allah's messages, recognize his abilities and blessings, and resolve to employ their faculties in

doing right lest they lose them and miss out on the rewards of using their senses as God intended. The unbelievers are punished by further missing out on the knowledge and blessing they would have gained by opening up to the understanding and enjoyment of the divine messages. We read in the "cattle" chapter, numerically the sixth in *al Qur'ãn*:

لَّا تُدْرِكُهُ ٱلْأَبْصَـٰرُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ ٱلْأَبْصَـٰرَ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱللَّطِيفُ ٱلْخَبِيرُ ﴿١٠٣﴾ قَدْ
جَآءَكُم بَصَآئِرُ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۖ فَمَنْ أَبْصَرَ فَلِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِىَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۚ وَمَآ
أَنَا۠ عَلَيْكُم بِحَفِيظٍ ﴿١٠٤﴾ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نُصَرِّفُ ٱلْأَيَـٰتِ وَلِيَقُولُوا۟
دَرَسْتَ وَلِنُبَيِّنَهُۥ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾ ٱتَّبِعْ مَآ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ ۖ لَآ
إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٠٦﴾ وَلَوْ شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مَآ
أَشْرَكُوا۟ ۖ وَمَا جَعَلْنَـٰكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا ۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيْهِم بِوَكِيلٍ ﴿١٠٧﴾

It is He that has created for you the stars, so that they may guide you in the darkness of land and sea. We have made plain Our revelations to men of knowledge.

It was He that created you from a single being and furnished you with a dwelling and a resting-place. We have made plain Our revelations to men of understanding.

It is He who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth the buds of every plant. From these We bring forth green foliage and close-growing grain, palm-trees laden with clusters of dates, vineyards and olive groves, and pomegranates alike and different. Behold their fruits when they ripen. Surely in these there are signs for true believers...

Momentous signs have come to you from your Lord. He that sees them shall himself have much to gain, but he who is blind to them shall lose much indeed (6: 100).

Allah's warnings and threats of disability are also an expression of his mercy. He does not want human beings to commit errors that are unworthy of their intelligence, provoke His anger and make Him deprive them of His guidance and blessing. He wants them to grow in healthy knowledge and prosper.

In order to persuade humans to make the best use of their senses during their earthly life, Allah threatens to punish serious lapses with disablement on judgment day as the following combination of Quranic verses indicates :

Those whom God guides are rightly guided; but those whom He confounds shall find no friend besides Him. We shall gather them on the Day of Resurrection, prostrate upon their faces, blind, dumb, and deaf (17: 97)

قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًۢا بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ
بِعِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرًۢا بَصِيرًا ﴿٩٦﴾ وَمَن يَهْدِ ٱللَّهُ فَهُوَ ٱلْمُهْتَدِ ۖ وَمَن
يُضْلِلْ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُمْ أَوْلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِهِۦ ۖ وَنَحْشُرُهُمْ يَوْمَ
ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ عُمْيًا وَبُكْمًا وَصُمًّا ۖ مَّأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ كُلَّمَا
خَبَتْ زِدْنَٰهُمْ سَعِيرًا ﴿٩٧﴾ ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآؤُهُم بِأَنَّهُمْ كَفَرُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا
وَقَالُوٓا۟ أَءِذَا كُنَّا عِظَٰمًا وَرُفَٰتًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ خَلْقًا جَدِيدًا ﴿٩٨﴾

On that day we shall lay Hell bare before the unbelievers, who have turned a blind eye to My admonition and a deaf ear to My warning (18: 99)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَعَلَهُۥ نَارًا قَالَ ءَاتُونِىٓ أُفْرِغْ عَلَيْهِ قِطْرًا ﴿٩٦﴾ فَمَا ٱسْطَـٰعُوٓا۟
أَن يَظْهَرُوهُ وَمَا ٱسْتَطَـٰعُوا۟ لَهُۥ نَقْبًا ﴿٩٧﴾ قَالَ هَـٰذَا رَحْمَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّى ۖ فَإِذَا
جَآءَ وَعْدُ رَبِّى جَعَلَهُۥ دَكَّآءَ ۖ وَكَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّى حَقًّا ﴿٩٨﴾ ❁ وَتَرَكْنَا
بَعْضَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَمُوجُ فِى بَعْضٍ ۖ وَنُفِخَ فِى ٱلصُّورِ فَجَمَعْنَـٰهُمْ
جَمْعًا ﴿٩٩﴾ وَعَرَضْنَا جَهَنَّمَ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْكَـٰفِرِينَ عَرْضًا ﴿١٠٠﴾ ٱلَّذِينَ
كَانَتْ أَعْيُنُهُمْ فِى غِطَآءٍ عَن ذِكْرِى وَكَانُوا۟ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ سَمْعًا ﴿١٠١﴾

He that rejects My warning shall live in woe and come before Us blind on the Day of Resurrection. "Lord," he will say, "Why have You brought me blind before You when I had once been clear-sighted ?" (*al Qur'ān*, 20: 125 - Dawood).

فَوَسْوَسَ إِلَيْهِ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ قَالَ يَـٰٓـَٔادَمُ هَلْ أَدُلُّكَ عَلَىٰ شَجَرَةِ ٱلْخُلْدِ وَمُلْكٍ لَّا
يَبْلَىٰ ﴿١٢٠﴾ فَأَكَلَا مِنْهَا فَبَدَتْ لَهُمَا سَوْءَٰتُهُمَا وَطَفِقَا يَخْصِفَانِ عَلَيْهِمَا مِن
وَرَقِ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۚ وَعَصَىٰٓ ءَادَمُ رَبَّهُۥ فَغَوَىٰ ﴿١٢١﴾ ثُمَّ ٱجْتَبَـٰهُ رَبُّهُۥ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ
وَهَدَىٰ ﴿١٢٢﴾ قَالَ ٱهْبِطَا مِنْهَا جَمِيعًۢا ۖ بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ ۖ فَإِمَّا يَأْتِيَنَّكُم
مِّنِّى هُدًى فَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَ هُدَاىَ فَلَا يَضِلُّ وَلَا يَشْقَىٰ ﴿١٢٣﴾ وَمَنْ أَعْرَضَ
عَن ذِكْرِى فَإِنَّ لَهُۥ مَعِيشَةً ضَنكًا وَنَحْشُرُهُۥ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ أَعْمَىٰ ﴿١٢٤﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ لِمَ حَشَرْتَنِيٓ أَعْمَىٰ وَقَدْ كُنتُ بَصِيرًا
﴿١٢٥﴾ قَالَ كَذَٰلِكَ أَتَتْكَ ءَايَٰتُنَا فَنَسِيتَهَا ۖ وَكَذَٰلِكَ
ٱلْيَوْمَ تُنسَىٰ ﴿١٢٦﴾ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى مَنْ أَسْرَفَ وَلَمْ يُؤْمِنۢ بِـَٔايَٰتِ
رَبِّهِۦ ۚ وَلَعَذَابُ ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ أَشَدُّ وَأَبْقَىٰٓ ﴿١٢٧﴾ أَفَلَمْ يَهْدِ لَهُمْ كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا
قَبْلَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْقُرُونِ يَمْشُونَ فِى مَسَٰكِنِهِمْ ۗ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّأُو۟لِى
ٱلنُّهَىٰ ﴿١٢٨﴾ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ لَكَانَ لِزَامًا وَأَجَلٌ مُّسَمًّى ﴿١٢٩﴾

It is worth noting that Islam is a message of forgiveness. Throughout *al Qur'ān*, Allah reiterates the hopeful promise of His forgiveness to those who change themselves and choose true repentance. The clauses of divine justice call for a comparison with certain disabling human practices said to faithfully represent Islamic law based on "an eye for an eye" Quranic verse such as the following:

وَكَتَبْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ فِيهَآ أَنَّ ٱلنَّفْسَ بِٱلنَّفْسِ وَٱلْعَيْنَ بِٱلْعَيْنِ وَٱلْأَنفَ
بِٱلْأَنفِ وَٱلْأُذُنَ بِٱلْأُذُنِ وَٱلسِّنَّ بِٱلسِّنِّ وَٱلْجُرُوحَ قِصَاصٌ ۚ فَمَن تَصَدَّقَ
بِهِۦ فَهُوَ كَفَّارَةٌ لَّهُۥ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ يَحْكُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ
ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾ وَقَفَّيْنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم بِعِيسَى ٱبْنِ مَرْيَمَ مُصَدِّقًا
لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ ۖ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ ٱلْإِنجِيلَ فِيهِ هُدًى وَنُورٌ
وَمُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ وَهُدًى وَمَوْعِظَةً لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

> We decreed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a wound for a wound. ***But if man charitably forbears from retaliation, his remission shall atone for him.*** Transgressors [or Oppressors, or Unjust] are those that do not judge according to God's revelations"
>
> (*al Qur'ãn*, 5 : 62, Dawood's translation - Italics mine)

The italicized part of the verses is a clear indication of Allah's preference and encouragement of moderation and forgiveness. Yet, in certain parts of the Islamic world of our times, extremist Muslim applicators of *al Qur'ãn* opt for disabling modes of punishment, such as the cutting of hands, the chopping off of ears and noses as well as the blindening of eyes and disfigurement of faces [12] for various "crimes" that range from theft to the scorn of a forceful admirer's proposal. Such practices can be found in Islamic societies such as Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. To justify such extreme measures, the extremist Muslims or Islamists would often evoke the Quranic verses (quoted above) and omit the final forgiveness note. They would also quote the following verse:

> As for the man or woman who is guilty of theft, cut off their hands to punish them for their crimes. That is the punishment enjoined by God. God is

[12] Such practices go very far back in time and place. They were used in ancient Egypt and India. A Quranic verse documents this fact about the Egyptian Pharaonic era: "Pharaoh said: 'Do you dare believe in Him [the God of Moses] before I give you leave ? This is a plot you have contrived to turn the people out of their city. But you shall learn. I will cut off your hands and feet on alternate sides and then crucify you all!" (7: 124). While taking into consideration the fact that Pharaoh's statement in this verse is a threat, we can read it as indicative of the possibility of the deed. The politics of the time were founded on Pharaoh's oppression of his people. His threat is a speech act that shows him capable of having already done what he threatens and of doing it again. His victims would be politically-disabled people.
Concerning ancient India, we read in a piece of medical literature: "the ancient Indian surgeons had ample opportunity to master the art of making new noses because of the practice of chopping off the nose and ears as a mode of punishment."

mighty and wise. But whoever repents after committing evil, and mends his ways, shall be pardoned by God. God is forgiving and merciful (*al Qur'ān*, 5: 34)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لَوْ أَنَّ لَهُم مَّا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا وَمِثْلَهُۥ مَعَهُۥ
لِيَفْتَدُواْ بِهِۦ مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ مَا تُقُبِّلَ مِنْهُمْ ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ
أَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٦﴾ يُرِيدُونَ أَن يَخْرُجُواْ مِنَ ٱلنَّارِ وَمَا هُم بِخَٰرِجِينَ مِنْهَا ۖ
وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّقِيمٌ ﴿٣٧﴾ وَٱلسَّارِقُ وَٱلسَّارِقَةُ فَٱقْطَعُوٓاْ أَيْدِيَهُمَا جَزَآءًۢ
بِمَا كَسَبَا نَكَٰلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٣٨﴾ فَمَن تَابَ مِنۢ
بَعْدِ ظُلْمِهِۦ وَأَصْلَحَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَتُوبُ عَلَيْهِ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

The forgiveness message in the "eye for an eye" verse, which is about a greater crime than theft, namely being about killing and bodily harm, tends to be forgotten by the larger groups of Muslims as a consequence of such omissions. The earlier part of the verses does not justify its application in times other than those of pre-Islamic and early Islamic societies. Those were largely tribal and nomadic societies competing to survive in harsh environments and scarce economies. Violence and theft were strong temptations. A large part of the populations had limited access to literacy and education. We can imagine that warlords and their followers were able to understand raw physical power more easily than radical spiritual messages of moderation and forgiveness. In a gradual mode, *al Qur'ān* first speaks to them in their language and suggests for a beginning Islamic law to use the threat of bodily punishment as an effective deterrent to wrongdoers. Yet, implicit in the verses is a hope for humanity to evolve to levels of moral development that make unnecessary the appeals to primal fears of physical punishment and that call for a revision

of the law into a more forgiving yet effective code. The forgiveness note reads as timeless. Such a reading promises to reduce the number of individuals who could be disabled at the hands of other humans playing God in their lives and misusing the scriptures as a pretext to justify their own unhealthy preference for violent retaliation and allow their continuation of outdated practices. In their wish to apply the "eye for an eye" measure at every occasion and under any pretext, the extremists do not seem to be restrained by a scenario of large populations of hand cut and one-eyed individuals. They seem to seek mass destruction. Allah, whose merciful example humans are supposed to follow, has in mind forgiveness and healing for his creatures. He encourages and promises to forgive and heal. Implicit in one of the most severe disability verses, is the possibility of healing: "Say: 'Do but consider: if God took away your hearing and your sight and set a seal upon your hearts, could any but God restore them to you?" (The Cattle chapter - 6: 42).

فَلَوْلَآ إِذْ جَآءَهُم بَأْسُنَا تَضَرَّعُوا۟ وَلَٰكِن قَسَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَزَيَّنَ
لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾ فَلَمَّا نَسُوا۟ مَا ذُكِّرُوا۟ بِهِۦ فَتَحْنَا
عَلَيْهِمْ أَبْوَٰبَ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا فَرِحُوا۟ بِمَآ أُوتُوٓا۟ أَخَذْنَٰهُم
بَغْتَةً فَإِذَا هُم مُّبْلِسُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾ فَقُطِعَ دَابِرُ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ۚ وَٱلْحَمْدُ
لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾ قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَخَذَ ٱللَّهُ سَمْعَكُمْ
وَأَبْصَٰرَكُمْ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِكُم مَّنْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ ٱللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُم بِهِۦ

Allah reaffirms in *al Qur'ãn* that He has the ultimate power to bestow, take away and restore the gifts of senses when He chooses. He does that to make humans carry out

His plans and understand His reasons. Quranic stories are one of the best places in *al Qur'ān* to see Allah's purposes unfold. In the opening of the chapter "Joseph," Allah says: "We narrate to you the best of narratives, by Our revealing to you this Quran, though before this you were certainly one of those who did not know" (12: 3, Shakir's translation).

الٓرٰ ۚ تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ٱلْمُبِينِ ﴿١﴾ إِنَّآ أَنزَلْنَٰهُ
قُرْءَٰنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢﴾ نَحْنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ
ٱلْقَصَصِ بِمَآ أَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَيْكَ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ وَإِن كُنتَ مِن قَبْلِهِۦ لَمِنَ
ٱلْغَٰفِلِينَ ﴿٣﴾ إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ يَٰٓأَبَتِ إِنِّى رَأَيْتُ
أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِى سَٰجِدِينَ ﴿٤﴾

In fact, the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob (*Yacob* or *Yaqub*), is one of the most popular Quranic narratives. An entire chapter bears the prophet's name: *Yusuf*. It features disability.

Jacob's blindness tells a very moving story of human nature, culture and disability that is marked by forgiveness all throughout. Its framing tale of sibling rivalry combines social and economic signs. A group of Jacob's sons, mothered by the same woman, is jealous of two half-brothers who are especially dear to their father's heart. They suspect Jacob of favoring the pair over their numerous body. They plot to eliminate him. They persuade their father to allow them to take Yusuf along on one of their excursions. He consents reluctantly and despite his fears of seeing Yusuf devoured by the wolf. The brothers decide to kill him, but one of them is inspired by Allah to object to the killing

and to suggest casting Yusuf in a dark pit. After executing this plan, they go back home and tell their father that the wolf ate Yusuf. Yacob does not believe them but resolves to be patient and trust in God. In the meantime, Yusuf is taken up by a caravan, sold and bought by an Egyptian king. The latter adopts Yusuf, cherishes and entrusts him till the seduction incident and its resulting imprisonment of Yusuf. The jailed slave/prince remains determined to reassert his innocence, save his one true brother, see his father and reunite with his other half siblings from a position of power and prestige. A long series of connected events happens before Yusuf sees his brothers again. He is treasurer of the granaries of the land. They come seeking provisions. They do not recognize him. He thinks up a creative plan to make them bring his brother to him. He requests that as a condition to providing them with their needs and offering them an extra camel-load of provisions. They pressure Yacob to part with Yusuf's brother. He allows them to bring Benjamin to Yusuf after taking from them a pledge that they never abandon him, unless they are surrounded by danger. Once they reach their destination, for reasons of his own, Yusuf pretends to accuse his brother of theft in order to keep him and proceed with his plan to reunite and reconcile the family. The brothers find themselves obliged to dispatch the sad news of the brother's theft and detainment to Jacob, who knew better than to believe them:

> No!' cried their father. 'Your souls have tempted you to evil. But I will have sweet patience. God may bring them all to me. He alone is all-knowing and wise.' And he turned away from them, crying : 'Alas for Joseph !' His eyes went white with grief, and he was oppressed with silent sorrow.
>
> His sons exclaimed: 'In God's name, will you not cease to think of Joseph until you ruin your health and die ?'

He replied: 'I complained to God of my sorrow and sadness. God has made known to me things that you know not. Go, my sons, and seek news of Joseph and his brother. Do not despair of God's spirit; none but unbelievers despair of God's spirit.'

And when they went in to him, [Yusuf], they said: 'Noble prince, we and our people are scourged with famine. We have brought but little money. Give us our full measure, and be charitable to us, God rewards the charitable.'

'Do you know,' he replied, 'what you did to Joseph and his brother? You are truly unaware.'

They cried: 'Can you indeed be Joseph?'

'I am Joseph,' he answered, 'and this is my brother. God has been gracious to us. Those that keep from evil and endure, with fortitude, God will not deny them their reward.'

'By the Lord,' they said, 'God has exalted you above us all. We have indeed done wrong.'

He replied: 'None shall reproach you this day. May God forgive you: of all those that show mercy He is the most merciful. Take this shirt of mine and throw it over my father's face : he will recover his sight. Then return to me with all your people.'

When the caravan departed their father said: 'I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.'

'In God's name,' said those who heard him, 'it is but your old illusion.'

And when the bearer of good news arrived, he threw Joseph's shirt over the old man's face, and he regained his sight. He said: 'Did I not tell you, God has made known to you what you know not?'

His sons said: 'Father, implore forgiveness for our sins. We have indeed done wrong.'

He replied: 'I shall implore my Lord to forgive you. He is forgiving and merciful.'

(*al Qur'ān* 12 : 87 - 94, Dawood p. 172-3)

وَسْـَٔلِ ٱلْقَرْيَةَ ٱلَّتِى كُنَّا فِيهَا وَٱلْعِيرَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَقْبَلْنَا فِيهَا ۖ وَإِنَّا لَصَـٰدِقُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾
قَالَ بَلْ سَوَّلَتْ لَكُمْ أَنفُسُكُمْ أَمْرًا ۖ فَصَبْرٌ جَمِيلٌ ۖ عَسَى ٱللَّهُ أَن يَأْتِيَنِى
بِهِمْ جَمِيعًا ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨٣﴾ وَتَوَلَّىٰ عَنْهُمْ وَقَالَ يَـٰٓأَسَفَىٰ
عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ وَٱبْيَضَّتْ عَيْنَاهُ مِنَ ٱلْحُزْنِ فَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿٨٤﴾ قَالُوا۟ تَٱللَّهِ
تَفْتَؤُا۟ تَذْكُرُ يُوسُفَ حَتَّىٰ تَكُونَ حَرَضًا أَوْ تَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْهَـٰلِكِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾
قَالَ إِنَّمَآ أَشْكُوا۟ بَثِّى وَحُزْنِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَأَعْلَمُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

إِنَّهُۥ مَن يَتَّقِ وَيَصْبِرْ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾ قَالُوا۟
تَٱللَّهِ لَقَدْ ءَاثَرَكَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا وَإِن كُنَّا لَخَـٰطِـِٔينَ ﴿٩١﴾ قَالَ لَا تَثْرِيبَ
عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۖ يَغْفِرُ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۖ وَهُوَ أَرْحَمُ ٱلرَّٰحِمِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾ ٱذْهَبُوا۟
بِقَمِيصِى هَـٰذَا فَأَلْقُوهُ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِ أَبِى يَأْتِ بَصِيرًا وَأْتُونِى بِأَهْلِكُمْ
أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾ وَلَمَّا فَصَلَتِ ٱلْعِيرُ قَالَ أَبُوهُمْ إِنِّى لَأَجِدُ رِيحَ يُوسُفَ ۖ
لَوْلَآ أَن تُفَنِّدُونِ ﴿٩٤﴾ قَالُوا۟ تَٱللَّهِ إِنَّكَ لَفِى ضَلَـٰلِكَ ٱلْقَدِيمِ ﴿٩٥﴾

Jacob's blindness is thought provoking. Its causes are multiple and complex. His sons' yielding to the natural sentiments of jealousy and hate for the other brother is what set in motion a series of connected events that caused Jacob to become blind. A combination of nature and culture would be the more exact cause of Jacob's blindness.

فَلَمَّآ أَن جَآءَ ٱلْبَشِيرُ أَلْقَىٰهُ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِۦ فَٱرْتَدَّ بَصِيرًا ۖ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكُمْ
إِنِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾ قَالُوا۟ يَٰٓأَبَانَا ٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَآ إِنَّا
كُنَّا خَٰطِـِٔينَ ﴿٩٧﴾ قَالَ سَوْفَ أَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ رَبِّىٓ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ
ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٩٨﴾ فَلَمَّا دَخَلُوا۟ عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ ءَاوَىٰٓ إِلَيْهِ أَبَوَيْهِ وَقَالَ ٱدْخُلُوا۟
مِصْرَ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ءَامِنِينَ ﴿٩٩﴾ وَرَفَعَ أَبَوَيْهِ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ وَخَرُّوا۟
لَهُۥ سُجَّدًا ۖ وَقَالَ يَٰٓأَبَتِ هَٰذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُءْيَىَ مِن قَبْلُ قَدْ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّى حَقًّا ۖ

The band's behavior was conditioned and exacerbated by the natural environment in which they lived and the nomadic society they were part of. The number of able sons was considered to be of great importance in such an economy of scarcity and uncertainty.[13] They internalized that and translated it into a feeling of higher power and greater merit over the younger pair of half brothers. Along this line of thinking, the various experiences that occur as a consequence to their blunders could be read as a process of teaching them that number, cunning and brute power should not be counted as reliable measures of value and merit. They eventually admit that God has exalted and enriched Joseph above them all (12: 88), for his moral worth which combines innocence, virtue and knowledge. Being numerous, they felt entitled to all they could get from their father's inheritance. They grudged sharing with the other boys what they reaped from their nomadic expeditions, often hard and dangerous ones. They saw their brothers from the other woman as a threat. Such sibling conflicts are recurrent in polygamous societies.

[13] Regarding my term "economy of scarcity," Dawood captures the context by adding the word "famine" in his translation. The Arabic expression *thorron* is more general and signifies "harm" or "distress."

In a social structure of clans and tribes, they perceived their brothers in tribal terms and pictured the two boys coming together and growing to compete with them. They tried to separate and divide them by eliminating one of them.

In a social context where the number one as single individual connotes powerlessness and helplessness, they probably calculated that Joseph's brother would become less of a threat and an easier prey should they later decide to exploit or eliminate him. In due time, after he has enabled himself with more knowledge and power, Joseph offers his brothers an excuse to use their other brother and take him from his father. They do not hesitate to do that (12: 59 – 61). When they go back to Jacob with the news that his son has been detained by the treasurer for theft, he knows better: "No!' [he says,] 'your souls have tempted you to evil." His understanding of what they did to Joseph comes back and revives his pain. The dawning upon him of their evil theories and short-sighted blunders causes him to become blind while enhancing his inner vision. With his blindness, he tries to show his sons an alternative way of living, one based on love, faith-full and intuitive knowledge, patience in facing life's trials as well as forgiveness.

Yacob's blindness serves the purpose of embodying his love for his sons. It lends life to the linguistic expression of cherishing someone as "the apple of the eye." The innocent, good and vulnerable brothers were the light of Jacob's eyes. He would also willingly give his eyes to any of his sons. He did not seem to mind going blind. He did not say "O my eyes!" Instead, he voiced his trust in God and his faith that He will bring them all together to him. He made a choice to be patient and tune in to his special ways of

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The context in question was also an environment of uncertainty where caravans were threatened by wolves and thieves, hence Jacob's fears for his sons.

knowing. His other sons could have developed earlier that kind of positive knowledge had they chosen to use their senses to feel and do right.

Jacob seems to have known intuitively that his blindness will be an important agent in bringing the story to a happy ending by revealing the truth and reuniting the family. After disclosing his identity to his brothers, Yusuf tells them to use his shirt to heal his blind father. Yacob and Yusuf shared special ways of knowing. Yusuf knew about his father's blindness and its cure. Their connection was intensified by the blindness. Jacob knew all along that with the complication of his condition would come the resolution. His vision comes true. His sons cast Joseph's shirt over his face and by Allah's leave he regained his sight. It is inspiring that Yusuf understood his father's blindness to be different from other cases of eyesight loss.

Blindness can have various causes that could be physical as well as cultural or socio-political. It can also, in special cases, happen any time suddenly for reasons that the medical eye cannot see or explain, and return as miraculously.[14] Disabilities can be caused also by family relations, directly and indirectly. The Quranic story of Yusuf and Yacob is informative and inspiring in that it teaches the spiritual, Islamic way of "accepting" disabilities such as blindness. Yacob's "graceful patience," (a possible translation of his Arabic expression in the Quranic verse), represents the right and rewarding attitude that a person of faith and knowledge should adopt when faced with disability. It is a patience that should not be misunderstood as resignation. A disabled

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[14] In our times, we hear about such a case on a popular American talk show "Oprah." An episode about miracles relates the story of an American man named Renay Poirier who according to the online text of his experience "lost his sight in a high-voltage electrical accident. *Doctors could find no explanation for his blindness*... Unable to watch his young daughters grow up or hold a steady job, he persevered by training to become a physical therapist. [Ten year later], Renay experienced a severe headache followed by a brilliant light- and the revelation that his sight had returned! 'Awonderful gift was given to me,' says Renay.

person should continue to pursue the understanding of God's work. The patience should come from knowledge of and trust in God. Yacob had faith that God was able to help him be patient and continue to live. He also believed that God would give him back his eyesight in due time. Accordingly, his response to his blindness was to invoke God's help and wait to see. By God's leave, Yusuf healed him. The healing is a sign of God's ability and mercy.

The healing of Jacob is a measure of God's mercy also because of what the life of the blind and disabled might have been like in those times. By virtue of his spiritual and practical knowledge, gentle character and esteemed position within his society, Jacob as a blind old man might have become more of a respected community member. However, he might also have been reduced to an aggravated level of poverty and a dependency that would have humiliated him. We can imagine the conditions of the more common disabled persons, those who might not have had some of the privileges of Jacob, such as the born blind and mute in other similar societies and economies of scarce moral and material resources. A common fate for the disabled in such contexts is to beg.

The healing of such a common disabled person as a miraculous prophetic sign is demonstrated by Jesus within a different Quranic story, that of Mary:

> The angels said to Mary: 'God bids you rejoice in a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary. He shall be noble in this world and in the world to come, and shall be one of those who are favoured. He shall preach to men in his cradle and in the prime of manhood, and shall lead a righteous life.'
>
> 'Lord,' she said, 'how can I bear a child when no man has touched me?'

He replied: 'Even thus. God creates whom He will. When He decrees a thing He need only say: "Be," and it is. He will instruct him in the Scriptures and in wisdom, in the Torah and in the Gospel, and send him forth as an apostle to the Israelites. He will say: "I bring you a sign from your Lord. From clay I will make for you the likeness of a bird. I shall breathe into it and, by God's leave, it shall become a living bird. *By God's leave I shall heal the blind man and the leper*, and raise the dead to life. I shall tell you what to eat and what to store up in your houses. Surely that will be a sign for you, if you are true believers. I come to confirm the Torah which preceded me and to make lawful for you some of the things you are forbidden. I bring you a sign from you Lord: therefore fear God and obey me" (3: 46 – 51).

وَرَسُولًا إِلَىٰ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ أَنِّي قَدۡ جِئۡتُكُم بِـَٔايَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ أَنِّيٓ أَخۡلُقُ
لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلطِّينِ كَهَيۡـَٔةِ ٱلطَّيۡرِ فَأَنفُخُ فِيهِ فَيَكُونُ طَيۡرَۢا بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۖ وَأُبۡرِئُ
ٱلۡأَكۡمَهَ وَٱلۡأَبۡرَصَ وَأُحۡيِ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰ بِإِذۡنِ ٱللَّهِۖ وَأُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا تَأۡكُلُونَ
وَمَا تَدَّخِرُونَ فِي بُيُوتِكُمۡۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗ لَّكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ
﴿٤٩﴾ وَمُصَدِّقٗا لِّمَا بَيۡنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ ٱلتَّوۡرَىٰةِ وَلِأُحِلَّ لَكُم بَعۡضَ ٱلَّذِي حُرِّمَ
عَلَيۡكُمۡۚ وَجِئۡتُكُم بِـَٔايَةٖ مِّن رَّبِّكُمۡ فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٥٠﴾

Combining the Quran and the Bible would help us see possible meanings of the quoted verse. The story of Jesus healing the blind man is described in detail in the Christian Gospel, called *Injeel* in Arabic. According to the biblical story, the blind man was a beggar. He had living parents but they had apparently abandoned him. They probably

believed, as was characteristic of their times, that he was blind because he had sinned. Even granting that, it seems that instead of forgiving him for a sin they could not prove and helping him make a living, his community feared and shunned him. By interacting with him, the prophet Jesus represents an endeavor on the part of God to debunk the negative association between disability and sin that clouded the human minds of the time. Jesus put clay on the eyes of the blind man and told him to wash in the pool of *Siloam* in Jerusalem. After he is healed, the Pharisees continued to express concern with the notion of sin instead of looking at what the live miracle in front of them could mean. They said that it would be a sin if he, Jesus, had done the healing on the Sabbath. The blind man dismisses the objection and tells the story saying: "whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see" (The Bible – John 9: 1-41). The beggar appreciates God's miraculous work and rejoices in the difference that sight will bring into his life. He will probably become able to do work that he could not have done as a blind man and gain a degree of independence and dignity within his society.

The Holy Books converge in communicating a message of integration in favor of the blind and by extension the disabled more generally.[15] In this light, the Quranic verses suggest a new creative reading. Except for the line using "the blind man and the leper," the major part of the verses quoted seems to be written mainly in respect of the able-bodied, addressing them in the second person plural and teaching them through miracles performed over the bodies of the disabled. The Quran refers us to the preceding God-sent

[15] This includes the leper. There may be a question as to how leprosy can be read as a disability. God pairs the differently disabled in the miracle healing verses. That is possibly because the blind and the leper were treated in similar ways. They were both physically different because of their disabilities. They were perhaps perceived as suffering from certain forms of ill health that were divine punishment for sins the two men had committed. Accordingly, they were imaginably subject to the same nature of mistreatment to varying degrees of shunning, exclusion and suffering.

Books, however, to develop our understanding of His words. The details that we find in the Bible about the begging blind man can enrich our reading of the Quranic verses as a unit and in relation to other divine verses about the blind and the disabled. An example of such different verses would be the *Abasa* chapter, which was composed by Allah to reproach the prophet Muhammad for not welcoming and instructing the Arabian blind man. More of the story than the line "by God's leave I shall heal the blind man and the leper" can be read as being about and for the disabled.[16]

As we can read in the Quranic story of Mary and Jesus, the Messiah inspires better treatment for those who remain blind and marked by leprosy. By demonstrating God's ability to heal the disabled when He chooses, Jesus seems to argue that if God willed, He could cure all disabled persons. If he does not, that is for reasons of His own. While waiting to see God's plans, the disabled should not be shunned and alienated. Believers should follow the example of the prophet and interact with disabled persons. They have a duty to heal them in the ways they can. If they do not, they should fear God's punishment. Being the giver of all, God could punish them by taking away their sight and health and making them become like those they abandon and mistreat. The able-bodied can heal the disabled in diverse ways, by making lawful for them areas of community life they have previously forbidden to them, and by making accessible to them educational gatherings. They can heal them by sharing with them family meals and saving them from begging. They should allow them to develop work venues that permit them to live with sufficiency and dignity. They need also to assist them in their aspirations to follow the model of a prophet's character and help them with instructions in scriptures and various fields of learning.

Quranic references to disabilities seem in general to privilege the physically blind, possibly out of compassion for their deprivation of natural sights and their special vulnerability to societal ills. As for the physically lame and the sick, they are subjects of verses that regulate their exemptions from certain religious duties. References to the deaf and mute seem to be exclusively metaphorical and parabolical. Allah often asks Quran readers and listeners to imagine the unbelievers as disabled and the believers as the able ones and to compare if the two are equal: "the likeness of the two parties [the unbelievers and the believers] is as the blind and the deaf and the seer and the hearer. Are they equal when compared. Will you then not take heed?" (11: 21)

مَا كَانُوا۟ يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾ لَا جَرَمَ
أَنَّهُمْ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمُ ٱلْأَخْسَرُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَأَخْبَتُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ
هُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾ ۞ مَثَلُ ٱلْفَرِيقَيْنِ كَٱلْأَعْمَىٰ
وَٱلْأَصَمِّ وَٱلْبَصِيرِ وَٱلسَّمِيعِ ۚ هَلْ يَسْتَوِيَانِ مَثَلًا ۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

However, in one particular instance, which qualifies more as a parable because it is more of a story, God mentions the mute with a thought provoking description that suggests a different reading of the verse as voicing a message on behalf of the physically mute.

The parable reads as follows:

> They worship helpless idols which can confer on them no benefits from heaven or earth. Compare God with none: God has knowledge, but you have not.
>
> ... God also makes this comparison. Take a dumb and helpless man, a burden on his master: wherever he sends him he returns with empty hands. Is he as good as he that enjoins justice and follows a straight path ?
>
> (*al Qur'ãn* 16: 73 – Dawood p. 192).

Allah is saying that those who choose idols for Gods cheat themselves of their own senses. They know that the deities they created for themselves are stone deaf and dumb. By persisting in the wrong and silencing the voice of their reason, they are reducing themselves to the likeness of stone, a burden on their masters, God and man, for being in such a condition of their own erroneous choice. They do not speak truth or goodness and are consequently comparable to a mute man. In contrast, those who believe in Allah develop the senses given to them by their creator. They speak well and do well. One particular translation of *al Qur'ãn* offering commentaries on meanings of verses proposes the following explanation:

> In the ... Parable, one man is dumb; he can explain nothing, and he can certainly do nothing; he is only a wearisome burden to his master, no matter what his master asks him to do; or perhaps he is really harmful instead of bringing any good ; such are idols (literal and metaphorical) when taken as false gods. The other man is in a position to command, and he commands what is just and righteous; not only his commands but his doings also are on the path of

> righteousness. Such are the qualities of Allah. (*The Holy Qur-ãn: English translation of the meanings and Commentary*,[17] p. 755).

The comparison of the unbelievers to a "do-no-good" mute is suggestive of a base in the reality of the times. In His attempt to dissuade people from idol worship, Allah seems to be evoking an "example" (the literal translation of the Arabic word *mathalan* rendered not without success as "parable"), an observed/observable image familiar to his audience, the picture of a person whom and in whose place they would not like to be. We can infer that the mute in such societies were unable to do or accomplish anything. The above quoted explanation offered by the Islamic scholars in the Saudi Arabian English translation of and commentary on *al Qur'ãn*, may be helpful in imagining the extent of the disability of the mute in societies where they "can explain nothing." A society where nothing the mute say is understood constitutes a handicapping environment. The reasons for the language gap could be the under-development of sign and its dismissing for communication by able hearing and speaking masters. Based on the divine verse and the human commentary, one can imagine the predicament of the mute in pre-Islamic and early Islamic society. Yet, they were supposed to know from stories of earlier prophets that God would not dismiss any sign language. If instruction in previous Holy Books had been made accessible to the people of pre-Islamic Arabia, they might have known about the three-day muteness of Mary and Zacharia. If the stories had been altered or lost, *Al Qur'ãn* reminds:

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[17] The work is an attempted combination and revision of previous best translations particularly that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. It has been carried out by the Presidency of Islamic Researchers, IFTA, Call and Guidance and printed by royal decree at King Fahd Holy Qur-an printing complex in Al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia.

قَالَتْ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لِي غُلَٰمٌ وَلَمْ يَمْسَسْنِي بَشَرٌ وَلَمْ أَكُ بَغِيًّا ﴿٢٠﴾ قَالَ
كَذَٰلِكِ قَالَ رَبُّكِ هُوَ عَلَيَّ هَيِّنٌ ۖ وَلِنَجْعَلَهُۥٓ ءَايَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَرَحْمَةً مِّنَّا ۚ وَكَانَ
أَمْرًا مَّقْضِيًّا ﴿٢١﴾ ۞ فَحَمَلَتْهُ فَٱنتَبَذَتْ بِهِۦ مَكَانًا قَصِيًّا ﴿٢٢﴾ فَأَجَآءَهَا
ٱلْمَخَاضُ إِلَىٰ جِذْعِ ٱلنَّخْلَةِ قَالَتْ يَٰلَيْتَنِي مِتُّ قَبْلَ هَٰذَا وَكُنتُ
نَسْيًا مَّنسِيًّا ﴿٢٣﴾ فَنَادَىٰهَا مِن تَحْتِهَآ أَلَّا تَحْزَنِي قَدْ جَعَلَ رَبُّكِ تَحْتَكِ
سَرِيًّا ﴿٢٤﴾ وَهُزِّيٓ إِلَيْكِ بِجِذْعِ ٱلنَّخْلَةِ تُسَٰقِطْ عَلَيْكِ رُطَبًا جَنِيًّا ﴿٢٥﴾

فَكُلِي وَٱشْرَبِي وَقَرِّي عَيْنًا ۖ فَإِمَّا تَرَيِنَّ مِنَ ٱلْبَشَرِ
أَحَدًا فَقُولِيٓ إِنِّي نَذَرْتُ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ صَوْمًا فَلَنْ أُكَلِّمَ ٱلْيَوْمَ
إِنسِيًّا ﴿٢٦﴾ فَأَتَتْ بِهِۦ قَوْمَهَا تَحْمِلُهُۥ ۖ قَالُوا۟ يَٰمَرْيَمُ لَقَدْ جِئْتِ
شَيْـًٔا فَرِيًّا ﴿٢٧﴾ يَٰٓأُخْتَ هَٰرُونَ مَا كَانَ أَبُوكِ ٱمْرَأَ سَوْءٍ وَمَا كَانَتْ
أُمُّكِ بَغِيًّا ﴿٢٨﴾ فَأَشَارَتْ إِلَيْهِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ كَيْفَ نُكَلِّمُ مَن كَانَ فِي ٱلْمَهْدِ
صَبِيًّا ﴿٢٩﴾ قَالَ إِنِّي عَبْدُ ٱللَّهِ ءَاتَىٰنِيَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَجَعَلَنِي نَبِيًّا ﴿٣٠﴾

You shall recount in the Book the story of Mary: how she left her people and betook herself to a solitary place to the east. (19: 12)

... And when she felt the throes of childbirth she lay down by the trunk of a palm-tree, crying: 'Oh, would that I had died before this and passed into oblivion!'

> But a voice from below cried out to her: 'Do not despair. Your Lord has provided a brook that runs at your feet, and if you shake the trunk of the palm-tree it will drop fresh ripe dates in your lap. Therefore eat and drink and rejoice; and *should you meet any mortal say to him: 'I have vowed a fast to the Merciful and will not speak with any man today"* (19: 22)

Allah inspires Mary to deal with her society's slandering gossip and unknowing accusations to her of dishonor by acting as if she were mute. By implying the recourse to sign as a viable option of communication, God seems to legitimize the language as an alternative to speech. It seems that by having Mary demonstrate to her people that she could be made by God to speak one day, be mute the next and able to speak again later, God was hoping that they would reflect on that and believe the miracle of the immaculate birth as possible from a Creator capable of giving, taking away and restoring everything at will. Such a reading could be supported by the following part of Zacharias' story:

> ...Zacharias prayed to his Lord, saying: 'Lord, grant me of Your own grace upright descendants. You hear all prayers.'
>
> And as he stood praying in the Shrine, the angels called out to him, saying: 'God bids you rejoice in the birth of John, who shall confirm the Word of God. He shall be princely and chaste, a prophet and a righteous man.'
>
> 'Lord,' said Zacharias, 'how shall I have a son when I am now overtaken by old age and my wife is barren?'
>
> 'Such is the will of God,' He replied. 'He does what He pleases.'
>
> 'Lord,' said he, 'vouchsafe me *a sign.*'

'*For three days and three nights*,' He replied, '*you shall not speak to any man except by signs.* (3: 40)

هُنَالِكَ دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُۥ ۖ قَالَ رَبِّ هَبْ لِى مِن لَّدُنكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ
إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ ٱلدُّعَآءِ ﴿٣٨﴾ فَنَادَتْهُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ وَهُوَ قَآئِمٌ يُصَلِّى فِى
ٱلْمِحْرَابِ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكَ بِيَحْيَىٰ مُصَدِّقًۢا بِكَلِمَةٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَسَيِّدًا
وَحَصُورًا وَنَبِيًّا مِّنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾ قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّىٰ يَكُونُ لِى غُلَٰمٌ
وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِىَ ٱلْكِبَرُ وَٱمْرَأَتِى عَاقِرٌ ۖ قَالَ كَذَٰلِكَ ٱللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَآءُ
﴿٤٠﴾ قَالَ رَبِّ ٱجْعَل لِّىٓ ءَايَةً ۚ قَالَ ءَايَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ ٱلنَّاسَ ثَلَٰثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمْزًا ۗ

The retelling of this story in a different chapter clarifies the affinity between this example and the definition of a temporary case of speech disability. In this case, God has chosen to take away from Zacharias his ability to speak for three day:

'Lord,' said Zacharias, 'give me a sign'

'Your sign is that for three days and nights,' He replied, 'you shall be *bereft of speech*, though otherwise sound in body' (19: 8, italics mine)

The purpose of this divine act seems to be one of convincing Zacharias that God who can bestow and deprive of senses is equally able to create for him a son despite his old age and wife's sterility. God explicitly instructed Zacharias to communicate with people using sign as a merciful act on His part designed to prevent the severance of communicative ties between Zacharias and people during those three days. Despite such early divine messages and the fact that mute people tend to sign instinctively, we can imagine how disabled they can become if at any time their community of able-bodied

individuals decides to forbid them in various ways from using sign language. Such ways could be keeping sign unrecognized and under-developed, preventing the mute from associating with each other and using it,[18] refusing as speaking people to learn sign and consequently making communication between the two groups impossible. Such decisions could come from a large number of prejudices, ranging from the belief that the disabled are inferior to that of their being sinners and/or sons and daughters of sinners. If the audiences of Mary and Zacharias thought during the three disability days that the two were being punished along such lines, God answered to that by revealing later that they were rather blessed individuals.

[18] In an article published by Americans for Middle East understanding in the Link magazine (Vol 14, No. 5) and offering a survey about disability services available in the Arab world country by country, Shabbas points out that in Iraq, "[a] non-residential Amal institute is best known. The program at Amal [an Arabic name/word meaning "hope"] is based on ... teaching deaf youngsters (even totally deaf) to speak rather than sign; employment of "behavior modification" techniques in teaching; the belief that youngsters ought to live with their families and among hearing people. A commitment to family and rehabilitation to full functioning in the "normal" hearing world is the rationale for emphasis on speaking rather than on signing.

Tunisian Camera's Treatment of Disability

Tunisian media's coverage of the experiences of persons with physical differences and disabilities is highly selective and their investment in making such persons visible often has mixed motives and results. The media seem to pursue the stories of extraordinary appearances, accomplishments and compensations on the part of persons with physical differences and disabilities. This chapter will analyze instances of popular media's treatment of disabilities and physical differences in my home culture, Tunisia, an Arab-Islamic society in North Africa. On Tunisian television, we repeatedly see the physically disabled and different ridiculed and exploited as objects of voyeuristic entertainment by able-bodied persons who work at the heart of the information sectors. Various Tunisian shows reflect the positions that their subjects assume within their society and tell us about important cultural issues that shape the lives of individuals with physical disabilities and differences.

In Tunisia, the unusual accomplishments of a few physically different and disabled individuals are occasionally reported and praised by the media. A Saturday afternoon news edition (the only program with signed interpretation for the deaf) once presented the story of a girl who accomplished outstanding success in her school life despite the fact that she was armless. She has developed the ability to write with her toes. In response to the broadcast interview, an artist made a song about her.

The media play a significant role in making persons with physical differences and disabilities visible to the public. Such work is laudable when the attention brings the

differently abled individual positive recognition. However, it is worth noting that Tunisian television and newspapers seldom follow up on the lives of the interviewed individuals. Reports and studies on the predicaments of persons with similar conditions are lacking. The lack of documentation and follow-up runs against a better scenario role for the media, one of treating people with various disabilities as persons, working on expanding the public awareness of other individuals in similar plights and trying to help them in a non-discriminatory manner, equally and in a non-profit spirit. Certain physical differences seem to be privileged, for suspect reasons, while others are rejected and stigmatized in different ways.

The misrepresentations of physically different persons and persons with disabilities such as deafness, are common in Tunisian television. Yet, there has been no critical journalistic writing or academic study about the mis-representations of disabled and especially deaf persons in television programs. The hearing-impaired are repeatedly ridiculed in television "soap operas" and "Hidden Camera" episodes (equivalents to the American "Candid Camera" show), all imported genres made as annual treats for consumer spectators during the holy month of Ramadhan. To note an irony, Ramadhan (a month during which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset) is supposed to be a month of spiritual rebirth, social reconciliation and abstinence from worldly consumption.

Long before the introduction in Tunisia of the now mushrooming satellite dishes, called in French "les paraboles" or "antennes paraboliques," national authorities have allowed Tunisians to view, in addition to the local television channel, the Italian one. We have been able to watch RAI UNO as the main Italian channel that we could access, most of the time since the 1960s. Tunisia gained its independence from French colonization in

1956. The immediate post-independence times saw the birth of Tunisian television. French language programs were part of our post-colonial imports. Next to shows in Tunisians' native tongue, Tunisian Arabic, and in literate Arabic (the main language of news), the local channel continued for long years to include numerous programs from France. The number of such programs gradually decreased over the 1980s, in application of a new set of policies reinforcing the Arabization of administrative paperwork, education and information. Although national television programs eventually have become almost exclusively Arabic. The French channel "France 2" has continued to be available to the general public, those who did not have the special antennae that some could buy and import in order to watch foreign television. Tunisians have been able to watch "France 2" most of the time since the mid-1980s.

The Italian and French channels have long had their versions of the "Candid Camera" entertainment show, predating its import to Tunisia by Francophone Tunisian television crews and local adaptation into a Tunisian "Candid Camera" in the mid-1990s. By that time, Tunisian viewers were familiar with the French "Camera Cachée" ("hidden" camera) show, to the point of retaining the French name and adopting it into their dialect, Tunisian Arabic. Consequently, the Tunisian version's title is a combination of two languages: "Camera Khafiya, " *khafiya* being the standard Arabic adjective that translates the French *cachée*. The Western device and name made a permanent way into Arab cultures and languages. The import/export of the show determines not only the language but also the content of the program. The word "Camera" is part of the Tunisian dialect. Tunisian viewers were so taken with the French "Camera Cachée" shows that even when they had their own version they usually referred to it as "Camera Cachée."

Most of them would not use the standard Arabic word for "hidden" that is "khafiya." It was also evident that the director of the Tunisian series was collecting and "borrowing" ideas for his show from French and other Western programs. He was adapting European material and was projecting local touches on the borrowed scenes.

A Tunisian *Candid Camera* entertains the viewers with a portrait of a Tunisian deaf man. We see a man with a big old gramophone-style loudspeaker standing in the middle of a sidewalk among crowds. He repeatedly stops passers-by to ask for directions to a close and well-known part of downtown Tunis. The area is called *Bab Aliwa* (the first part meaning "door" and the second being a proper name) and it hosts a number of inter-regional transportation stations. The man names the place loud and clear. As passers-by start to answer, he acts as instructed by the Camera directors. He interrupts and holds his interlocutors in order to show them how to make him hear. He puts the loudspeaker to one ear and moves the person to his side in order for him/her to mouth the direction in his ear through the device. Despite the device and the shouting, the deaf man repeatedly fails to hear and understand. Some passers-by persist in trying to help him but in vain. When they become impatient and desperate, they start to walk away. At that point, the actor tells them that it was "Candid Camera." Apparently all that was only for the laughter of the audience. It is reasonable to imagine that the Tunisian director "photocopied" a deafness show from a European "Camera Cachée" episode.

The European-imported Tunisian "Candid Camera" deaf man episode betrays a lack of knowledge about how deaf persons usually behave and function. The program inadequately represents the Tunisian Deaf in the time and place of the scene. In Tunisia of the 1990s, a mid-life deaf man could be expected to think of resorting to pen and paper

to draw and/or write questions. It would have been natural of him as well to combine all with some form of sign language. His articulation of the name for the bus/train station place, *Bab Aliwa*, could be read as an implication that he "acquired" his deafness late in life, after having learned language and speech. Such skills imply a certain level of intelligence. It was unlikely for him to be the illiterate or unintelligent man the Camera show portrays. From his bearing, garb and apparent simplicity also, the deaf man seemed to be of rural origin. However, it is almost unimaginable for a Tunisian village man of the 1990s or 1980s to be illiterate. He had to be literate, "by force," even literally speaking.

Across North Africa, even long before the founding of Western style educational institutions associated with colonial presence, in urban and rural areas alike, there used to be local religious schools called *Kuttab* where children and especially boys would go to learn to write, read, recite al-Quran, the book of Islam, and memorize its verses. The Arabic name of the religious school derives from the verb *kataba,* which means "to write" and could translate as "writing place." The severity of the feared and respected *kuttab* teachers called in Arabic *Moadib* or "agent of discipline" is almost a cliché in North Africa. Physical punishment was a common experience for young learners. Some of the blows administered by teachers to the heads and bodies of children could be said to border on the dangerous and disabling.

The *Camera* scene portrays the deaf man as an illiterate and unintelligent migrant from the village. He is rendered as a coarse villager who cannot read his way about the city (even considering the fact that there are not enough written signs and informative boards around Tunis to facilitate a deaf person's life). While the part is symptomatic and telling of certain Tunisian issues such as regionalism, it is not plausible in itself.

Regarding the literacy issue, as a child and particularly as a male one, the peasant man of the *Camera* show must have gone to the local village, *kuttab*, to learn the basics of Quran reciting, reading and writing under the threat of severe beatings. In general, a child who complains to a parent about a beating would not be heard. The father would not grant him any protection by speaking with the master on his behalf. Possibly against his most loving paternal instincts, he would tell his son what he believes, that the beatings from the master are good for him and will make a man out of him.

As to how the Tunisian rural *Hidden Camera* character "acquired" his deafness (being able to speak unlike most of the born deaf as noted earlier), we can only imagine and speculate. Among other places, he may have acquired it in his local school or at home. In North African social reality, cases of preventable and avoidable deafness and disabilities are numerous. Their histories range from undetected, untreated and preventable infantile diseases associated with poverty and parental negligence to cultural and social ills. The educational style of the Tunisian and generally North African and Islamic *kuttab* could be an example of a violent cultural practice. Fortunately, it is no longer common, particularly in the cities. Nonetheless, such harmful beliefs and practices continue to exist.

In North Africa, various forms of parenting are often motivated by a set of beliefs that are characteristic of a male dominated and patriarchal culture where, contradictory as it may seem, it is the norm both to physically privilege sons and to punish them, in order to produce strong yet obedient men out of them. A rurally based miseducated and excessive male-favoring nutrition culture has been documented by Tunisian television to be handicapping. The work takes the form of a recent, less than a decade-old genre of

television clips serving to raise public awareness about certain health and cultural issues. It is the fruit of combined cultural work done by health professionals and television authorities. The ten-minute clip, called in French "spot," shows scenes from the domestic farm life of a couple with a male child.

We see the mother going about her daily house work outdoors and the child playing nearby in the open nature. The father is repeatedly coming home and asking his wife about what she has fed his son. She starts reciting a breakfast menu of large quantities of eggs, milk, bread, olive oil, honey and dates. In his fatherly sense of duty toward his son, the man does not think that his wife fed their son sufficiently and despite her mild protests, goes into the pantry to get more of the aforementioned products to force on his son. There is more to the protagonist's behavior than a gender dimension. To be sure, his food culture is to be contextualized within his agricultural environment and economy as well as his geographical location with respect to Tunisia (being in the country part) but also the Mediterranean olive laden region. In fact, his menu comes from deeper Islamic Arab sources. The specific preference he displays for milk, olive oil, honey and dates is grounded in his Islamic identity. The products are mentioned in Quranic verses and have a special place in the hearts of Muslims. They are blessed by Allah. He says: "In cattle too you have a worthy lesson. We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, between the bowels and the blood-streams: pure milk, pleasant for those who drink it" (*al Qur'ãn* 16:63 – Dawood, p. 191). The olive tree is praised by Allah in the 24th chapter of our holy book:

> God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp, the lamp within a crystal of star-like brilliance. It is

> lit from a blessed olive tree neither eastern nor western. Its very oil would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light; [Allah] guides to his light whom He will. (*al Qur'ãn* 24:35, N.J. Dawood's translation of *al Qur'ãn* p. 249).

Regarding honey, an entire Quranic chapter (the 16th) is titled "The Bee." Allah speaks to human beings about His blessings and miracles:

> Your Lord inspired the bee, saying: 'Make your homes in the mountains, in the trees, and in the hives which men shall build for you. Feed on every kind of fruit, and follow the trodden paths of your Lord.' From its belly comes forth a syrup of different hues, a cure for men
>
> (*al Qur'ãn* 16:68, Dawood, 192).

The verses about dates are associated in particular with the story of *Miriam* the mother of *Issa,* Mary the mother of Jesus. In the 19th chapter of al-Quran, titled *Miriam, Mary* in Dawood's translation (p. 215), we read:

> And when she felt the throes of childbirth she lay down by the trunk of a palm-tree, crying: 'Oh, would that I died before this and passed into oblivion !'
>
> But a voice from below cried out to her: 'Do not despair. Your Lord has provided a brook that runs at your feet, and if you shake the trunk of the palm-tree it will drop fresh ripe dates in your lap. Therefore eat and drink and rejoice"
>
> (*al Qur'ãn*, 19:22).

It is worth noting that as it encourages the consumption of such blessed food, Islam's holy book guards against excessive indulgence in treating the body and prescribes moderation, which the protagonist of the clip does not take into consideration.

The father endearingly calls his son in Arabic *fhayel*. The father is inspired to use this nickname by the agricultural and farming context of his upbringing. The expression is a diminutive of *fhal* which in breeding language means a potent and reproductive male animal, usually a bull or sheep. The father used the diminutive form out of tenderness for his son's age and worth. The child grows bigger and bigger. To convey the unhealthy size in a humorous way, the authors and directors of the scene employ a well-known adult actor who is moderately overweight. They dressed him in children's clothes and made him sit like a toddler. Similar scenes are repeated. The father keeps forcing his son to gulp down bottles of olive oil. The paternal love for the male heir is motivated by the father's concern to pass on his abundant farm economy into strong hands and brute body force.

Of limited education, the father does not respond to the vaccination campaigns that the public health establishments organize in rural areas across Tunisia. His ignorance of concepts of balanced nutrition and his uneducated estimation of the nutritional value and benefit of such culturally privileged natural products as olive oil cost him dearly. One day, after a generous feeding session, he tries to make his son stand up on his feet. *Fhayel* seems unable to walk, however. He has lost the use of his legs. In such a case, the child's acquired disability would be the result of the father's cultural beliefs and practices. The patriarch's food culture was based on his misinformed faith in the virtues of the holy natural products, olive oil and honey. That was compounded by his obsession with the health of his child. The father's belief in the value and use of a son dictated this intensive care. He rejoiced in his own male forces and privileges and dreamt of cloning

himself through his son. His apparent scarce education shaped his misconceptions as to how to add to his son's value. He confounded excess quantity with quality.

To be sure, the televised representation of the disabling dimension of the father's culture relies on exaggeration. Nevertheless, it succeeds in rendering the father's behavior as characteristic of Tunisian rural patriarchs. The fictional television clip evokes recognizable elements from the countryside, the source of city market grain, olive oil and honey produce. It offers a glimpse of the mobile manpower (an instance being the father's comings and goings) that farming extracts and the investment that rural families place in the reproduction and nurture of male offspring capable of carrying on with the labor and business. Moreover, the father's expressively endearing manners around his son are typical of dramatic and verbal Tunisian fathers. Out of belief in the effectiveness of humor for teaching viewers about Tunisian matters of culture and health, the television clip uses exaggeration. Yet the familiar elements give the spectators a sense of the work's reality source and dimension. In fact, there exists a problem of obesity among the Tunisian population, mainly due to lifestyle restrictions and the consumption of excess pasta and pastry during the combined celebration of holidays, Islamic and Western. As for the specific clip idea, it is likely that it comes from similar rural stories of children suffering from obesity-related impairments and disabilities caused by their parents' food culture, lack of health education and aversion to the concept of vaccination.

A considerable part of North African parenting styles (especially in rural areas) has been shaped by the culture's beliefs in the superiority of men and its definitions of a role for male parents as based on the discipline of children through physical punishment. This may apply to other cultures across the world. Nonetheless, in the case of certain

North African societies, further local beliefs, often popular religious ones (strongest in rural areas), may compound the parenting styles and relate to disabilities in regionally specific ways that would make a given North African society different from any other society within and outside of North Africa. For example, as mentioned in passing in *Perceptions of Present and Future Programming in Selected Centers for Disabled Persons in Morocco*, Thelma Lois Watts writes in her Ph.D. dissertation: "Moroccan folk tradition says that everyone has an angel on each cheek so it is considered very bad to slap anyone on the face. Consequently, children who are being disciplined are often hit about the head, including the ears. Several persons reported loss of hearing following a blow to the head" (59). It is worth noting that such a belief does not seem to have had a strong bearing on Tunisian treatments of children or to have been directly related to deafness by any study.

Intermarriage is another social practice common across North Africa and in Arab culture playing a major role in causing disabilities. Watts has identified a part of similar Moroccan family practices in causing blindness. Her informative passage goes as follows:

> A survey conducted by the School for the Blind in Rabat-Sale in 1980 with the 65 students then enrolled in the school showed that 35 of the 65 students lost their sight at pre-school age and were not born blind. This indicates either a lack of medical care for such conditions as trachoma or situations leading to many accidents or both. Of the remaining 30 students, 26 were born blind (or became blind shortly after birth) and come from families with blind brothers and sisters. Perhaps this can be attributed to birth defects resulting from marriages within

> families. Geertz, Geertz and Rosen (1979) report that while there is an institutionalized preference for a man to marry his father's brother's daughter, there is an even more widespread practice of marriage between other close kinsmen (58).

In Tunisia, there has been once a television report about a relatively isolated village where the large majority of the inhabitants were deaf mutes. The practice of inter-marriage is common in rural areas. The geographic and mental isolation drives the community members to imagine their safety and future in self-preservation and reproduction. This social engineering has a gender dimension. It is usually arranged and enforced by the fathers primarily but also by the mothers. It is often forced on the youth of the village. It can be most oppressive to young girls, who tend to be married off to their cousins without being granted any say in the matter or right to object. The priority is usually attributed to the cousin on the paternal side. A girl is supposed to marry the son of her father's brother. Next comes marriage between maternal and more distant cousins. The television program shows the deaf mutes of the village to have developed, on their own, an instinctive and elementary form of sign language that helped them communicate among themselves.

Isolationism in its multiple forms can be variously disabling across cultures. A similar example to the Tunisian village of deaf mutes exists in the United States, in the town of Chilmark, Massachusettes on the Island of Martha Vineyard. As we read in "A Short History of Martha's Vineyard"at http://marthasvineyard.com/html/penn/history.htm

> Chilmark, eight miles from West Tisbury, fifteen from Vineyard Haven, was an isolated community during the past three centuries. Until the automobile

> age, Chilmark was a half day's journey from anywhere on the Island. As a result, intermarriage among Chilmarkers brought out a genetic tendency for deafness. At one time, more than one quarter of Chilmark's residents were deaf and could not speak. Old time Vineyarders remember people signing in Chilmark rather than speaking, a difference, not a disability."

The deaf and mute are known to start gesturing and signing by instinct. That is not contingent on literacy. This fact holds true of pre-literate communities, oral and literate societies, across cultures. In a program aired by the American channel WCCO on April 25, 2000 and titled "Deaf in Nicaragua," we learn about a group of deaf children who created a sign language of their own. Developing an environment where deaf persons have multiple resources and options, such as the use of pen and paper in addition to a fully elaborated and recognized sign language, would be certainly preferable to a condition of scarcity and limit. The purpose of this part is to note the fact that the deaf have always already been endowed by God, their creator, with the expandable ability to sign, till certain fellow human beings decide to take it away. They do so by denying the importance of sign language and/or keeping it under-developed.

The *Camera* scene directors would not consider having the gramophone deaf man resort to sign language, not even to gesturing as a form of instinctive and elementary signing. In fact, gesturing would have been more in keeping with the rural background of the man. Tunisians of rural background tend to use their hands to express themselves more than urban people do. The absence of sign in this show and telvision entertainment in general is contrary to the fact that deaf persons tend to develop a sign language by instinct. To be sure, it takes two to sign. As a matter of fact, family and community

members of deaf persons often help in initiating a basic sign language, as a spontaneous attempt at facilitating the integration of deaf individuals. Such a language would be the means of communication between the people of the street, the neighborhood, and the deaf person. The show directors' omission of sign language could be read as symptomatic of its under-developed status in Tunisian reality.

The *Camera* director attempted to amuse the public by presenting them with a ridiculous sight, a strange appearing man walking up and down the street holding to their faces a *macro*phone, for their words to fall on deaf ears. For a device to assist the deaf act player, the *Camera* men chose a gramophone parabolic horn[19], an enlarged caricature of the hearing aids of our times, as it could have been read, particularly by people in the audience who are personally or professionally concerned with deafness. For fun, which is the only the purpose of the reality show, the director equipped the deaf man with an antique and oversized microphone in which the passers-by should shout directions for him as he holds it stuck to his ear. The show makers seem to believe that the ridiculing of the deaf man is necessary for the entertainment of the spectators.

The age and size of the hearing device seems to have been meant to elicit the laughter of the passers-by and viewers. Because the presence of gramophones in Tunisia dates back to the late period of Ottoman reign and early colonial era (approximately the 1870s-1930s), the deaf man appears "old fashioned." He is holding an outdated, indeed antique object and approaching people without reservations, in the fashion of old men from past generations. The director's pairing of the deaf man with an obsolete hearing and talking device "antiquates" and devalues him. To a Tunisian's mind, a gramophone

piece would connote the expression equivalent to "antique." The "Tunisian Arabic" word is *antica*. The term has been adapted into our idiom from French and Italian, since colonial times. Tunisians use the expression "antica" to label something or someone as obsolete or old-fashioned more than to mean that an object or person is valuable. It is worth noting that this attitude toward old and rare artifacts has been changing over the past twenty years. Tunisian entrepreneurs and artists have learned from Western tourist's fascination with local costumes and ceremonies to appreciate more their own history and culture. Through their observation of and interaction with tourists in markets, Tunisians are better able to see the beauty and worth of local craft. Openness to foreign television channels and the transmission, among other shows, of European programs about Tunisia has been an additional factor in facilitating such a trend in favor of the local produce. Nowadays, Tunisians value their traditional objects more than they did in the past. They tend to consume, collect and display their local products.

In the *Camera* show, the purpose of using the antique parabolic horn was not to honor the artifact and its accomplishments; rather it was to make a spectacle of deafness and mock hearing aids. The director of this scene attempted to hold the attention of the participant passers-by and the spectators not only through the outdated and large instrument that the deaf man had to carry but also through his strange behavior and his shortcomings. He was supposed to fail to hear despite the numerous attempts of the passers-by to talk in his ear through the gramophone horn. It seems that the director was expecting this to make them laugh. Many persons tried their best to help the deaf man and did not laugh at him during the attempted interaction. They would laugh, eventually,

[19] Described as such in an Encyclopedia Britannica search result about gramophones : "... the earliest known attempt to amplify a sound wave was made by Athanasius Kircher [1601-1680]... [He] designed

when told by crew members that it was the camera show and that they had, without knowing it, participated in one of its episodes destined to entertain thousands of spectators across the country.

The director's planning of the interaction between the deaf man and the people in the street runs against the natural ways of communication between deaf and hearing persons in society. The director's ideas as to the motions of the actor playing deaf are ill-advised (he could have used the help of a disability and deafness consultant if such a function existed in his context). He instructed him to move the passers-by from his front to his side and persuade them through gestures to shout the directions in the gramophone horn that is stuck to his ear. This behavior is implausible in a deaf person. It would have been more sensible for the director to have him look his interlocutors in the face when they started to respond and read them as they mouthed words aloud to him. In reality, for the purpose of communication, deaf and hearing-impaired persons tend to combine eye contact, signing and/or speech, lip reading, pen and paper (an option for the literate) as well as the use of hearing aids when possible.

Ironically, the people were more willing to gesture directions than move aside and shout in the gramophone loudspeaker. As if sensing that the man's behavior was strange for a deaf person, they would spontaneously start to sign in their way. The public in the street seemed more ready for sign language than for the joke of the show. If there were anything funny in the episode, it would be the strained efforts of the deaf man to jerk them around to his side. They would repeatedly stiffen and return to their initial position facing him. The request to shout in the horn is what would occasionally make them laugh. It seemed to strike them as an unusual or inauthentic demand on the part of a deaf

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parabolic horn that could be used either as hearing aid or a voice amplifier.

person. They would dismiss it at first and act on the natural option that they think of, that of mouthing and gesturing directions. The deaf man insists, however, that only through the spectacular device could the passers-by communicate or rather *mis*communicate with him. From his forceful ways, it seems that the protagonist was obliged to conform to a script. He was acting to suit the pre-written scenario that the reality show director chose for the Tunisian street and willed to remain as fixed as possible. His work seems to come from his conception as to what the deaf should be like. His representation of deaf-hearing interaction betrays a disbelief in the possibility of communication between the two groups.

The result of the directors' imposed decisions is a scene of forced *dialogue de sourds* between the hearing people (the chance street participants) and the person they believed to be deaf. Such a belief could have been an opportunity for them to develop the experience of communicating with the deaf, using their spontaneous sign and body language. They were interrupted, the actor and the people of the street. They were not allowed the freedom to act to the best of their abilities. Role playing deaf involves learning about and acting on deafness behavior. Yet, the reality show authorities instructed the deaf man actor to act contrary to deafness ways. He could not improvise to approximate deaf behavior. By the same token, the voice of the Deaf was dismissed. Sign language was not allowed. The deaf man actor had to repeat the words the show director put in his mouth. Time and again, made to appear as if he were responsible for the miscommunication, he would frustrate his helpers by failing to hear through the gramophone horn or distorting their directions as he restated them to elicit further repetitions and corrections on their part. After risking the exasperation of the street

people by pretending not to hear several times in order to make them speak again in the horn, the deaf man actor delivers the popular line of closure, "Smile you are on *Hidden Camera*." From the multiple efforts invested in making the street participants speak in the fictitious sound amplifier, we get the sense that the hearing device was mainly a talking machine an oralist member of the society devised.

The *Camera* scene privileged oral communication over the natural sign language the deaf tend to develop. In a sense, this could be read as a reflection of the state of being deaf in Tunisia where formal sign language is insufficiently recognized. Unlike the case in the United States, where hearing people are encouraged to learn sign language in mainstream schools as a second language, sign language in Tunisia is taught and learned only in the schools that are set apart for the deaf. This makes it hard of access to the hearing and hinders dialogue between the deaf and hearing in Tunisian society. Sign language is not accessible to the deaf in public spaces within society and the media. There is only one brief weekly news program with signed interpretation for the deaf. Conferences, ceremonies and political speeches are not signed. The under-development or lack of the disability services that Tunisian deaf and hearing-impaired persons need constitutes a handicap that deprives them of full access to hearing-based and oriented spaces and situations. The hearing-impaired who assume a liminal position are particularly challenged in mainstream educational settings, especially if their hearing loss is severe. Service-wise, their category does not seem to be considered in Tunisia. That is unlike hearing-impaired students and teachers in the United States who have access to a range of tailored services and devices to assist them in their education and employment. Beside the listening ears and advice of counselors, special equipment is made available to

them free of charge. Such servicing consists of FM systems and real time captioning in the classroom, as well as TTY phones for office use. As for group discussion meetings and conferences, and as a perfectible solution to hearing-aid amplified background noise, technology has recently offered the hearing-impaired a unidirectional pyramid-shaped microphone to be put in the middle of round tables and moved in the direction of the speaker to relay his/her voice to the ear of the targeted listener. Thanks to these services, the hearing-impaired in the United States may enjoy access to all walks of life. That is not the case in Tunisia. The lack of adequate assistance limits the presence of the Tunisian hearing-impaired in certain fields of education and employment. In America, we see for an example of a better reality and representation of the deaf, a *Law and Order* type television adaptation of a courtroom where a deaf-mute woman, played by a deaf mute actress named Mary Matlin, fulfills the function of a lawyer by employing sign language. In the Arab-Islamic world, we do not see deaf or disabled persons cast in such roles. That is largely because they do not have access to such areas de facto in social reality. While waiting for better services, the literate Tunisian deaf and hearing-impaired continue to rely on their solitary reading, special ways of listening and the help of certain extraordinary family members and teachers.

Literacy can open up desirable options for the deaf. Written languages need to be made available to them not only as a solitary activity of reading books and newspapers but also as a social *con-text*, a text that allows the simultaneous sharing of information and entertainment with (*con*, as in Italian and Latin) other people. Unlike in the United States, the deaf in Tunisia do not have the possibility of reading caption texts while watching the same programs with other people or family members during the privileged

moments of potentially affective gatherings that give fuller meaning to their lives. Television programs and local films are not captioned (foreign movies tend to be subtitled, which may make the Tunisian deaf prefer them to the local product). The Tunisian deaf cannot gain information at the same pace as hearing people. Administrative buildings do not offer sufficient written signs and instructions. The deaf depend heavily on the hearing to help them pass through. It is worth noting that in such situations, the expressive orality of information desk agents is advantageous to the deaf. Such a category of Tunisian people are given to loud speaking, gesturing and instinctive signing, a style that tends to be replaced by hushed manners. While Tunisians in general laugh easily at deaf behavior (as observable through daily social interaction), their spontaneous communicative ways are helpful to the deaf.

It is noteworthy that in the *Camera* scene, the passers-by did not think of using a pen and a paper to help the deaf man see their directions. While this may reflect Tunisians' unwillingness to write in a society of increasing television literacy, the response of the street people in gesture and body language can be interpreted as a positive and promising social sign for the Tunisian deaf. The camera episode has succeeded in its function as a reality show in the sense that it reflected the spontaneous behavior and will of the people. The Tunisian street is ready for sign language. It is time to better assist the deaf, recognize, publicize, promote their language and encourage its learning by the hearing people. The *Camera* was dismissive of sign language and realistic hearing devices, the people tended to pass on the gramophone horn to use gestures and signing. The deaf man had to fail to hear repeatedly in order to get the passers-by to speak in the horn. They were made to speak in a macrophone that keeps them unheard. Their counter

gestures voice their election of sign language. The mental lapse of the participants to use a pen and a paper, their surprised and forgiving smiles at learning that they had been on the *Camera,* and the popularity of the show could be considered a measure of the extent to which television literacy competes with reading and writing in Tunisia. This is all the more reason to use the medium positively.

Television has a significant promise to teach. People watch and learn. Tunisian media would benefit society by choosing useful imports. Instead of misrepresenting and ridiculing persons with physical disabilities and differences on camera, in reality shows and soap operas, Tunisian television could create positive programs about them, less mixed documentaries and interviews, tele-novellas and films. We could learn from the European and American on-going achievements in the field of disability representation. We could as well import more Egyptian movies and telefilms dealing with disability issues.[20] Our media need to consult and solicit feedback from the public on various productions, including disability related programs that constitute a key to social reconciliation between different members of society. Tunisian television is emulating Western models of media-audience interaction. American television seems to surpass European television as to the investment in considering responses from the audience, following up on program subjects such as interviewees, checking in on them, providing transcripts of shows upon viewer request, captioning programs to integrate the deaf and hearing-impaired members of the audience and accomodating various requests from the public for re-visions of certain programs. Tunisian television would benefit from

[20] Examples of such works would be the Egyptian movie *al-Kitkat* featuring a blind man and tele-film (Egyptian as well) about a father's attempts to find a husband for his educated only deaf mute daughter. It is titled, in my translation *My Daughter and Life* and in Arabic *Ibnati wa al Ayyam* (in literal translation : *My Daughter and the Days*).

supplementing its openness to European media by the observation of a selection of additional American programs and channels. Continuing and supplementing the interactive trend in Tunisia promises an ear for my reading of the *Camera* scene and my spectator response.

The *Camera* scene could be read as dismissive not only of sign language but also of the realistic hearing devices used by people with various degrees of deafness. The parabolic gramophone appeared grotesque in its deployment as an oversized hearing aid. It was designed by the show producer as a sound amplifier for deaf ears in order to solicit, from the spontaneous participants and spectators, mixed sensations of wonderment, mocking and pitying. The show maker seeks such an effect through literally making fun (out) of the believed-to-be-deaf man. While granting that it was all humorous make-believe, it is worth noting that the choices made by the show director to the purpose of accomplishing his desired effects betray unfamiliarity with and insensitivity towards deaf persons. It is to be admitted that the deaf man actor appeared to express needs that are true of the deaf in reality. The hearing-impaired do need sound amplifiers in many situations, hearing aids and *micro*phones for contexts of education, employment and social gatherings. The deaf actor's behavior was, however, stereotypically exaggerated. The *Camera* act sought the belief of the street public, albeit for a few moments, that a deaf person could be as strange in appearance, behavior and equipment as it represented the deaf to be. The attempts of the passers-by to help the man come from their belief for the moment that he was deaf. During the interaction, they were induced to experience a set of mixed emotions and thoughts that would be unfair to the deaf, such as that a deaf person could be as grotesque and needing of estranging equipment. The most alienating

element in his aspect was the gramophone horn, the hearing device which the participants tried repeatedly to bypass.

To the mind of the director, the idea of using the gramophone piece as a hearing device apparently stems from the information about its past use as such and from the knowledge that hearing-impaired persons needed and used hearing aids, smaller, ear-sized and more efficient in the days of the *Camera* episode. The director's need to caricature the hearing device could be read as a symptom of a problem with hearing aids on his part. It could be said that the street people were reacting to the size and age of the instrument. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that they tended to think the sound amplifier unnecessary. They would try to make the deaf man hear by various means before moving unwillingly to use the hearing device. The reluctance to deal with the hearing device reflects a general lack of consideration for the need of sound amplifying devices when it comes to the deaf. That could be observable in the fact that pay and work place phones do not offer volume control for the hearing-impaired. Educational institutions do not take the initiative to propose services and equipment such as microphones to enable hearing-impaired students to follow lectures in large classrooms. Tunisians tend to look hearing aid users in the ear. They give them a "now you know I know" look. The devices are not as easily accepted as visual correctives. Visual impairments and correctives seem to be the most tolerated compared to other disabilities. That could be partly explained by the fact that they outnumber other disabilities. This process is observable in various cultures. For instance, the American society of the past, of the times of "the Little House on the Prairie," used to make fun of eye-glass users (the case of Mary in the television series). Subsequently, people have worn glasses openly for a long time, thus obliging society to

adapt to them. One possible solution to Tunsians' mixed stance on the wearing of the listening device would be to *show* and present hearing aids. They could be enlarged by the camera to be seen such as on European and American hearing aid commercials. Television can create positive change in public attitudes toward hearing aids through programming informative texts about them. That would be preferable to the work the "Camera Cachée" does in making fun of the deaf man, literally speaking. The able/ableist, normal-hearing show director and producer exploited deafness by caricaturing and ridiculing deaf behavior in order to make profit out of entertaining the spectators at the expense of the deaf.

Despite the critical remarks the Tunisian "candid camera" episode invites, its portrayal of the deaf man remains overall negative and does not excuse the mocking laughter it solicits. An example of a space in the scene where the work could be read as a serviceable statement on behalf of the deaf, can be found in the regional dimension to the deaf man's character. The representation of his antiquated and inadequate equipment provokes thought as to the conditions of the deaf and disabled in rural areas. They have more difficult access to services, schools and assistive devices than capital city inhabitants and migrants tend to experience. Accordingly, we can imagine the deaf man as a migrant bird in quest of better services from and communications with his co-nationals. Shortcomings in city services risk to turn him into an immigrant seeking on the other side of the world what he cannot find at home. The scene could be read as a warning sign against losing the Tunisian deaf and disabled. It is worth suggesting that the scene could be open to different readings. Nonetheless, the overall note is one of mixed messages, more negative than positive. It reflects the mixed treatment of disability in the

larger society. The *Camera* episode provokes thinking about other mixed treatments of physical differences in Arabic language, Arab media and society.

Linguistic references to and idiomatic expressions about disabilities can be telling about the perceptions of impairments and the positions of the disabled in a given society and culture. The Egyptians, for example, have a saying which translates as "like the deaf man at the wedding" from the Arabic "zay el atrache fi ezzafa." It is used in mockery and/or pity when a person is unaware and uninformed about what is going on around him or her, and cannot benefit from what is taking place. The statement could be read from a disability perspective as a measure of the alienation and exclusion of the deaf from social life and ceremonies. There exists in the Tunisian dialect for instance, an expression to describe deafness that could be uninformed and offending. It is equivalent to the English language expression "stone deaf." In Tunisian Arabic it reads "atrach samma." The words make the deaf like a stone, totally incapable of hearing, comprehending or responding (the *Camera* scene probably comes from and enacts the saying as it has tried to show the deaf man almost completely failing to hear). Another idiomatic Tunisian phrase attempts to render the same absolute measure of deafness. It says "so deaf, [he/she] cannot hear the thunder." Such statements are insensitive because the deaf often feel vibrations. In addition, stones have ears. It would be un-Islamic to believe stones completely inanimate. According to *al-Quran* and to paraphrase a verse of the Book, some stone opens up and yields water out of feeling for human beings and in response to God's merciful commands.

Linguistic representations of disabilities can also be informative about other aspects of society such as family relations and gender issues. One more example from

Egypt would be the humorous proverbial saying "el hama ama," meaning "the mother in law is blindness." Other forms of speaking to and about the disabled in Arab societies bear streaks of humor that mix sympathy and mockery. An example could be a saying Tunisians evoke to joke about singing that they deem or teasingly pretend to find of poor quality. They say "lucky you deaf man," in transliterated Tunisian Arabic "saadik ya latrech." That is usually said to and among hearing persons meaning "if I or there were a deaf person, that would have been lucky." The saying has the anecdotal implication that the disadvantage of disability can be interpreted as something other than a sinister and unspeakable condition. On certain occasions, it can be seen an advantage or a blessing in disguise. The fact that such occasions tend to be humorous does not detract from the interactive and integrative dimension of the statement. It comes from a scene that we can imagine, that of someone speaking to a deaf man and congratulating him for being spared the imperfect performance. The saying could be read as a measure of the acceptance and integration of disabled individuals. Mentioning their disabilities to their faces and in jest (as the second person form of address suggests) indicates that they were spoken to and teased about everything including their conditions[21] and that laughter was used an alternative indigenous and dialectal medicine.

With respect to classical Arabic and medieval Arab societies, compilations of sayings and anecdotes about the blind have been put together by at least two Arab writers: al Harawi and al Safadi. The latter's work, the most comprehensive one, has been re-introduced in the writing of two Arab persons of the twentieth century, Ahmad Zaki and Fedwa Malti-Douglas. In one of her essays, the latter reflects on proverbs about the

[21] An example of this kind of social relationship can be found in the Egyptian film *al-Kitkat*, the subject of a next chapter in this work.

blind. Exploring the representations of disabilities in modern Arabic language and dialects warrants a research project in its own right. Nonetheless, the subject and purpose of this chapter, the presentation of a sample of local disability treatments and the critique of certain imports, call for a linguistic note. I will highlight select ways of "naming" disabilities because they are non-pejorative or less offending than others. Such merciful terms are on the way to extinction. They have been replaced in a major part by the French term "handicapé." Certain indigenous old ways of referring to disabilities need to be saved and revived. The disabled may benefit emotionally and socially from such a revival.

Tunisians, particularly those of older generations, have a special way of speaking about the disabled. The expressions they use are seldom heard nowadays. The "old-fashioned" Tunisian way consists of predating equivalents to the recent American term "a person *with a disability*." Tunisians born in the 1920s and before would avoid saying "deaf," "blind" or "lame." Instead, they would refer to a disabled person respectively as being "with/by his/her ears," "with/by his/her eyes." When a person has a disability affecting one eye, they would say a person "with/by his/her little eye" (they would use a diminutive similar to the Italian/latin "ino/a" or "etto/a" such as used for the light shade of the color Mocha "Mochaccino" and to designate a small book, "libretto" versus libro) or "with/by his/her little leg" if it is one leg or foot. In modern times, such terms have been replaced by a translation of or a switch to the French "handicapé." The American disability rights movement has been working toward the gradual erasure of the term and its replacement by "a person *with a disability*." Ironically, Tunisian society seems to have made a move from predated to belated in the field of naming disabilities. In a context of

westernizing efforts, certain native and positive ways of saying, knowing and naming have become obsolete in the eyes of a large number of Tunisian sons and daughters. The nearly forgotten ways seem to have been a compassionate, endearing and polite way of speaking about the disabled.

In Tunisia, compassion for the disabled seem to endure, in different modern forms. We hear Tunisian songs about them.[22] While this is a positive treatment, we can read mixed messages between the notes. It may be useful to try to draw lines in order to discourage the negative elements while promoting positive tendencies.

Two Tunisian young male singers who emerged in the late 1980s, have contributed two songs about disability to the collection of televised songs of the 1990s. The first song was about a Tunisian girl who was born armless. She managed to succeed in her schooling by using her toes to write. The song was staged video clip-fashion with scenes of the girl in her family home doing her homework. The second song, which appeared a few years ago, is to be heard in a clip also. The singer himself acts and sings in it. It is set in a beach. It pictures a courtship scene and tells the story of an unusual romantic prospect. A girl is quietly sitting by herself building a sand castle. A young man takes a look at her work and compliments her. She smiles thankfully. Their encounters are repeated and the young man tries to initiate conversation with her. She answers with her eyes and does not speak. She appears shy. After more failed attempts on the man's

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[22] It is worth noting that "singing about disability" is not unique to Tunisia. In the American film "Range of Motion," an Afro-American man sings :

I got one leg
and I'm gonna roll over you
I got the wheelchair blues
gonna roll over you

The man is apparently a war veteran. I do not know whether the song was made for the film or if it is a known blues song. Nevertheless, the subject of "disability songs" and perhaps "disability poetry" warrant research and writing across cultures.

part to engage her in talk, he becomes angry and shakes her up by the arm. At that point, she helplessly signs that she cannot hear or speak by pointing her fingers to her ears and mouth. The song ends with a note of acceptance, reconciliation and companionship.

Reading the songs entails screening their sound and picture texts for positive and negative implications. The title of the first song says to the armless girl "bless your feet." Its singer is known for a special genre of music and subject matter that is qualified as "engaged" songs, *aghani multazima* in Arabic. His songs tend to be intellectual, patriotic and spiritual. He composed his tribute to the girl in solemn and graceful notes. The serious character of the singer and his work may gain less popularity for the song than would have been the case if it had been authored and composed differently. On the other hand, that makes it less likely for the song to be trivialized, for instance by being sung for its rhythm without conscious appreciation of its subject. Its serious tone makes it less susceptible to rote memorization than lightly composed songs.

The song could be reproached for displaying the protagonist as an "armless wonder."[23] Nevertheless, its positive suggestiveness outweighs the lapses it may be suspected of. It could be argued that the protagonist's use of her feet should not be considered a wonder for display. In fact, she is presented not in a demeaning and inquisitive show but in a song that tries to honor her education and special way of writing. Equal to all humankind, persons with her disability are endowed by God with a creative instinct for survival. In fact, many persons in her condition develop such a compensatory function through a combination of nature and nurture. With the care and support of family, individuals with disabilities learn to use the bodily resources they have

[23] Rosemarie Garland Thomson's book titled *Freakery : Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* disapproves of the display of "armless wonders" in freak shows (5, 6).

to counter their impairments. By showing the girl in her domestic environment, the song highlights the role played by the family home in her survival and accomplishment. The family home scene is informative of the combination of nature and culture that may often work to the advantage of disabled individuals in Arab culture. The family home is a highly cherished pillar in Arab societies. Rather than in institutions, the Arab disabled generally get the care, protection and educational help they need from family members. Watts confirms this fact when she states that "Traditionally, the [Morrocan-North African] extended family has been the source of support and whatever training was provided its disabled members" (53).

In the past, extended families used to be more common than nowadays, especially in towns and villages versus cities. Regarding this cultural feature, Thelma Lois Watt, in her work on the disabled in Morocco, quotes Shabbas about the fact that "the mentally ill and physically handicapped along with the chronically ill ... have usually been cared for by more fortunate family members since the extended family is a valued and extended source of support in such cases." She also cites Geertz and Rosen in pointing out that "as the extended family has begun to weaken, especially in the increasingly urban environment, the more vulnerable members of society have had less support" (17). Nevertheless, immediate relations within an Arab-Tunisian nuclear family continue to assume the major part in the care for any disabled members it may include. The number of homeless disabled women and men, however, is increasing to an alarming degree in the streets of Tunis, such as *Charles de Gaulle* Street. This problem needs to be written about, by all means. The stories of the homeless disabled need to be researched and voiced. The public needs to be informed and educated about the difficulties of persons

with disabilities. The disabled deserve to be even better helped by television and newspapers entering their family homes to continue their extraordinary efforts to educate and save themselves, for their salvation lies in learning, writing and teaching.

If the "bless your feet" song was inspired by the girl's extraordinary accomplishment and appearance, the motives behind the song clip about the deaf mute girl call for questions. It seems that the most extraordinary aspect of the scene consists in the able-disabled social encounter itself. Tunisian society does not accept deaf persons easily. As the song clip represents, they tend to be misunderstood. They also experience difficulties communicating with hearing people. Sign language is insufficiently accessible in mainstream Tunisian society. Therefore, romantic relationships between deaf and hearing persons are unlikely to develop. The singer/actor seems to represent a Tunisian man's feeling of being extraordinarily generous when he intimates that he is willing to continue to "look down" (as in the clip) on the work of a deaf mute girl. The main motive of the singer in performing the song seems to be that of celebrating the sympathy he felt in himself toward a person with a disability.

For that reason, the scene could be read in different ways. The singer appears both condescending and sympathetic toward the deaf mute woman. The scene seems to be more about the hearing-speaking-singing man than the object of his curiosity and affection. It is curious why he felt the need to have a deaf mute woman in a song of himself. His song clip is self-centered. It is as if the woman had to be deaf mute for the male character to act and sing. The scene seems to be mainly about the ego of the hearing-speaking character. With the girl repeatedly unable to answer him in speech, he does not seem to even begin to guess her condition (the extraordinariness of her behavior

to him could be a measure of how rare the encounters between deaf and hearing are). He does not assume an understanding attitude. He takes her silence personally. His reaction is to question her in a nearly violent manner, by shaking her up. At that point, she tells him that she is deaf-mute.

It can be inferred from the young woman's belated confession to her disability that she may have hesitated to tell him earlier and wished to let him believe her hearing. She may also have been torn between a desire to say and a fear to tell, in anticipation of a negative reaction. The song offers a message of hope in that once told by the girl about her disability, the man seems accepting. It may be that he needed her to tell him from the start. By being hesitant to communicate about their disabilities, out of shame and fear of societal rejection, the deaf contribute to the public lack of information about their signs and needs. By breaking the silence about their experiences, developing an educational art and allowing their work to be seen, they would be able to open up a space for understanding and affection between deaf and hearing. The song ends on a note of friendship between the protagonist and the sand-drawing deaf mute girl. He continues to sing. He could have concluded the clip by a scene of the pair singing together. The deaf mute can sing.

It is to be doubted that the woman acting in the song clip is deaf mute in reality. The part has probably been performed by a hearing and speaking person. The audience does not know for sure because there was no writing on the screen or follow-up about the identity of the acting woman. In a context of rising disability awareness such as in the United States, information as to whether the woman is deaf or hearing would not have been omitted. On television screen and on-line written information about the work of the

well-known American actress Mary Matlin often states that she is deaf mute in reality. In case a hearing actress were cast in a deaf person or character's place, objections would have been voiced in America. If the Tunisian singer had not thought of employing a really deaf woman, that could be due to hearing persons' difficulties to imagine and search for a deaf individual they conceive capable of singing, dancing and acting. There is hope in Tunisia for change regarding the access of the deaf to performative arts. It is worth pointing out that a fledgling Tunisian acting and dancing theatrical initiative for the deaf promises to familiarize the public with the concept of the deaf-mute's ability to enjoy music and communicate through song act. In 1999, a famous film actor and man of theater named *Mohamed Idris* joined efforts with the "Association for the Voice of the Tunisian Deaf" (*l'Association de la Voix du Sourd Tunisien*) to start directing stage performances by and for the deaf.

The disabled, in their various categories, need the attention and assistance of the able to help them improve their situations. The role of the media, persons of letters and arts is significant. The potential of the song about the deaf-mute girl to raise public awareness about situations of persons with similar conditions has not been capitalized on by the media. Tunisian media seems to reserve discriminatory treatment for different disabilities based on extraordinary individual achievements. It is worth noting that while a number of interviews preceded and followed the armless girl song, one of them being about another woman with a similar condition, no reports on persons with similar conditions and their situations followed the deaf mute girl song. No attempts were made

to reach out to a larger group of deaf and disabled or inform the audience about their difficulties.[24]

The song is about a deaf mute girl, yet deaf viewers do not seem to be considered members of the hearing and orally speaking audience nor a target audience. The song was not captioned or subtitled. That is despite the fact that subtitling is not totally foreign to Tunisian television. A musical program for Tunisian youth often captions the English words of American popular song hits to help its audience learn them and their language. Occasionally, Tunisian television shows films that are subtitled in French or Arabic. New popular Arabic language song clips from the Middle East often come with the lyrics captioned. No objection was heard to the lack of captions and exclusion of the deaf from the deaf-mute song, neither from persons with similar conditions nor people interacting with the deaf. The irony has never been pointed out in any media critique. If such a lapse had occurred in the United States, it would not have gone unnoticed by American Deaf critics and activists.

[24] An exception would be the (mixed but welcome) reportage on the aforementioned Tunisian village where the majority of the population were deaf-mute. This work was done a long time before the song came into being.

The Disabled Native: *Ressource Humaine* for the French

A Literary Study of Rachid Mimouni's *Tombéza*

The Algerian Rachid Mimouni was an economist as well as a writer. His acute sensitivity combined with his knowledge of his nation's socio-economic and historical issues have made his writing inclusive of every social category that he witnessed in his country, even the disabled, "handicapped" women in particular. By documenting their plights and representing their predicaments, he extends a helping hand to the disabled men and women whom his fellow citizens and writers tend to forget. Rare as that is in North African literature, he allows individuals with physical disabilities and differences to lead his narratives (worth granting that the blind may be an exception, since the presence of visually disabled characters in North/African literature has traditionally been recurrent). Through Mimouni's work, an entity of characters with societally-engineered and culturally-gendered disabilities develops in North African literature. A recognition of similar cases throughout various texts in our culture, in Tahar Ben Jelloun's work for instance, warrants a field of Disability Studies of our own.

In Mimouni's novel *Tombéza*, the leading character is a man with multiple disabilities.[25] The author uses his portrayal of the title character Tombéza to narrate the positions of the Algerian disabled and connect their disabilities with complex cultural causes. By the same token, he reveals the role of North African gender issues in shaping the experiences of disabled men and women during the Post/Colonial periods of Algerian society. The male dominated society that Mimouni describes is founded, particularly in

the context where Tombéza was born, on a gendered concept of honor and the separation between the sexes. Minimized contact with females limits men's ability to understand and feel for women. It alienates fathers from daughters and makes patriarchs treat their female offspring with fear, suspicion and violence. A patriarch looks down upon female progeny, underestimates women's abilities and associates having daughters with risking a loss of honor. Tombéza is born into a society that equates femaleness with disability. In North African patriarchal cultures, women are considered inferior in ability.[26] At the same time, they are required to be good-looking and strong enough to fulfill their field or house-work and childbearing duties, especially the bearing of sons. When a woman has an apparent illness or a disability (one that the community knows of, whether it is a visible or an invisible disability), society translates the profile of the woman into evidence that makes her supposed shortcomings more actual and concrete. This could explain the abuse that North African disabled people and especially women suffer from their position within a patriarchal economy of relations.

Mimouni documents the mistreatment of disabled women in relatively different spaces and times of Algerian society. He covers a rural context as well as an urban one and moves from house to hospital. Through the eyes of his protagonist, he gives us a glimpse into the predicament of disabled women. Among them is a minor female character brought to the hospital and abandoned there by her family when she became "impotente" (196). She later died during her rape by the hospital's custodial worker. The young woman's abandonment by her family in a culture where kinship ties are supposed

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[25] Rachid Mimouni, *Tombéza* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1984).

[26] The reference is in particular to the 1930s-1950s in North Africa, that is the period before independence in the various countries of the Maghreb. Women's situations have changed to different degrees in the

to be strong testifies to the devaluation that the female body undergoes within her society upon loss of health. The sense of the woman's worthlessness is contagious from family to more distant community members. The knowledge of such a gendered familial and societal system of values is what gives the hospital worker the power and boldness to violate the helpless woman in the expectation of impunity. In fact, it is family and society's failure to protect and serve the woman that is the most "handicapping" factor of all in her condition. Her guardians' abandonment of her to the impersonal hospital institution disables her more than her physical impairments do by denying her protection and dignity, and placing her in a defenseless position. As he suggests this reading, Mimouni engages in a challenge of his society's definitions and treatments of disability.

In the case of Tombéza and his mother, Mimouni pursues more fully, deeply and explicitly his revision of societal and medical diagnoses and treatments of disability. His narrative demonstrates that the medical term "acquired disability" needs to be supplemented to include the various handicaps that are caused by society's material and moral violence. Mimouni's voicing of women's concerns goes beyond the work of noting the singular predicament of being a female with a disability in North African society to that of questioning the gender boundaries that his culture writes over the body of his disabled protagonist. On Tombéza's body, we can read the arbitrary workings of artificial gender lines as his community's concept of his illegitimately-conceived disabled identity feminizes his male state of being.

The "ill-born" title protagonist and his mother are salient examples of culturally generated and gendered disabilities. In fact, Tombéza is disabled by his society's

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various countries, yet remain limited in reality and mentality by restrictive legacies.

conception of gender. In his society, the female sex is considered a disability. Such a belief is the most handicapping element in Tombéza's condition. His mother is punished for being a woman, as we shall see. Society's disabling and killing of his mother continues beyond her death, over Tombéza's body, through rejection and mistreatment. Tombéza's mother was punished by her father for being born female and getting raped. Her accident was viewed by the patriarch as dishonoring and shameful. He beat his fifteen year old daughter until she became disabled and died. The honor-related disabling of Tombéza's mother echoes deadly real-life practices that are still taking place in other patriarchal societies such as Jordan and Bangladesh. The following passage describes father's reaction when he found out about the rape of his daughter:

> Sans mot dire, l'homme alla décrocher sa canne. . . . Ce bagarreur émérite des combats de çofs maniait en expert son bâton d'olivier à bout renflé, visant la tête, les articulations des membres, bien au fait des endroits sensibles du corps, où la douleur irradie jusqu'au cerveau, ou les coups laissent des séquelles indélébiles. [Çofs were guilds, unions of men carrying on the same profession or trade in the Kabylie region]. La main tendue de la fille dans une muette et terrible supplication n'eut pour effet que de décupler la rage de l'homme, la violence et le rythme de ses gestes. . . . La fille ne put jamais se remettre de ce phénoménal tabassage. Défigurée à jamais. . . . Elle en sortit avec le regard fixe et l'esprit absent. Elle ne comprenait plus ce qu'on lui disait, ne savait plus parler . . . Toute la famille se mit à attendre sa mort (30-31).

The family understood that once and for all reduced to a disabled female, the girl would have no future life. The society started to wish for the disabled girl's death long before

her unwed pregnancy was discovered. The pregnancy exacerbated her state of being. She died giving life to her child. The title protagonist, the fruit of the rape and punishment of his mother, is "disabled." He describes his own "disabilities" for us: "Beau spectacle, en effet, que mon apparition offrait ! Noiraud, le visage déformé par une contraction musculaire qui me fermait aux trois quarts l'oeil gauche. . . rachitique et voûté, et de surcroît affecté d'une jambe un peu plus courte que l'autre" (33). His community sees him as "the fruit of illegitimacy" (34).

Tombéza's society is incapable of admitting the obvious causes of his disabilities. The culturally determined patriarchal mental habits of moralistic connections lead to the reading of the protagonist's different features not as marks of the violence that his mother suffered, but as signs of divine punishment for the sin of the mother. The indigenous society of the protagonist interprets his physical image in terms of his illegitimate birth. Tombéza explains:

> J'ai grandi sous la risée des enfants du douar. . . [Leurs] mères en profitaient pour faire un peu de morale à leurs rejetons.
>
> - Regardez, disaient-elles, le fruit de la débauche et de la fornication ! (33).

Tombéza mockingly contests society's rationalizing of his disabilities:

> Fruit de l'illégitimité ... ! Allons donc, laissez-moi rire ! Je rirai des siècles entiers. Plutôt le résultat de la fantastique rossée qui laissa ma mère idiote, sans compter ce qu'elle a connu de rudoiements, de coups, de bousculades au cours de sa grossesse, sans compter les infâmes breuvages qu'elle fut forcée

> d'ingurgiter, sans compter le manque de soin, la saleté ..., la faim, les maladies qui furent mon lot quotidien.
>
> La fornication ! Hypocrite société ! Comme si je ne savais pas ce que cachent tes apparences de vertu, tes pudibonderies (34).

Tombéza redefines his disability as culturally acquired in contrast to the way his society conceives it. He also, accuses the deplorable sanitary conditions prevailing within his country's economy of scarcity and the traditional healing malpractices determined by his community's superstitious mentality, which had a deadly impact on his mother.

Society's connection between Tombéza's illegitimate birth and his appearance, is a dynamic space for the social construction of gender. His ill treatment was an attempt at obliterating the memory of his mother from the family narrative. Tombéza recalls the family's reaction to her death during childbirth and their wishfulness for his own: "la mort de la fille transforma le scandale en malheur et celles qui la montraient du doigt se mirent à la plaindre. La famille se résigna à accepter mon existence, reportant sur moi la hargne qui avait accablé la défunte, dans le secret espoir de me voir bientôt la rejoindre" (34). Despite his male state of being, Tombéza was considered to be an extension of his mother's femaleness in the family's guilty conscience.

In a society that stridently and excessively celebrates the birth of sons and where additional male names have been a source of pride and where garments of boys and men are shown off boastfully on families' clothes lines, Tombéza's family received his birth as if it were that of an unwanted female. He reflects on his community's reaction to his coming into the world as determined by their refusal to forgive the story and sin of his mother: "ma naissance ne fut l'object d'aucune de ces réjouissances traditionnelles qui

célébraient la venue d'un enfant mâle dans la famille" (29). In a society that encourages self-sacrifice to nourish children, the protagonist suffered from "gendered malnutrition"[27] and was deliberately forgotten during food distribution. Because of his mother's mistake in getting raped, of which his appearance was a constant reminder to family members, his grandfather brought him no food. Tombéza recalls that, by 1940, the war complicated the prevailing situation of poverty and famine. Rationing was introduced and families were given food tickets based on the number of children in their care. Tombéza notes: "Même en ce temps de disette où les listes d'enfants permettaient d'obtenir les précieux tickets de farine, de sucre, de café, Messaoud refusait obstinément d'ajouter un nom sur le document familial"(127). The protagonist's grandfather would not include the nameless boy in the list. It is worth noting that Tombéza mentions his grandfather by his first name, to indicate his bitterness and contempt for Messaoud's cruel failure to be a grandfather to him. He forgot to count him for the purchase of a new piece of clothing on religious holiday occasions: "Messaoud refusait de poser son regard sur moi, ne m'évoquait jamais dans ses propos, m'oubliait quand il faisait le compte du nombre de gandouras [clothing] à acheter pour le jour de l'Aïd [name for the Islamic holidays to celebrate the end of Ramadhan, the fasting month, or to reenact Abraham's sacrifice story] (126). Tombéza 's community distributes gender in the name of paternal origin or the no-name of its lack. It has the power to unman the males at will. Society reads Tombéza's physical peculiarities as reminders of the fact that he was not a son legitimately conceived by a known father. Therefore, his community denies him the status of a male child. His manhood is negated.

[27] Anne McClintock. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 14

Society's disablement of Tombéza's gender identity through a willfully ambiguous treatment of his male state of being can be read as an imaginative document of the fact that men with disabilities tend to be feminized in North African culture.[28] Tombéza's status as a son is dismissed despite the fact that North African/Arab/Muslim societies tend to be more forgiving and accomodating when physical peculiarities are born by a male.[29] His manhood is ignored because he remains heavily associated with his mother's trespass in the family memory. The ill-born young man was unmanned and unnamed. The grandfather conceived such a treatment toward his daughter's child out of a set of customary gender manoeuvres that were available for him to manipulate. That was a time in the culture when male and female family members were discouraged from naming and looking each other in the eye, so that even husbands and wives used to avoid saying each others' names and would instead refer to each other by "him" and "her." Men also used to dismiss the presence of women by not looking at them. Messaoud, the protagonist's grandfather, drawing on a set of social rules that was meant to govern men's treatment of females - and not that of family members toward the lesser able and/or orphan boys in any particular sense - refused to look at his ill-born grandson and, by the same token, reduced him to a state of femaleness.

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[28] In North African societies, women tend to take more liberties (with dress, speech and manner) in the presence of the deaf mute young man, and the one-armed or limping boys of the neitghborhood as if they were lesser men for their disabilities.

[29] A measure of society's relatively greater tolerance of men with disabilities versus women with similar conditions is the marriageability of disabled males. Usually, society finds wives for disabled men and, sometimes, the prospective wives themselves find them to marry (such as in the case of Zein, the mentally disabled character in Tayeb Salih's Arab cultural work of fiction, *The Wedding of Zein*). The disabled man's bride tends to be, on recurrent occasions in literature, the beauty of the village as we see in the story of Tombéza himself. It is worth noting, however, that the manhood that is forcibly granted Tombéza in marriage is, in another gesture taken away from him as a bogus medico-societal narrative sterilizes him and makes him unable/disabled to father, less of a man once again (p. 151). This could be read, also, as a fictional representation of the forced sterilization that society has variously subjected disable people to.

Messaoud's mistreatment of his grandson as a woman betrays certain religionist connections. The rituals of not looking that he subjects the orphan boy to could be read as an extreme distortion and misapplication on his part of the Islamic recommendation that men avoid prolonged eye contact with women or that they lower their eyes when they interact with them. Messaoud's visual performance vis-à-vis Tombéza is initially evocative of and seems to come from the Islamic regulation of the faculties of looking and seeing that lies at the heart of the Islamic code of modesty. While Messaoud's visual treatment of his grandson is strikingly similar to the way men in his culture avoid looking at women out of (dis)respect for the other sex (it is worth granting that some Algerian/Arab/Muslim men do not look at female interlocutors out of genuine respect and modesty, and in a quality listening mode), the motive and impact of his actions toward the orphaned young man are a far cry from any religious principle he might claim. He fits in the profile of a religionist also in his hypocritical selections of what to remember and apply of religious rules versus what he chooses to forget in memory and practice. He is the product and accomplice of the local religious educational system. Both the grandfather and the Quranic school master, as we shall see, forget that it is the obligation of Muslim kinsmen to respect, support and protect the lesser-able and the orphan.

The local patriarchal and educational institutions join forces in excluding Tombéza from their society. The traditional Quran teacher violently denies the "bastard child" admission to the village's religious school. The rule of paternal origin is upheld by the representative of the disciplinary establishment. The traditional master values the body in moralistic terms of patriarchal lineage. Tombéza accounts for his community's

hatred of him as he recounts his experience of exclusion from the Quranic school. The master slaps him on the cheek:

> Son bâton s'abat sur ma joue. . . . toute une population qui découvre la cause de tous ses maux, ce qui faisait que la pluie ne tombait pas, que sévissaient les épidemies, que mouraient les bêtes, que les seins des femmes ne contenaient plus de lait, qu'émigraient les hommes vers d'autres regions. . . que pleuvaient sur eux les amendes de toutes sortes, que régulièrement s'alourdissait l'impôt. . . . (44).

Tombéza is used by his society as a scapegoat to explain the colony's natural, political and economic problems in terms of his ill birth from a fallen woman.

It is characteristic of members of traditional male-dominated and pseudo Islamic countries to hold "woman" responsible for all changes in their world order and to take their feelings of humiliation, frustration and powerlessness out on female relatives. The terms in which Mimouni describes the beating that Messaoud, the grandfather, administers to his daughter for having allowed his honor to be violated, reveal a connection between the wordless violence that he aims at the young woman and his loss of control over his world as he has known it. Tombéza characterizes Messaoud as a locally renowned fighter in the following account of the incident that resulted in the disabling and death of his mother, as well as his own disabilities: "sans mot dire, l'homme alla décrocher sa canne. . . . *Ce bagarreur émérite des combats de çofs maniait en expert son bâton d'olivier à bout renflé*, visant la tête, les articulations des membres. . . . "(30, Emphasis mine). The aggression voices the rage, humiliation and despair of a patriarch who finds himself forced to become a mere spectator to radical

changes taking place around him at the hands of foreign occupiers and over which he is unable to exert control. He is obliged to make a rapid, difficult and painful transition from a world of stick fighting against known enemies in familiar trades to that of modern warfare against alien invaders in which modern sophisticated and massive weaponry has the dominant say as to who wins and who loses in a global historical combat. The patriarch holds on to his olive tree stick, a symbol of a power that is dependent on the continual and autonomous development of a natural economy; that is itself threatened by drought, human-caused uprooting (to construct roads or buildings) and dispossession (by governments). He uses it as an instrument to delude himself into fantasies of control over his reality. Finding himself still able to control only a few domains in his small fading world, most of all his womenfolk, he takes out his frustrations on the young woman. The grandfather is a product of a society that was founded on the concept of honor and believed that everything started with "woman" and that it was a woman's responsibility to uphold the honor of the tribe, the family and the nation and to guard the homeland against the penetration of sin and corruption. In such a frame of mind, it came naturally to Messaoud to take it out on one of the most vulnerable females in his household. He was punishing her for daring to provoke his sense of shame and dishonor him among his tribesmen. Her crime was that of being a victim of an accident that transformed her from a girl to a woman without a ceremony to allow him to know and control her transfer to the dominance of another man with whose person and family history he was acquainted.

The social and economic problems that Tombéza and the mother within him are punished for are complicated by foreign presence in Algeria. The pre-existing conditions of poverty and substandard health care are exacerbated by Western presence and warfare.

Tombéza testifies about the impact of World War II on Algerian society when he states that: "à partir de 1940, avec l'irruption de la guerre, la misère devint insupportable" (126). There were not only French settlers in Algeria, but Italians and American soldiers, also. They, particularly the French and Americans, altered the local scene and introduced irreversible changes in the indigenous culture, which fashioned a long-term relation of dependency. The French replaced wheat fields by vineyards (102). In the narrative, Americans introduce alcohol to Algerian society in the context of a commercial exchange that would involve the protagonist as well as other natives (73). Tombéza reflects on his society's dependent need for Western imports of a certain aesthetic and practical standard: "tous ces médicaments si efficaces importés en totalité, tous ces appareils compliqués qui nous viennent de l'étranger, que se passerait-il si brusquement nous en étions privés?" (78). The Americans play a major role in setting the norm on various fronts. Tombéza sees and labels the Frenchmen's "friends" (68) as "les nouveaux conquérants" (65). The Americans are described in the narrative as: "grands soldats blonds aux joues roses" (77). Speaking about modern machines, the protagonist comments: "aujourd'hui encore, les survivants continuent de comparer les monstres modernes aux camions américains, les jets les plus rapides aux antiques quadrimoteurs, et jamais aucun froment au monde ne surpassera la qualité américaine" (77).

This sense of American superiority on the part of Tombéza and his co-nationals is applicable to conceptions of physical norms. It is curious that Tombéza begins his description of his infirmities with his color "noiraud" (33). This is telling not only of the fact that having a dark color complicates the state of being a disabled individual in North Africa, but also of the fact that imported beauty standards have exacerbated a pre-existing

preference for white skin in the region. What if Tombéza's skin were white? What if he were, albeit illegitimate, born healthy and looked like a "normal" French child? His predicament might have been easier, at home with his grandfather and in the world with Uncle Sam.

The colonizers brought with them a foreign system of education and employment, which they intended to use as a new means of waging war against the natives. The drive to exclusion is a distinguishing mark of the French system of education. French schools made it easy to fail repeatedly. Provoked poor performance and age limits would be used as a pretext for throwing pupils out. The French educational system is similar to the Islamist system in its enforcement of discipline and punishment. It also drew lines between literary and scientific study. In both systems, education consisted of dogmatic dictation and rote memorization, which did not encourage independent performance or lead to genuine development among the subjects. Both systems represent violent and extreme versions of the corresponding cultures. The following passage connects the dominant system of education to the rising problem of unemployment among the youth of the country: "les dizaines d'adolescents éjectés du système scolaire à l'âge où l'on veut conquérir le monde, pour se retrouver le nez contre le mur de l'implacable réalité et passer toutes leurs journées à traîner devant les portes des supermarchés d'Etat dans l'attente de la sortie d'un produit inexistant sur le marché. . . ." (106). In order to describe the unemployed school dropouts who spend their days leaning their backs against city walls, Algerians coined a "Franco" term derived from the Arabic word for wall, "heet." The youth are referred to as "the heetist" which would translate into the "wallist." The term subverts not only the French language but also the fiction of progress and

superiority claimed by the colonizers. The youth felt betrayed by the French educational mission. Their violent outbreaks touched Tombéza. They would act out their frustrations and despair physically and verbally, mostly in French. The French language divided and joined Algerians. The protagonist understands the language of his co-nationals. He identifies with the products of the French system and voices their view as they justify their resort to violence: "on se débrouille comme on peut, les entreprises refusent de nous recruter, trop jeunes, pas de métier, aucune expérience, pratiquement analphabètes malgré la dizaine d'années passées à user nos culottes sur les bancs d'une classe surpeuplée" (107). Some of those "ejected" from the schools as well as other raw natives of lesser education would be subsequently adopted and injected in Algerian society as agents of the colonizing services.

Tombéza describes the colonizers' work at devising employment for select members of the native population as a new way of making war against/with Algerians:

> Cette nouvelle façon de faire la guerre. . . le [reference to a French officer] comblait d'aise. . . cet organisme. . . régentait la population du camp de regroupement a l'aide d'une brigade de harkis bien plus obéissants que les recrues du contingent, disposait de pouvoirs de police, d'état civil, dispensait des soins médicaux, fournissait une aide alimentaire aux nécessiteux, gérait une école pour les exclus du système scolaire (127).

In the quoted passage, Tombéza explains how the French divided the local population into "camps" and recruited indigenous agents to enforce order. As a way of consolidating the assigned authority of the native agents over their fellow Algerians, the French granted the body of recruits different kinds of missions. They endowed them, to that purpose,

with the means to provide health care, police protection and education for the teenagers who had been thrown out by the school system

At such a time of economic problems and foreign interference, unemployment soared. Even healthy men had difficulty finding employment. It is worth noting that in economies of scarcity, the disabled members of society tend to be the most handicapped and barred in their job search, but not Tombéza! The colonial agents see the disabled native as a privileged natural resource. The French indulge in an outsourcing mission to consolidate their imperialist interests. The French favor Tombéza and his likes. The disabled native is granted employment rights by the colonial agents of discipline. He is employed at the heart of the police apparatus as well as the community's westernized medical institutions.

Once they saw him, the French policemen knew that they found the type of "ressources humaines" they needed. Before long and upon hearing his name, they hired him as their native informer:

> - Comment tu veux t'appeler?
>
> - Tombéza!
>
> - Bravo, mon gaillard! Toi, bonhomme, tu commences à me plaire.
>
> C'est ensuite qu'il [the French lieutenant] me proposa de devenir responsable du village de regroupement (130).

In his very name, Tombéza is both harmed and served by the French language. "Tombéza" derives from the French verb "tomber," to fall. It was chosen for him by

children who obviously were learning the language in school and many of whom would be dropped or thrown out. They invented this "monstrueux surnom" to ridicule his appearance and birth history (125).

The French colonial agents found a productive use for the French named and speaking disabled native. Surveillance and information were Tombéza's assignments. The French have always needed him as an eye and a native informer (101). This is an irony given that Tombéza had a "deformed' left eye. Tombéza's recruitment is made possible by the symptomatic French way of looking at the disabled native. With the French, Tombéza is both reduced to and elevated above his physical abnormalities. In the eyes of his own family, Tombéza's outward infirmities are inseparable from his past and the illegitimate birthing which flouted the value of paternal origin. On the strict local job market, what he would have qualified for in the eyes of his own people, at best, would have been work as an errand boy-man and/or village freakish clown and fool. The colonial agents, unlike his own people, do not consider his history important and see only his potential to serve their interests according to their plans. They are willing to accept that he has no past. The French lieutenant at the police station responds sarcastically when the native says that he does not have a birth certificate, identity card, name, father (124). He proposes to "fabricate" a new existence and identity for him. He gives him the unique chance to choose his name.

In a strategic refusal of the French politics of naming, the protagonist proclaims for the first time in the narrative "Tombéza!" the name that the children of his community mockingly chose for him (130). Tombéza and the French react to the name with similar enthusiasm but at cross purposes. The native preferred his people's

oppression over a repetition of French interference. He did not want to allow his colonizers to invent another French name for him.

The French employ Tombéza based on his French-inspired name and his appearance. He is initially reduced to his physical abnormalities since they are all they see of and in him. They interpret and invest them as a mark of internalized violence. They expect and identify a bitterness which they intend to exploit. They can guess at the violence that is dormant within him from knowing the way they would "normally" respond to his physical abnormalities. They also certainly know that he must be suffering from rejection within his own social milieu. The study of the indigenous structures of relations is an important component of the colonial enterprise. They would know, though in an unsympathetic and self-serving way, that a person such as the protagonist would not be easily accepted in the kind of society they were working on altering. In the context of the world war, the French made indigenous chiefs choose the strongest native men and send them to fight for France (66). The male-dominant society was growing aware that it needed valid manpower more than ever, in order to counter the colonial presence and oppression. That made it more intolerant than ever of those it regarded as invalids under any pretext. The French saw Tombéza's physical shortcomings as a sign of convertible and extraordinay abilities to serve and execute. In the past, sultans used dwarf and deaf persons as executioners.

Tombéza's appointment will modify his relations with his own people. It will create both division and solidarity between him and his people. He will stop speaking with the French and use their language to tell the narrative and to unveil the motives of his multiple oppressors. In his life, his internalized colonizing led him to victimize people

like him. Nonetheless, he saved others. Hired to "see" for the French, he occasionally decided not to see. Tombéza did not denounce the disabled and disfigured man of short stature whom he once glimpsed in the dark during a surveillance mission (138). The man of dwarfish stature with a disfigured face and multiple bodily deformities appears only briefly in *Tombéza*, yet his short presence invites wide reaching connections and his silence speaks volumes. He is described in the following passage:

> La porte pivote de nouveau pour laisser se dessiner à contre-jour la silhouette d'un homme de petite taille. Il approche lentement. On distingue peu à peu ses traits. Horreur. Répulsion. Peau de visage profondément labourée. Nez absent. Lèvres à moitié rongées figeant un sourire sardonnique. Plus d'oreilles. Moignons des doigts inégaux et difformes (157).

All we can gather about him by way of factual information is that he was a "combatant" fighting against his French oppressors and their followers among his co-nationals. Tombéza identifies with him and speaks for both of them and on behalf of other similarly disabled individuals within and beyond their context.

A connection to Algerian reality under Islamist violence haunts this project. There was once in a Tunisian newspaper an article about the complex fundamentalist aggressions that have been taking place in Algeria since the early nineties. It reported villagers describing, in terms that echo Tombéza's quoted passage, a dwarf brutally butchering people. Regardless of whether it was fact or fiction, the piece warrants an interrogation of how much of the person's violence might have been caused by the oppression, under-estimation and exclusion he had experienced due to his physical difference. Such an interrogation could be useful if translated into a practical research act.

Social scientists and statisticians could take up the lead to find out if there is a considerable number of persons whose fall into the fundamentalist trap could be related to experiences engineered by their fellow men's social reactions to physical differences and disabilities.[30]

The effect of Tombéza's telling the story of this fellow countryman is another revision of the common definitions of disability and an additional supplement to the category of acquired handicaps. The invisible man's deformities are politically-acquired and his scars are the products of Algeria's colonial history. The cause of his disabilities is war. Textual evidence for these facts is readable in the following passage where it becomes clear that the strange man's tragedy has been shaped by the human military error and miscalculation of a commander who, trained in modern warfare theories, attempts to fight and defeat the invaders. Enemy planes and bombs, however, come to abort an otherwise successful mission on the part of the freedom fighters:

> Embuscade contre un grand convoi militaire. Objectif atteint à 100%. Le commandant contemplait la scène en jubilant. Mais on commençait à peine à décrocher qu'apparaissait dans le ciel une escadrille de quatre avions bombardiers qui firent pleuvoir sur la region un déluge de bombes. Phosphore et napalm. Partout s'embrasait la foreêt (158).

More planes and bombs, massacre and entrapment of the troops. "Éclabousse par un jet de napalm," the man "se tortillait sur le sol. Douleur atroce. Arrivent les brancardiers"

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[30] Likewise, it may be useful, in the wake of recent world events, to think about the case of Omar Abdel Rahmen, the fundamentalist Egyptian blind Sheikh who is being tried in the United States. for masterminding the first attack against the World Trade Center. Inexcusable as his alleged plot was, a question worth asking is whether his handicapped state has determined, to a certain extent, any of the violence that he may be guilty of. One can imagine his limited life as a blind man living in his part of the world, despite the privileges that he may seem to have enjoyed. Such a reading applies as well to the war-disabled, paraplegic man who figures on the Bin Laden tape.

(158). He is "brûlé," severely burned (159). The Algerian patient's disfigurement, disabilities and deformities are caused by the napalm that was dusted from the powerful bombers.

In a spirit of fellowship based on empathy and understanding, Tombéza pretended not to see him during surveillance and saved him from capture and torture. The protagonist is able to imagine and sympathize with the suffering that a man like him must have endured because of people's reactions to his appearance:

> Pendant combien de temps encore cet homme pourra supporter la répulsion que son apparition provoque chez ses semblables ? Les jours passeront, s'émoussera lentement le prestige du maquisard, seront plus pénibles les humides nuits de l'hiver qui réveilleront la douleur, et les petits enfants effrayés que sa vision fera fondre en larmes, et la mère serrera dans ses bras son rejeton apeuré, cachant son visage contre son epaule, et devant cette scène mille fois répétée tu n'oseras plus sortir dans la rue qu'avec l'obscurité, la tête enfuie sous la cagoule de ta kachabia, et tu fuiras la lumière et les hommes (157-8).

Tombéza's gesture of solidarity, that of benevolently turning a blind eye to him during surveillance, will be gratefully returned by the unknown man. He appears when the protagonist finds himself held hostage by villagers who decided to seek revenge for their prior abuse and oppression by other Algerians erected against them by the colonizers, Tombéza being one of their protégés. The narrator gives us an account of his reunion with the strange man:

> Qui est cet homme ? . . . . C'est étrange, mais je n'ai pas peur de lui. Il se glisse derrière moi . . . . Mon libérateur détache aussi mes chevilles.

- Fuis, me dit-il. Va-t'en, et ne reviens jamais dans la région.

Je le regarde, muet d'etonnement avant de reconnaître ces yeux que le faisceau de ma lampe avait cueillis sous une haïe dans la nuit du camp de regroupement.

J'ébauche quelque gestes mais il m'est impossible de me relever. Je rampe vers la Porte entrouverte. Alors, l'homme a eu ce geste que je n'oublierai jamais : son bras fraternel se place sous mon aisselle et me soulève. Pour la première fois de ma vie, j'ai pu m'appuyer sur une épaule offerte (159).

Whereas the colonizers sought to divide the native population , common experiences of oppression and separation eventually bring Algerians together. This expression of understanding, sympathy and acceptance is a significant final note in Tombéza's defeated life.

Tombéza's employment gives him an opportunity to accumulate wealth and power. Having once been excluded from the Quranic school as a boy, he is now able, through money, the grant of donations and offer of lavish meals to influential administrative and religious personalities, to secure a privileged place in the front row at the mosque. During this time, he discovers the social ills that are tearing his nation apart. Poverty and an hypocrisy fueled by need, lawlessness and a sense of inability to change reality, exacerbate the corruption which threatens to destroy his society. Eventually, Tombéza is betrayed by a co-national, a corrupt policeman, and falls. He falls into coma, silence and death. The police agent arranges to kill him lest he regain his ability to speak and tell all about the criminal activities that they were involved in. Mutism is a desired and privileged disability in police states and societies at various times and places.

Tombéza keeps command of the narrative till the end. The fate of other disabled Algerians continues to preoccupy his thoughts as he draws his last breath. His encounter near the end of the novel, with Bismillah, a blind man, warrants another piece of writing. To conclude this article, however, suffice it to note some of the thought-provoking connections that Tombéza's mixed treatment of the blind man suggests. The protagonist documents the situations of beggarly need and dependency that the blind are left to fall into by their able-bodied co-nationals. Bismillah's name means "in the name of Allah." He was so called probably not only because he was a religious man and attended prayer meetings and sermons faithfully, but also because he used to say the Islamic expression frequently as he felt his way with the assistance of his olive-tree cane. Tombéza is intrigued by his character and treats him ambivalently. He helps and harms him, thus demonstrating the ableist treatments that the blind are subjected to in his society and the divided consciousness with which disabled individuals relate to each other. Nevertheless, Tombéza's representation of Bismillah draws on a traditional profiling of the blind as insightful guides. Bismillah's insight explains his own maltreatment at the hand of Tombéza in an ableist moment as well as the evil that ravages his society at that time of its history and beyond. The protagonist threatens to push him over a cliff in order to force the blind man to admit that his fate lies in the hands of "Si Tombéza" ("Si" being an equivalent of the title "Sir") and in the same gesture to negate the existence, will and mercy of Allah (261). Bismillah's response to that is insightful: "c'est ma cécité qui t'encourage à me tenir ce discours. . . . Tu n'oserais pas blasphemer ainsi si tu savais mes yeux fixés sur toi. C'est donc que tu n'as pas de regard interieur" (262). Tombéza's final statements vindicate the blind man's insight and vision by upholding his point of view,

namely that "[le mal (evil):] c'est ce qui transgresse les enseignements d'Allah" (261). Tombéza reclaims for Bismillah his traditional privileged role of teacher and offers his inspiration as a counsel to their society. From their perspective, a possible solution for the ills of Algeria is a return to the roots of the Islamic faith and to following the teachings of Allah, not in a negatively selective, hypocritical, dogmatic and violent way, but in a poetic and merciful spirit. Part of Tombéza's mixed donations to the mosque were a modern system of sound amplification and a collection of the *Qur'ãn* on tape sung, in Mimouni's words, by "the most beautiful voice in the world," no doubt that of the Egyptian Sheikh Abd El Baset Abd Essamad, (256). He was previously inspired by another teacher who believed that their people needed to reclaim the critical power of the Arabic language by combining Western education with the reading of canonical works such as those of Ibn Sina, and we should add Averroes (78). In addition to that, Tombéza hoped for people to re-learn the divine poetry and remember its teachings in the compassionate treatment of other human beings, particularly the differently able.

The Case of Female Characters with Disabilities

Fatima vs. "Cure or Kill"

A Disability Study of Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de Sable / Sand Child*

To be a deaf or blind man in the male dominated post-colonial Arab and Muslim world often means to be an object of comedic exposure and abusive social treatment at the hands of mis-educated ableist fellow citizens. It means also scarce employment options, or being thought a freak or a gesticulating clown like some mute signified from *The Arabian Nights*. At the other extreme in Muslim societies, blind men have traditionally been reciters of *The Quran*. Women, whether able-bodied or blind, have been forbidden by religious authority figures to access this religious profession under the pretext that a woman's voice is a temptation and would be inappropriate for men to hear in the moving chant-like quality of Quranic recitation. Blind men have had, at least, this secured and respected employment to count on.

In Arab and Muslim societies, disabled women fare much worse than their fellow men. That is the case mainly because Arabian societies are customarily misogynous and tend to equate femaleness with disability and the death of patriarchal lines and names. To have a physical impairment in addition to being a woman in such a society, signifies a state of culturally gendered and accrued handicaps. In fact, the handicapping treatment that awaits a woman with a disability in a misogynist society would make the abuses that her disabled fellow men endure seem luxuries. Indeed, the deaf man who is treated as if he were "dumb" and the blind man who is asked to entertain the listeners with the story

of his blindness, enjoy chances to perform in the act and make their voices heard, chances denied the Arab and Muslim woman with a disability. They have, at least, a liberty of mobility in public space and an opportunity to speak and sign during their acts and communicate in creative, subtle and strident voices their refusal of their social mistreatment. The mobility and visibility that disabled men enjoy, relative as that may be, combine with the favorable status that accrues from being male in a male dominant society to secure for them the additional social advantage of marriageability. A woman with a minor disability would be deemed unfit for sight and society, and unmarriageable. Women with disabilities living in Arab and Muslim society have traditionally been isolated, silenced and buried alive in the house institution. They are seldom represented in their national media. They have always been absent-present in Arab and Muslim classical and contemporary societies and texts. They continue to be underdeveloped in their Post-Colonial literary milieux, where writers tend include them only as minor and easy to abuse and forget,[31] fix or kill characters.[32] Such is the predicament of the Moroccan disabled female character Fatima in the Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable* (*The Sand Child* in English translation). Her Morocco represents a moderate modernizing Arab and Muslim country in the Post-Colonial era that other societies in the Arab and Muslim world and African continent, particularly its Northern part, entered during the same period, in the 1960s. Yet Fatima's predicament, which could serve as a sample of the conditions of disabled women in her time and part of the

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[31] An example of such unpunished abuses committed by able-bodied male characters over the bodies of forgotten women with disabilities can be found in Rachid Mimouni's *La Malédiction*, (which could be translated as *The Curse*), on page 75.

[32] Another Post-Colonial novel in which the narrator and his characters administer such a "cure or kill" treatment to a disabled woman, is the Indian Rushdie's *Shame*. We find a relatively similar case in the Tunsian al Metwi's novel *Attout al Morr*, which could be translated as *The Bitter Berry*.

world, is anything but progressive or humane. That predicament begs us to imagine the plight of a woman with a disability in an Islamist state, for instance, the more radically Muslim Iran (compared to North African societies) in the Middle East. We can see a picture of what it means to be a blind Iranian woman living behind the veil under Islamist rule in the film *The Apple*, which was directed by Samira Makhmalbaf and based on a true story.

The relatively different Post-Colonial context in which Fatima lives complicates her experiences further and produces a modernizing native son/sister who will occupy her in a liminal space between Islamism and modernity. As a consequence, Fatima finds herself at an intersection of two competing and conflicting cultures, Arabian and Pre-Islamic customs, and Post-Colonial Westernizing cultural "imports."

North African Arab and Muslim disabled women can find themselves only in restricted fictional spaces where they tend to be managed in a fashion similar to their mistreatment in reality. Fatima accumulates all the harm that results from the mixed recitations of her contemporary fellow citizens, as they recite religious and commercial imports. Yet, helpless as she is, she creates a space from which she forges intertextual relationships with sisters in the same predicament and manages to utter a call for their recognition as a textual entity worthy of inclusion and development. She embarks on a mission of metaphoric rescue in favor of female characters with disabilities like her. She initiates that by contesting her narrative treatment and protesting against the "cure or kill" technique that writers creatively administer to them. She talks back to her writer and chastises her storyteller. In order to hear her voice and version of her story, we need to begin with the end of the narrative.

Near the end of his journey, the storyteller in Ben Jelloun's novel reveals encountering his characters:

> I walked for a long time, then found myself back at my starting point. The characters I thought I had invented appeared on my way, called to me, and demanded an explanation. Condemning fingers pointed at me, accusing me of betrayal... I met Fatima, too. She was no longer sick. It was on a Friday. She stopped me and said, "I am Fatima; I am cured." She appeared to me laden with flowers, happy, like someone who had just taken her revenge on destiny. A slight smile played around her lips. Her white dress – something between a shroud and a wedding dress – was almost intact; just a little soil was caught in the folds. "Do you recognize me now?" She asked calmly. "I am the woman you chose to be your hero's victim. You soon got rid of me. I have now come back to visit the places and observe the things that I wanted to be eternal. I see that the country hasn't changed."

The storyteller's statement "the characters I thought I had invented" is thought provoking. It testifies that such characters as Fatima exist and are real, and that her narrative is possibly based on true stories of other disabled women living or rather dying in her larger country. Their death in life is intimately connected to their exclusion from public social space, their unmarriageable status and sterile living conditions. Fatima rebels against her hasty banishment from the narrative and comes back with a graceful vengeance to haunt her narrator and to urge him to voice her concerns and allow her to interact with him in rewriting the story of her fellow citizens in her country. She has

statements to make on the state of their shared culture and its impact on disabled women like her. She wants certain parts of it to be eternal and others to change. We shall see in the position of the disabled Fatima the present face of Post-Colonial Morocco that must make the changes necessary to improve the living situations of its disabled and the rest of their society. Such cultural work entails that Arab and Muslim societies return to their common Islamic source for directives and simultaneously move forward on a path of genuinely modern and moral progress where all community members, especially men and women with disabilities, have adequate access to all the social, educational and professional venues that they wish to pursue.

The Friday meeting of Fatima and the narrator is laden with Islamic cultural and spiritual meaning, given that it is Muslim's holy day. It foreshadows a common allegiance that connects Fatima and the narrator. They both explain the degradation of their present to a certain extent in relation to religion. More precisely, they attribute such a degradation to the forgetfulness by their fellow citizens of fundamental Islamic principles and values under the influence of unwelcome negative Islamist and Westernizing changes that are sweeping their country. Such values are the respectful, compassionate and inclusive treatment of all community members, especially women and disabled individuals. The misogynous social text of Fatima's society that is written by a male dominant state most tragically over the bodies of disabled women violates every Islamic principle and distorts the spirit of Allah's words. In *The Quran*, God has never intended women to be read as "bad news." Yet, that is how female infants were received in Fatima's context.

In the background narrative of *The Sand Child*, the protagonist's father, *Hajji Ahmed* (called *Hajji* because he had managed to fulfill the pilgrimage to Mecca, *Hajj*), is beset with a large number of daughters, an undesirable occurrence in Arab and Islamic societies.[33] The daughters were precisely seven, a number which otherwise, is considered blessed and lucky by Arabs. Hajji Ahmed blames on the wife what we might call her "male-sterility," for he forgets his daughters into non-existence (9). He thinks that she carries an infirmity within her that makes her unable to produce males (13). His brother spitefully rejoices in this situation and waits to inherit from him. In the absence of a male heir, Islamic inheritance laws prescribe that the brother of the deceased inherit the largest share, even when female progeny exists. The narrator documents this legal fact of the times in his following address to the listeners and readers of his storytelling: "you are not unaware, my friends and accomplices, that our religion is pitiless for a man who has no heirs. It dispossesses him in favor of his brothers, while the daughters receive only one-third of the inheritance" (10). In order to counter the oppressive legal clause, the protagonist's father decides that the next child to come will be a son even if it were a female. Accordingly, the last girl born, the protagonist, is given a male name, dressed and raised as a man to be.[34] Shortly after the childbirth of the eighth girl, he even brainwashes the mother into believing that the female she is looking at is actually a male

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[33] Textual evidence for the reception of female offspring as bad news can be found in North African folklore. For example, in a Tunisian folk tale recounted by a popular storyteller named Abd el Aziz el Irwi and titled *Ftima : the Daughter of the Carpenter*, two brothers live in the same neighborhood. One of them has seven daughters and the other has many sons. When they cross each other on the way to work every morning, the girls' father says to his brother "good morning, man of fortunes! " The father of sons greets him back by saying "good morning, man of misfortunes!"

[34] It is worth noting that tales of transgendering are frequent in Maghrebian and Oriental folklore, including *The Arabian Nights*. Such gender shifts are tolerated to a certain extent, especially when they are an instrument used more or less on the female figure's initiative to demonstrate a woman's abilities. The father's forced transgendering of his daughter in Ben Jelloun's work, however, is felt by the narrator and various characters to be an aberration. That is most evident in Ben Jelloun's next novel, *The Sacred Night*.

(17). She will treat the girl accordingly and repress every sign of femininity in her. The deafening silence of the mother - literally speaking, for once unable to tolerate her husband's voice anymore, she will disable her hearing by pouring hot wax in her ears (100) - enables the father to carry out the transgendering stratagem. Hajji Ahmed did everything else he could do besides silencing and brainwashing the mother, to mislead his society into believing the travesty and accepting the living portrait he was drawing of Ahmed as a real man. He even sacrificed his finger simulating Ahmed's circumcision (21). He worked on securing the success of his scheme through giving Ahmed a boys' education, separating her/him from the sisters and sowing a dangerous division among the women of the family:

> Ahmed never left his father. He was educated outside the house, well away from the women. At school he learned to fight and fought often. His father encouraged him, but when he felt the boy's muscles, he found they were soft. Ahmed mistreated his sisters, who feared him. It was all quite normal! He was being prepared for the succession. In due course, he became a man. In any case, he was taught to behave like a man, at home as well as outside (28).

Although our main focus in this work is on physical disability, gender itself may be deemed a disability, as in the previously cited instances of gender reception and legal discrimination. Furthermore, in a society where females tend to be disliked, gender aggravates the predicament of a woman with a disability. In such a context, a disabled female would be much less liked than a male or a normally healthy woman. The gender question as to whether the oppression of the disabled woman within Moroccan Muslim

society as portrayed by Ben Jelloun is complicated by the fact of her being female, also is relevant to this study because the narrator and protagonist's attempts to get rid of her are initially dictated by the prevalent misogyny in their shared context. That context was also marked by colonialism. Therefore, the mistreatment of Fatima was over-determined by intricate cultural mixtures of pre-post-colonial elements.

In *The Sand Child*, Hajji Ahmed wanted a male child not only because of the Arab Muslim family dynamics and male sibling rivalry that he was experiencing but also to celebrate for political reasons as well :

> He bought a half-page in the great national newspaper and had his photograph printed in it, followed by the following text :
>
> ... A boy ... We have called him Mohammed Ahmed. This birth will bring fertility to the land, peace and prosperity to the country. Long live Ahmed! Long live Morocco!
>
> This announcement in the newspaper set tongues wagging: people did not usually display their private life so publicly. Hajji Ahmed cared not a fig. For him the important thing was to bring the news to the knowledge of as many people as possible. The last sentence also caused a stir. The French police did not at all care for the "Long live Morocco!" The nationalist militants did not know that this rich craftsman was also a good patriot.
>
> The political aspect of the announcement was soon forgotten, but the whole town remembered the birth of Ahmed long afterward (20).

The quoted passage is highly suggestive. Colonial presence aggravated the bias in favor of male offspring. French presence was perceived by indigenous men as a threat to the

power and life of the native male population. They felt that they needed valid manpower more than ever, in order to counter the humiliation and oppression of colonial occupation. The challenges and insecurities they were faced with made them less tolerant of female and unhealthy progeny, and more desperate to produce males. The passage makes the reader think about the possible marks that French presence would leave on Ahmed, as is generally the case with colonialism, the colonial encounter often producing native generations of colonizing tastes, in this instance French-oriented European tastes. It makes the reader think, also, about how such an influence would translate into the treatments that Ahmed and the narrator devise for their disabled female character.[35] The passage foreshadows a number of connections between colonial presence and the social treatment of disability within the narrative. It announces a number of affectations that come with colonial occupation and that impact disabled characters more or less directly and in mixed ways, negative and positive. The aggravation by colonialism of pre-existing male dominance and misogyny will shape the protagonist's relationship with Fatima.

Ahmed, the daughter who Hajji Ahmed willed to transform into a son, grows to like the privileges that come with being a male in her/his society. As "he" reaches early manhood, he begins to further develop his adoption of a man's dress and conduct. He decides to seek power and starts to dress up in suit and tie, that is European fashion, and

[35] The narrator plays the role of an accomplice in Fatima's predicament. Speculative as this may appear, Ben Jelloun's reenactment of a "cure or kill" narrative treatment over the body of his disabled female character may have been shaped by his post/colonial readings in French literature. The work that he initiates in *l'Enfant de sable* may be a writer's response to the treatment of Hippolyte's limp in *Madame Bovary* (critiqued by Lennard Davis in his article "Constructing Normalcy") or that of the blind girl in Gide's *La Symphonie pastorale*. It is as well imaginable that the narrator was influenced by Arabian treatments of disabilities in classical literature and contemporary society. By imitating bi-cultural antecedents, Ben Jelloun seems to be attempting to critique the pejorative and dismissive treatments of the disabled in world literature.

to grow a mustache (34). In this combination of foreign and local ways, the mustache stands for the local macho look. He admits to his father:

> I don't just accept my condition and endure it, I actually like it. It is interesting. It gives me privileges that I would never have known. It opens doors for me, and I like that, even if it locks me in a glass cage... I am glad to be what I am. I've read all the books on anatomy, biology, psychology, and even astrology.[36] I've read them and have decided to be fortunate... I would like to pursue this story to the end. I'm a man. My name is Ahmed according to the tradition of our Prophet. And I want a wife... Father, you've made me a man. I must remain one. And, as our beloved Prophet says, 'A complete Muslim is a married man'" (34-5).

His mother asks him whom he wants to marry and the following exchange takes place:

> "Fatima... my cousin, the daughter of my uncle, my father's younger brother, he who rejoiced at the birth of each of your daughters."
>
> "But you can't. Fatima is ill – she's an epileptic and has a limp..."
>
> "Precisely!"
>
> "You're a monster."
>
> "I'm your son, no more, no less."
>
> "You'll bring unhappiness on us all!"

[36] This statement could be read as a note about gender discrimination in matters of literacy and education in Arab and Islamic societies of pre-independence times. Being a male used to imply easier and larger access to reading. If girls were allowed to start any education other than the Quranic learning provided at home and in religious schools, an education such as was offered by a few French schools during colonial times, they were withdrawn within a few years in order to spend most of their lives in the house. If under-education and possibly illiteracy were the common lot of females at that time and place, the general predicament of disabled women within the older generation is imaginable. We learn from the narrative that *Fatima*, *Ahmed*'s cousin, exceptionally, was literate. She used to read books of mysticism avidly (53). This

> "... Certain verses of the Koran that I had to learn by heart have come back into my mind recently, just like that, for no apparent reason. They go through my head, stop for a second, then vanish: 'God charges you, concerning your children: to the male the like of the portion of two females. ...' (37)

Ahmed has a precise plan for the employment of Fatima's disabilities. The following passage testifies to his intentions:

> Today I am pleased to think of the woman who will become my wife. I don't speak of desire yet; I speak of servitude. She will come, dragging one leg... I shall kiss her hand, say that she is beautiful; I shall make her cry and let her indulge her feelings. I shall observe her, struggling against death, slobbering, imploring (40).

Unworthy of kin, such a plan evokes certain negative treatments that Western colonizers and their "semblables" and/or allies engaged in vis-à-vis colonized native women with disabilities. Salient examples can be found throughout J.M. Coetze's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and in Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* (138-40). In the latter novel, the American protagonist, Port, expresses intentions similar to Ahmed's toward a blind Arab prostitute. To his eyes, her disability makes her a highly desirable object of curiosity and experimentation. While it is beyond the scope of this present work to analyze the scene in Bowles' novel, it is worth remarking that Port's statements could be imaginatively read as an extension of the way the colonizers and their "Frenchified" allied treat native women with disabilities. Colonialism produces generations of colonizing tastes in that co-nationals learn to shape and locate easy prey among themselves to occupy and abuse. The

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invites reflection on the consolation that literacy and reading can offer to the disabled, whose isolation and loneliness favor an immersion in the solitary activity of reading.

relations between able-bodied and disabled natives become allegories of colonial occupation. The pre-colonial and present native cultures surely contribute to this divided consciousness.

Ahmed reveals a connection between his intention toward his disabled female cousin and the Quranic verse that he cites,[37] which is widely memorized in Islamic societies and founds Muslim family inheritance laws. Particularly telling is his expression "verses of the Koran that *I had to learn by heart.*" It is a fact that traditional Islamic education was based on the forced rote memorization of *The Qur'ān*. As we have seen, this practice produced Muslims, exemplified by Ben Jelloun through Ahmed, who knew Quranic verses by heart, quoted them without consideration for the change in context and difference between the times of their revelation and those in which they were citing them. Such Muslims tend to take Quranic verses literally in different situations, consequently misinterpreting and misapplying the scriptures. In post-Islamic times, oppressive family members often act on their dislike of women in the name of Islam. In order to justify their actions, they pretend to read from *The Qur'ān*, select certain verses, and cite them by rote and out of context. They use Quranic verses as a pretext to sanction their misdeeds, as we shall see in our reading of Fatima's ordeal at the hands of her cousin Ahmed.

Ahmed cited the verse in his conversation with his mother not only to point out to her where their background story, the master family story of uncle, daughters, and coveted son, comes from but also to foreshadow and justify his reenactment with his chosen Fatima of what he thinks the verse to mean. He plans to enact over her body his

[37] This is the 11th verse of "the Women" chapter, the 4th in *The Qur'ān*. This chapter establishes the rights of women, orphans and the rest of family members to inheritance after the death of a relation. It urges upon Muslims the values of social obligation, mercy and justice.

inherited belief in the inferiority of women. A motive of his selection of Fatima is the hope that she will prove to be an easy and unsuspecting house-mate, qualities which have been essentialized in disabled women and that could serve the success of his subterfuge. He thought that because Fatima was a woman and disabled, she would be lacking in intelligence and attention, thus unable to find out his gender game. He anticipated that she would be easier to manage than a normally healthy woman and expected life with her to be easier to control, for he knew the way she was living in her father's house. To his eyes, her infirmities make her an easy target and disposable experimental object. Ahmed's quotation of the verse seems to betray a narrow comprehension of its implications. All he seems to see in it is a divine statement on the inferiority of women to men, for he will treat Fatima, according to the limited interpretation that was dominant in his society, as an unworthy female whose disabilities reduce her value even further.

The Quranic verse regulating inheritance along gender lines should be read and interpreted in light of its original context, because it derives its humane meaning from the times of pre-Islam and early Islam. In that period, women had virtually no rights and family relationships were marred by strife, abuse of power and oppression. The *Qur'ān* came and gave women rights where they had none. It entrusted men with the women in their care and urged on them to give females a share of the family properties, including disabled females.[38] Men, at that time, were the ones who were versed in financial affairs,

[38] Surprising and true enough, *The Qur'ān* does not explicitly mention disabled women, versus men, such as in chapter 80 which is dedicated to a blind man, and other references throughout the Book to the disabled in the masculine form. Verse 4:126, however, is explicated in canonical Quranic exegesis, such as the Islamic scholar Tabari's work, to be revealed in reference to the case of a blind girl who lived in the days of early Islam and a question put to the prophet by her uncle on whether being blind, the new inheritance laws applied to her as well as any other woman. *The Qur'ān*'s word on the matter is positive. Fatima Mernissi comments on the blind girl's story at some length in her work *Le Harem Politique*, translated into *The Veil and the Male Elite : A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. God's omission can be interpreted sympathetically by reading it as a statement on His part to the effect that He

whereas women lacked access to and practice in the matters and may have mismanaged a larger inheritance than *The Qur'ān* had entitled them to. Allah granted males double the portion of females for pragmatic reasons as well. Demanding an equal distribution of property between men and women would, at that time, have outraged the males, who were used to their privileges, with the possible result of denying women any share in property altogether and the perpetuation of the status quo. *The Qur'ān* was trying to institute change in a gradual manner, for society could not be expected to transform itself overnight.[39] While Allah refrained from any direct suggestion of women's entitlement to an equal share in the inheritance of property, he explicitly singled out disabled individuals throughout *The Qur'ān* as deserving of special care and protection. Precisely because of their infirmities, He sees such individuals to be worthy of assistance and trust. He looks on their hearts and minds and sees their humanity and ability to understand. Ahmed's citation of that particular verse rather than any Quranic verse urging the humane treatment of the disabled, which would have been more relevant to the context at hand, is symptomatic of the selective memory of many Muslims vis-à-vis *The Qur'ān*. They all remember that particular part of the inheritance verses, but neither Ahmed nor any of the other Muslims in his society within the narrative seem to remember one verse

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sees a blind girl as equal to a seeing woman and deserving of a fair share in social goods, hence He did not need or want to call her "blind."

[39] *The Qur'ān* has a gradual approach to a number of other issues, such as polygamy and slavery. Concerning slavery, a similar approach can be found in *The Bible*. Both Sacred Books include regulations of the slave-master relationship. Yet, that does not mean that God approved of slavery or meant it to last. As we continue to read, we find directives for future change. Concerning polygamy, before the advent of Islam, there were no limits to the number of "house slaves" or wives and concubines that a man could have. *The Qur'ān* came to narrow that down to four wives, mainly, on the condition that the husband treats them equally. One particular verse (4:130) addresses men explicitly: "try as you may, you cannot treat all your wives impartially." Verse 4:4 advances: "if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry one only or any slave-girls you may own." In a context where men reduced women to property, Allah, realistically, urges monogamy on the new believers in a gradual manner, hoping for more change and progress to follow. A similar approach is used regarding women and family's inheritance rights.

from *The Qur'ān* among the many that honor the disabled. Muslim populations tend to remember best the verses that they hear the most frequently in public, through the schools, the available media, and in the streets. Ahmed's forgetfulness of the Quranic verses that concern the disabled reflects the fact that those verses were not taught with any special emphasis by religious teachers, nor quoted or recited in newspapers and radio channels. Arab populations, particularly in economies of scarcity, tend not to read. Although they may recite learned texts, they tend to rely on authorities such as leaders, media and teachers to remind them of sacred verses and inform them. The inheritance verses that Ahmed refers to seem to be the most circulating ones in his society. Of the whole Quranic chapter, they are the ones that stand out and endure in men's memory. In the spirit of Islam, Quranic verses are meant to be read in context with "Ijtihad,"[40] that is with reason and imagination. They are not to be used as a pretext to fight women or the rest of society.

Ahmed chooses Fatima for suspect reasons. As he said to his mother, he chose her precisely because of her epilepsy and limp. Ahmed could have thought of many other women or female cousins to marry. Because of the common practice of inter-marriage between paternal cousins in Arab Islamic society, Fatima's sisters would have been highly eligible wives for him. Moreover, like her, they were also the daughters of the uncle who spitefully rejoiced in the fact that his father did not have a male heir. Having internalized his father's feelings of humiliation at the wife's failure to produce a son and

[40] The concept of "Ijtihad" in Islam means the process of interpreting Quranic statements and rules in application to new situations that occur in different later contexts. It is the effort to read God's intent in the long run. Regarding the inheritance question that we have at hand, God's plan would be to move forward from giving women rights where they had none, to extending their shares in proportion to their roles and accomplishments next to men when times genuinely changed and improved. God hoped that humanity would live up to their promise.

his uncle's mockery, Ahmed could have used one of Fatima's sisters in his revenge plan. Yet, he purposefully chose Fatima. It seems that he found her to be the fittest for his intended social game. Later in the narrative, he admits that "I had intended to use her to perfect my social appearance" (57). Ahmed's plan was to delude his society, including his uncle, into thinking that he was a man. He wanted to experiment with the codes of a society that was oppressive in its rigid distribution of life activities along gender lines yet easily fooled by a perfected cross dressing game. He wanted to prove that, fooled by his male dress into believing him a man, and more of a powerful man, even, being so "presentable"[41] in his European modern suit and tie; society would allow him to do everything that a man could do, including marrying a woman. To achieve that purpose in safety, he chose the disabled female cousin whom he knew to live in her father's house.

The uncle's dislike for the disabled daughter may not be obvious and she may even appear to benefit from special protection, kept sheltered as she was. This "protection," however, is merely a form of house imprisonment. It equals a death sentence. As we shall see in Ben Jelloun's representation of the situation of Fatima, the disabled woman's able-bodied caretakers reduce her, for suspect self-serving motives, to a lonely and loveless house bound existence. They consider her a nuisance and attempt to get rid of her by removing her to hidden quarters within the house. It is arguable that a worse fate may be awaiting the disabled woman if she were to be completely abandoned by her family and thrown out in the outside world of her society, in the streets or the brothel even. Yet, the protection in question remains troubling because the house

[41] It is a fact that in contemporary North African societies, especially Tunisia, presentability is associated with European style looks. Tunisians often switch codes to say the French expression "presentable" when they talk about appearance and norms of beauty.

imprisonment causes the disabled woman emotional and mental isolation, and social deprivation.

It may seem that Ahmed's marriage to Fatima was a rescue mission meant to save her from her restricted life, but in truth, he had at best mixed feelings toward her. The dominant elements in his design were his desire for revenge and his intention to use and dispose of his cousin. He admits to his revengeful motives later on in the narrative as he confronts himself: "you wanted that union not out of pity, but out of revenge" (63). It could be argued that a normally healthy person also could be the object of mixed feelings and vengeful schemes, so that it is not necessarily Fatima's epilepsy and limp that qualified her for this kind of treatment at the hands of her cousin. One manifestation of Ahmed's choice of Fatima precisely on account of her epilepsy and limp, however, is the fact that his thoughts and acts concerning her revolve around her disabilities. When he tries to analyze her, he dwells on her physical differences and shortcomings. Occasionally, he seems sympathetic in his descriptions of her restricted life, yet he ends up reducing her to the living conditions that he knew her to suffer in her father's house. In his own house, she is confined to the life of an undesired and disposable object of curiosity.

On the whole, Ahmed had harmful plans for Fatima, which the following excerpts will sum up. His cruel intentions betray mixed feelings towards her. Ahmed's ambivalent reactions to Fatima and his double treatment of her are more evident in the following passage:

> I gave her a bed next to mine and busied myself with her as much as I could...

> One day, as she lay asleep, I tried to see if she had been circumcised... I gently lifted the sheet and found that she was wearing a strong girdle around her pelvis, like a steel chastity belt, to discourage desire – or to provoke it, and destroy it, all the more (55)

Ahmed treats his disabled cousin as an object of curiosity and makes a private spectacle out of her for self-serving motives. He rejoices in observing the scars that the dehumanizing misogyny of their society has left on her body. By the same token, he congratulates himself on having escaped such a fate through cunning. The reference to female circumcision functions as a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of Fatima's society on women like her. Fatima is repressed, regarded as asexual yet hypersexualized at the same time. She is denied womanhood, sexual life, life in short. Ahmed sees her at the same time as discouraging and provoking desire, but she is doomed from beginning to end as her reproductive potential is destroyed through seclusion and rejection.

Ahmed's attitude towards Fatima changes quickly from false attraction and tolerance to annoyance and rejection, as the next excerpt demonstrates:

> Fatima's presence disturbed me greatly. At first I liked the difficulty and complexity of the situation. Then I began to lose patience. I was no longer master of my world and my solitude. That wounded creature at my side, that intrusion that I had myself installed inside my secret, private life, that grave, desperate woman who was no longer a woman, who had traveled a painful path, that woman who didn't even aspire to be a man, but to be nothing at all, that woman who almost never spoke, murmuring a sentence or two from time to time, but

> enclosing herself in a long silence, reading books of mysticism, and sleeping without making the slightest sound, that woman prevented me from sleeping.

Ahmed has learned from society how to ill-treat his disabled female cousin. He is encouraged in his choice and treatment of Fatima by his observation of society and family's irritation with and contempt for her, as we can see from this description of her living conditions:

> Everybody in the family had got used to seeing her knock her head against invisible walls. Nobody bothered or worried about it. The most anyone ever said was "Well! That fit was worse than the one last week. It must be the heat!" She was left alone to have her fit, so she didn't disturb anything: her brothers and sisters were left undisturbed, full of the future, happy to be able to make plans, ... put out at having a sister who introduced a false note into so harmonious a landscape.
>
> In the end, Fatima had her own space – an uncomfortable room, near the terrace. They often forgot about her. Two or three times, I [Ahmed] found her crying for no apparent reason, perhaps to forget or just to pass the time. She was very bored, and since nobody in her family showed her the slightest kindness, she sank into a shroud of pitiful melancholy. Sacrificed and exhausted, she was a tiny thing laid by mistake or by some curse on the everyday monotony of a narrow existence, laid on a table left in a corner of the courtyard where the cats leap and twist and turn, trying to catch flies (53).

Worth remarking is a note on Arab Islamic local family housing styles in North Africa during the early decades of the twentieth century. Extended families used to live together

in large houses. This way of life was based on sharing space, activities and meals. Siblings of the same gender would also sleep in shared rooms. Fatima, however, had a room of her own! That deviates from the course of sharing and caring that Arabian custom has instituted in community life and which Islam has urged to extend to disabled individuals. The deviation of Fatima's family from a local way of living that might have been beneficial to her exacerbates her alienation and loneliness within her family home. The separate rooms arrangement was meant to shun Fatima, remove her from the family space and make her existence as invisible and inoffensive as possible to her normal and healthy family members. This strategy in the treatment of her disabilities foreshadows a relatively similar move to come from her cousin Ahmed after he chooses her for a wife.

In order to assess the uses to which Fatima was put to by her family and Ahmed, it would be useful to read the narrator's account of how she was given away and re-examine Ahmed's motives for this union:

> To ask for the hand in marriage of the wretched Fatima, with her limp and her epileptic fits, was either too good a stroke of fortune or an insult.
>
> As soon as her name was spoken, she was taken away and shut up in the upper room, and no one said anything – either yes or no. They were waiting to consult the father...
>
> All his life he had been counting on that inheritance. With the arrival of Ahmed, he was forced to bury those hopes... Then he came around to the idea of talking about it with Fatima. She wanted to marry.
>
> Ahmed laid down his conditions : the two families would remain apart; he would live alone with his wife. She would leave the house only to go to the baths

> or to the hospital. He was thinking of taking her to consult certain great doctors, of getting her cured, giving her a chance (48-9).

One of the most striking aspects in the family's treatment of Fatima is the silence that they reduced her life to and that becomes especially audible surrounding her marriage project. Her father makes an exception when he talks to her on the occasion of her proposed marriage. It takes him a while to think of speaking with her about it, and when he decides to do so, it is for suspect reasons and not out of a genuine concern to consult her or give her a say as it may appear. He discovers a possible value and use to her, the potential of eventually accessing a part of the desired inheritance through giving her away in marriage to Ahmed. He probably had mixed qualms about such an idea. He possibly hesitated at the prospect of getting close to his brother's family, having maintained distant and hypocritical relations with them throughout the years. At the same time, he apparently had a shadow of a scruple about using Fatima for such self-serving ends. Unsure about how to justify his intentions to himself, he seized the thought of speaking with her. His conference with her is also a way of using her, her wishes and words as a pretext to give her away with an easy conscience. The fact that she wanted to marry would be a justification for abandoning her in a different form. The marriage deal is in effect a self-serving way of getting rid of Fatima. Her father does not seem to have felt the slightest objection to Ahmed's condition, namely that the two families remain apart. Her living away from the father's house would not have made any considerable difference to him since he does not appear to have been in the habit of checking in on her or verifying that she had any special care in her secluded room within the family home.

The father seems to be interested mainly, if not only, in the potential comfort and gain that might accrue to him through Fatima's removal and her pairing with Ahmed.

In Ahmed's house, Fatima is as silent as she has always been in the family home, initially at least. As the following passage will tell, at this stage in their co-habitation, Ahmed is intent on breaking her silence, but not for her sake. Once again, he is attempting to serve himself, this time to confirm, to the detriment of his mate, his image of himself as the educated young man who is learned in the history of the world and who can understand everything. He seeks to penetrate her mind:

> Sometimes I observed her for a long time in her sleep, staring at her until the features and contours of her face became blurred and I penetrated that dark, shadowy pit in which her deepest thoughts were kept. Silently I pursued my delusion, successfully reaching her thoughts as if I myself had expressed them. That was my mirror, my weakness; that is what haunted me. I heard her steps in the middle of the night, moving slowly over an old, creaking floor. In fact it wasn't a wooden floor, but I imagined the sound and the sound conjured up a floor made of old wood that had come from some ruined house, abandoned by travelers in a hurry; the house was an old hut in a wood surrounded by oaks that had been ravaged by time. I climbed up onto one of the few safe branches and looked down at the shed ... I could see the traces of footprints in the dust. These led me to a cave where rats and other beasts, whose names I do not know, live happily. In that cave, a veritable prehistoric grotto, lay the thoughts of the woman who was asleep in the same room as I, and whom I regarded with mixed feelings of pity, tenderness, and anger (56)

Ahmed feels modern and superior in comparison to Fatima. In the eyes of the young man, she is ancient. To his mind, she belongs to pre-historical times. He thinks the disabled woman retarded because he does not know what she is able to understand. Of all people, she turns out to be the person who finds him/her out from the start:

> I wanted to get rid of Fatima in some way that would not harm her. I put her in a room well removed from mine. Yet I came to hate her. I realized I had failed in the process that I had planned and set in motion. Because she was handicapped, that woman turned out to be stronger, harder, more unbending than I could have foreseen. Though I had intended to use her to perfect my social appearance, it was she who had managed to use me; she almost dragged me into her profound despair... That woman had a special kind of intelligence. All the words she never spoke, all the words she saved up, were poured into her unshakable condition, reinforcing her plans and projects.
>
> She had already given up living and was moving slowly and surely toward disappearance, toward extinction. Not a sudden death, but a slow series of backward steps toward the gaping ditch behind the horizon. She no longer took her medicines, ate little, spoke hardly at all (57).

She reveals to Ahmed: "I have always known who you are, and that is why, my sister, my cousin, I have come to die here, near you" (58). Fatima's words demonstrate her intelligence and agency. She is far from being retarded. She has known Ahmed's secret identity all along in part out of a sense of identification with a kinswoman who embodied the common predicament that hung over their lives like a sword: "be a man or be nothing."

Fatima's calculating intellect unfolds through the few statements that she manages to make in the narrative. She had said that she wanted to marry most likely because she wanted to get out of her father's house. She found Ahmed's marriage proposal to be a golden opportunity for her to escape from the family's prison house. She kept Ahmed's secret to a certain extent for similar reasons, in order not to have to go back to her father's house and to stay away from it till her death. She did not want to embrace her imminent death without expression. Another reason why she chose to play Ahmed's game was because she wanted the narrator to tell her story as a disabled woman in their society. She was aware that she had no place in her times and knew that she would die in a house, hence her assertion to her kinswoman "I have come to die here, near you." In their context, the house is women's "grave of life."[42] She chose, not without regret, to be an accomplice in her death rather then to continue leading a marginal existence. The regret comes from the fact that she wanted to live a human and happy life.

She helps the narrator get rid of her in the narrative by stopping to take her medications and withdrawing further, but not without reproach. Having become tuned to Fatima's inner sounds and feelings, Ahmed senses that her exit was more involuntary than willing. The narrator writes her back in the fiction and gives her a voice to criticize her narrative and social treatment. This critique involves tracing where the mistreatment of the disabled comes from. The narrator explains the social ills that affect everyone in his community and most of all disabled women, considerably in relation to religion, that is in terms of what happened to *The Quran* and to the Islamic character of his society in

[42] In Tunisia, the expression "grave of life" is, ironically, a euphemism for the concept of "house." Home ownership is highly valued in Tunisian society and people would say that buying or building a house is one of the most important things in life because a house is "the grave of life," meaning that it is the space where

our modern times, the Holy Book being a pre-text in this cultural work. It is a formative text, alive in everything Muslims do whether that is well informed by its principles or deforms its words. It is also a pretext that is recurrently invoked to justify choices and actions.

Ben Jelloun renders the Arab Islamic character of his fictional world in a dramatic fashion. Inspired by Arabic oral tradition, he stages his fiction in the form of a storytelling gathering in a Marrakesh market square of the 1950s, during which a professional storyteller, the characters and the listeners take part in telling stories within stories. One particularly imaginative description by Ben Jelloun of the source of the stories goes as follows:

> Our storyteller is pretending to read from a book that Ahmed is supposed to have left behind. That is untrue! Of course the book exists, but it is not that old notebook, yellowed by the sun, which our storyteller has covered with that dirty scarf. Anyway, it isn't a notebook but a cheap edition of the koran.
>
> ...Companions! Don't go away, listen to me... Be patient! Wait until I have reached the top of the terrace. I am scaling the walls of the house. I am going to sit on a mat on the white terrace, and open the book to tell you the strange and beautiful story of Fatima, who was touched by grace, and of Ahmed, cloistered in the vapors of evil (49 - 50).

In a sense, the book from which the multiple storytellers are reading and recounting is their social text, a cheapened version of *The Quran*, in which community relations are marred by deviations from Islamic principle and misogyny. It is a context where society

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one finds shelter, dignity and independence on this earth, before moving to the other grave of the "other life," the Tunisian way of saying the afterlife.

leaves the sacred word behind and regresses to beliefs and practices of the pre-Islamic times, called in Arabic, *al Jahiliya*, the (era of) Ignorantism.

To contextualize the preference of male over female offspring in Arab and Islamic societies, we need to ask where it comes from and place it within a larger and older setting, first at the local Islamic level and subsequently in the context of colonial European influence. The belief in the superior worth of male progeny and the different ways of burying females alive go back to Arabian pre-Islamic times.[43] As Ahmed Zahra's father, Hajji Ahmed, tells his daughter/son during a nightmare of hers: "before Islam, Arab fathers threw an unwanted female infant into a hole [in the desert sand] and covered her until she died" (*Sand Child*, 99). That was before Islam. Ben Jelloun's female characters live in Islamic times and yet, they continue to feel disliked and fear being buried alive. Zahra reveals her living nightmare:

> I sense them there behind me, pursuing me with their mocking laughter, throwing stones at me. I see first my father, young and strong, advancing toward me, dagger in hand, determined to cut my throat or to tie me up and bury me alive (99).

What the society of Ben Jelloun's female character does to women, burying them in houses for life, may be less, in degree, than the pre-Islamic practice. In nature, however, it is a similar kind of "killing." Vulnerable disabled women suffer the most from such a misogyny. In post-Islamic times, burying women alive takes different forms besides house arrest. Hajji Ahmed combined various ways of negating his daughters' lives:

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[43] The preference for male progeny over females exists in other societies, such as China and India, which are not predominantly Islamic. Our attempt to link the misogyny of Arab Islamic culture to pre-Islamic

> The father thought that one daughter would have been enough. Seven was too many; tragic, even. How often he remembered the story of the Arabs before the advent of Islam who buried their daughters alive! Since he could not get rid of them, he treated them not with hate but with indifference. He lived in the house as if he had no progeny. He did everything he could to forget them, to keep them out of sight. For example, he never called them by name[44] (9).

It is worth observing that such underestimation and mistreatment of females - whether it is slitting their throats, burying them alive in one form or another, abusing them psychologically or excluding them from society - do not come from Islam. Such misdeeds are often perpetrated in the name of Islam and Islamic values such as honor. In truth, numerous Quran verses give the lie to such claims.

The Quran includes several verses that document and condemn the common practice of burying female infants alive in pre-Islamic times. It is worth noting that, as we learn from the verse to be cited, the practice had a name that is almost untranslatable in English. It is not quite "burial." In Quranic Arabic, the noun is *wa'd* and, to the mind of the learned Arabic speaker, it signifies the burial of female infants alive in the desert sand, all in one short noun. The Quranic chapter, numerically the 81st, in which the verse occurs is about the end of the world and Judgment Day. Its title refers to the sun and

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practices that are documented in the Quran may serve to point out a difference between apparently otherwise similar cross cultural examples of female infanticide and related practices.

[44] It is worth remarking that, in Arab and Muslim culture (and possibly in other cultures as well), not calling or referring to someone by his/her name is a severe form of social chastisement. Hence, someone who has done or said something that the community disapproves of, would be referred to as "the unnameable." Alternatively, people would use an untranslateable "religious" expression that is usually said about dead persons and which becomes pseudo-religious in such a case. The expression is "al marhoum" in the masculine form or "al marhouma" in the feminine. It means "that who is dead and resting in God's mercy." Hajji Ahmed whose title acquires an ironic dimension given his un-Islamic thoughts and deeds, seems to be punishing his daughters for their existence by killing them, symbolically, through unnaming them.

describes what happens to it during apocalypse. It is titled in Arabic *At-Takwir*, and translated by Dawood as "the Cessation" (that is the cessation of the sun from shining) and as "the Covering Up" or "the Folding Up" (of the sun) in other translations. The chapter reads as follows:

> When the sun ceases to shine; when the stars fall and the mountains are blown away; when camels big with young are left untended, and the wild beasts are brought together; when the seas are set alight and men's souls are reunited; *when the infant girl,*[1] *buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain*; when the records of men's deeds are laid open, and heaven is stripped bare; when Hell burns fiercely and Paradise is brought near: then each soul shall learn what it has done (Dawood's translation of the Quran, p. 419 – Italics mine).

Allah clearly condemns the pre-Islamic custom of burying unwanted females alive. Moreover, He promises to punish those who committed the misdeed and to vindicate the innocent newborn girls. He will restore to the victim not only her life but also the voice that she was denied by her family and culture.

Allah did not mean or want females to be received as "bad news" nor did He see them as such. Possible linguistic evidence for this is to be found in the Arabic text of verse 17 in chapter 43. Its first part is often translated as "when the birth of a girl is *announced* to any of them"[45] and less frequently as "when one of them is given *news*."[46] It reads in transliterated Arabic as follows: *wa itha bushira ahaduhum bil ountha*. The second translation is more faithful to the spirit of the Quranic verse, for the verb *bushira*,

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[1] An allusion to the pre-Islamic custom of burying unwanted newborn girls. (Dawood's footnote).

[45] N.J. Dawood's translation.

the passive form of the infinitive *bashara*, means more than "to announce." The Arabic language has equivalents to the verb "announce." If that is what He meant, Allah would have chosen one of them. What the verb *bashara* means in Arabic is "to bring *good* news." Hence, the verse should read in faithful translation: "when *good news* is brought to one of them..." The qualifier *good* is inseparable from *news* in the Arabic verb. It comes from the noun *bushra*, which means "(a piece of) good news." It occurs in this sense in the Quranic story of Joseph (12: 19). "Good news! A boy!" said the passing caravan water-carrier who found Joseph in the well where his brothers had thrown him. *Bushra* is also given as a female name in the Arab world by parents who are enlightened enough to choose it for a daughter and call her *Good News*, ideally out of positive motives.[47] Arabic male names that derive from the noun *bushra* are: *Bashir* and *Bashar*, which mean "the messenger or bearer of good news." Based on this linguistic reading, it is clear that Allah could not be associated with the dislike for females that marks numerous Arab and Muslim societies.

Ahmed inherited his contempt for women not only from the Arab and Islamic side of his context, but also from the colonial one, though indirectly. It is worth connecting the body of conditions that Ahmed sets upon, undeterred by any of Fatima's supposed protectors, to his European oriented tastes, manifest, for instance, in his dress (suit and tie). By his modernizing and Europeanizing Moroccan young man like attire and behavior, the character of Ahmed seems to represent one way of treating the "Fatimas" that is adopted by younger generation males in North African society. With respect to the

[46] M.H. Shakir's translation.

fathers in the fiction, Ahmed represents the educated younger generation Moroccan men of mixed allegiances, torn between loyalty to internalized local patterns of behavior and Europeanizing trends. While taking into account the complex pre-existing enmity between the families, we can associate the condition to live alone as a couple with the changes introduced in North Africa by French presence. Another decision with mixed causes and effects is Ahmed's condition that Fatima "would leave the house only to go to the baths or to the hospital," with which the father does not seem to have an issue either. Our main concern in this part is to assess the impact such decisions would have on Fatima.

In North Africa, women of the older generations (born in pre-independence times up to the 1920s and 1930s) continue to speak about how, in their early days and the more distant past, women used to leave the house only to go to the baths and occasional family and neighborhood events such as weddings. They would say that in the cases where the houses had baths inside, Turkish style, women used to leave only to go to the husband's house and the grave. We can imagine Ahmed's condition and the father's lack of objection to it to come from such a fact about women's place in the local culture. The statement of such a condition on the part of Ben Jelloun's protagonist could be read as a critique of the house imprisonment that women in general and disabled females in particular were subjected to in Moroccan or more largely North African societies. This pre-existing local confinement authorized such abuses by the likes of Ahmed, individuals

[47] In Rushdie's *Shame*, a daughter is called by her parents "Good News" because she was healthy and beautiful, unlike her disabled sister Sufiya. She is called that name on account of her promise to marry and her ability to produce sons in the future. These expectations prove to be tragic to her.

with suspect and mixed motives. The culture had already made it possible to seclude vulnerable women within house walls.

It is worth observing that older generation North African women do not mention hospitals as a place their foremothers had permission to go to. In the form of a condition, Ahmed promises to allow the exception and make good on it. That could be read also as a critique of the family's lack of consideration for medical care on Fatima's behalf, probably out of neglect, ignorance and fatalistic despair of seeing her amount to anything of worth. It is curious that no one in the family even suggested presenting Fatima to/with an exorcist, misguided as that would have been. In that context, women with epilepsy were thought to be possessed by jinnis, the well-known Arabian expression for devilish spirits, and were taken to religious figures, traditional healers and exorcists to cure and/or kill them. Occasionally, accidents took place when the concoctions and ceremonies administered proved too strong for the patients. It is worth pointing out that Hajji Ahmed obliged his wife to visit shrines and swallow potions (10) in a desperate attempt to see her bear a male child. What the patriarchal society that he represents values the most in a woman is he ability to reproduce sons. Fatima's disability rendered her unimportant and less of a woman being in the eyes of the family. Taking her out to see a healer or bringing a charlatan to treat her, misguided and even harmful as that may have been, would have indicated a minimal degree of care about her on the family's part. Shame could be another explanation for such a neglect. Letting it be known at large in society that Hajji Ahmed had a daughter with disabilities would have brought additional ill feelings upon him, particularly from his brothers. As a consequence, Fatima was left alone and isolated. The hospital is mentioned only by Ahmed. The community does not seem to be in the

habit of going to the hospital for treatment in case of illness. That is an ironic backward movement from a golden Arab age during which the first hospitals to come into being were established in the Arab and Muslim world around 800 A.D., beginning in Baghdad.[48] Following the degradation of Arab societies, hospitals are reintroduced by the colonizers. This can be read in the names of long standing hospitals in Arab countries (Hôpital Charles Nicole and Institut Pasteur are examples from Tunisia). The mixed legacy of colonialism certainly includes positive elements. In the narrative, Ahmed takes Fatima to the hospital and buys her medication in order to cure her. The main point of this literary reading, however, is that what Ahmed combines from local and foreign cultures is largely harmful to Fatima. The idea of taking her out to the hospital informs us not of any genuine care for her, but rather of how unaccepted and unpresentable she was considered to be in her actual health condition, even in the eyes of Ahmed himself. In her state and unless cured she had no chance to lead a fulfilled life.

Ahmed's conditions have a mixed impact on Fatima. Nonetheless, a certain positive effect has to be noted, the main beneficial change that Fatima gained came from Ahmed's foreign idea of living away from the family. As Ahmed recalls, "on the day of her [Fatima's] arrival in my house, she whispered in my ear as if confiding a secret: 'Thank you for getting me out of the other house" (54). It is worth reiterating that Fatima's subtle cunning and agency enabled her own move out of the patriarch's house. She escaped through expressing her wish to marry and keeping Ahmed Zahra's secret.

Overall, the process of Ahmed's interaction with his cousin reads as a reproachful and critical statement on his society's neglect of a woman with disabilities. S/he, Ahmed

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[48] See Watts, Thelma Lois' *Perceptions of Present and Future Programming in Selected Centers for Disabled Persons in Morocco.*

Zahra, undergoes a change from feeling false, or at best mixed sympathy toward Fatima, to sympathizing more positively with her predicament and giving her a powerful voice and presence in the narrative. This change is accomplished through understanding that a large part of Fatima's oppression was determined by the undesirability of her gender in her context. She shared the same nature of oppression that women generally experienced in her culture, mainly the house confinement, lack of free expression and invisibility, but to a higher degree because of her disability.

While Fatima's resurrection by the end of the narrative still betrays a "cure or kill" approach to female disabled characters, it gives her voice and articulates her observations. The societies of the "Fatimas" need to change. The disabled women are far from being retarded. Their times need to upgrade to suit and serve them using the most humane of family oriented disability services and the best of modern assistive technology. Their societies need to work on granting them independence without depriving them of human contact. They need independent and decent housing along with freedom and opportunities to develop friendships.

The Visually-Challenged Sheikh Husni's Treatment of Blindness in the Egyptian Film *Al Kitkat*

In this chapter, I turn to the popular medium of film in order to examine the social treatments of blindness in Islamic societies as rendered through cinema. I propose to read an Egyptian movie titled *al Kitkat* after a historic popular area in Cairo and featuring a blind protagonist.[49] Through my translation of disability issues in the movie, I will try to introduce, explicate and interpret a set of complex social treatments of blindness in the Islamic world and make related aspects of my culture accessible to an interested Western audience. Such aspects include Islamic and Arab world beliefs and customs as they bear on the sight-disabled.

Al Kitkat is based on a novella titled in Arabic *Malik al Hazin* (the Sad Crane) and written by an Egyptian writer named *Ibrahim Aslan.*[50] A literary study of *Malik al Hazin* written in Arabic by a critic named Hasan Hamad reveals that Aslan's work takes inspiration from reality.[51] Most of his characters are based on real persons from the *al*

[49] Several libraries across the United States own copies of it, with and without English subtitles. The subtitled versions are of limited access since they are non circulating library material. The non subtitled versions are of easier access. This should not be discouraging. It may be of interest to watch the film without subtitles as if it were a silent film. That would allow the viewer to appreciate the body language of the actors. That may also enable the viewers to feel sympathy for deaf persons in the Arab Islamic developing world where captioning has not yet been made possible.

[50] Aslan's work has not been translated into English. *Malik al Hazin* is a familiar name in the Arabic literary collective memory. It is the Arabic literary name of the crane, a bird that is known to be fond of water. A classical Arabic writer, Ibn al Muqafaa, introduces the bird in his translation from Persian of Bidpai's work of fables titled *Kalilah and Dimnah* (the names of two main storytellers). In an English version of the work based on ancient Arabic and Spanish manuscripts, the bird figures in "The Chapter of the Pigeon, the Fox, and the Crane [or Don't get fooled by your own trick]." The bird is eventually killed for using his own trick. "Hazin" means sad. *Malik al Hazin* represents someone who has life-saving advice for others but not for himself.

Kitkat area, particularly the "sight-disabled" protagonist of the movie, who was called Sheikh Husni in reality as well. I am using the expression "sight-disabled" because Husni would prefer not to be called "blind." The expression is suggested to me by the American language with respect to disability. It is an approximate translation of how Husni would like to be called. I will present in due course the film scenes that support my inference of how he wishes to be represented and treated by his community. The study reports statements made by Aslan, the author of the novella, during interviews. In a part dealing with the background that his characters come from, he affirms: "Most if not all of the characters of this novella are real. I see to it that I follow up on the destinies of these characters. Mr Husni... died... What consoles me is the fact that he asked the seller of *basbousa* [an Egyptian popular dish] in the area to read the novella for him before he passed away and he was happy with it" (translation mine).

The film *al Kitkat* was made in 1991 by an Egyptian director named *Daoud Abd El-Sayyed* as an adaptation of the novella. The movie director, *Abd El-Sayyed*, named the film after its characters' home space. *Al Kitkat* neighborhood is situated in a historic larger zone within Cairo that is called *Imbaba*.

The meanings of the *Kitkat* name are worth exploring. The director's act of naming his work after this Egyptian space can be read as an attempt to restore, revive, and preserve the worth and significance of the place's character in the memories and hearts of contemporary Egyptians at home and abroad, as well as the film's larger audience of Arabic speakers and English subtitles readers across the global village. The director's attempts to celebrate the place and salvage its memory by helping the viewers

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[51] The work is titled : *Malik al Hazin : dirasah binyawiyah takwiniyah*, i.e. *Malik al Hazin : a Study in Structure and Form.*

remember its history and characters acquire a certain urgency in our times, when all some young Egyptians can think of once asked about the meaning of *al Kitkat*, is the American chocolate Kitkat.[52] The name *Kitkat* does not seem to be a meaningful Arabic word. *Al* is the Arabic equivalent for the English definite article "the." We are using one possible English spelling of the Egyptian neighborhood's name. It could be as well spelled *Kit-Cat* since the sounds *ka* and *ca* correspond to the same Arabic letter called *Kaf*. The British English word *Kit-cat* should be considered. In fact, it may be key in understanding the significance of the alley's name. As we learn from the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, *Kit-cat* is the name of a game where a thick bat known as *cat* is used by three or more players. The British English spelling *Kit-cat* could help understand a possible origin for the name of the place. There is a well-known British Club in Cairo called the *Kit-Cat Club*, which appears to be named after an earlier club. We read in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* that

> [The *Kitkat Club*] was founded [in Britain] in the early part of the 18th century by leading Whigs... Jacob Tonson, the publisher, was for many years its secretary and moving spirit. It met at the house of Christopher Katt, a pastry cook, in Shire Lane. Katt's mutton-pies were called *Kit-cats*, hence the name of the club. The club subsequently met at Tonson's house at Barn Elms. The portraits of the members... had to be less than half-length because the dining room was too

[52] Being Tunisian and not knowing about the place myself, I asked a number of Egyptians about the possible meanings of the film's title at the beginning of my project and they evoked the American chocolate. An American, my advisor and Professor Kent Bales, was the first person to tell me about the area in Cairo and the British Club that it was possibly named after. It is hopeful that more and more Americans are visiting such areas of the world and learning increasingly about their contemporary Arabs in their real popular settings, which is one of the objectives of my work. In the past, Americans used to know more about the ancient Egyptians than contemporary ones and in some cases more than Egyptians themselves. Nevertheless, Egyptians and other people in any area of the world should not replace

> low for half-size portraits. The word 'kit-cat' is in consequence still used for portraits of this size.

Although the club is never mentioned in the novella or film, the fact of the Club's enduring existence in Egypt combines with the proposed linguistic information to justify a conclusion that the Cairo alley has been named after the British club.

The Club brought a number of changes into Egyptian reality. Although *the Kitcat* was not quite a nightclub, we can imagine some of the activities that the British practiced within it. British music and song could be certainly heard there. In a documentary about *Um Kulthum*, the eternal diva of Arab music, the Egyptian singer herself comments on the 1920s in Cairo. She states:

> When I first came to Cairo, which was becoming the largest city in the Middle East, religious songs had declined in popularity... British soldiers crowded the nightclubs that grew up to accommodate them. Songs like 'Draw the curtains so we can enjoy ourselves' could be heard in every cabaret in the city... [Some local] singers were held in low esteem, but the most famous ones had great influence even with members of the government.

We can imagine *the Kitkat* to be, then and now, a microcosm of the larger competition that has been taking place between different cultures; the Egyptian, the British/European and the American one that has been entering the region more recently, most forcefully nowadays. The competition extends to the music cultures of the areas. American media are impatient to bring Britney Spears to Afghan young men's ears and eyes, to create more cultural shocks and confusions. While documenting their joy at being able to return

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knowledge and memory of their own history with that of American chocolate or any such consumer product.

to their music and listen to their favorite local singers that were banned during Taliban dominance, CNN reporters test Afghans on their knowledge of Western music and eagerly try to assess the competitiveness of American singers in such a new market.

A number of suggestions on possible ways to counter such invasions can be found in *al Kitkat*. The area in which the blind protagonist lives is a site of competing world cultures where British colonial institutions, such as *the Kitkat* Club endure and contemporary Western music coexists with Egyptian songs. One way to counter invasive foreign exports and compete with Western culture is to keep singing in the native language, old and new songs of quality. That is what the film's protagonist does with his son. The blind man invents his own songs. The film celebrates, as well, a reunion with the rest of the Arab world, which should be a part of any global cooperation plan. For a moment in the film, we hear from a radio, the Iraqi Nathim al Ghazali's popular song, frequently played at weddings across the Arab World, "she [the bride] is coming out of her father's home and going to the neighbor's house." We can only try to read the director's message behind the inclusion of this piece in his work. He certainly had reasons for his decision to make us hear a piece of this song over the voices of his characters during a conversation in the street.

As we see in the film and fiction, the area has been changing. It hosts several historical sites, which (like the *Kitcat* Club, in a sense) bear an enduring testimony to Egyptian encounters with foreign forces and influences. We learn from the Arabic language novella that *Imbaba* has been the most resistant to the forces of change. Even its nature revolted against French occupation. Its fruit sickened Napoleon's soldiers. On *al Kitkat*'s arch was engraved the memory of the end of the *Pyramids Revolt* of 1798. The

novella's characters recall that by *al Kitkat*'s marble columns, used to stand the soldiers of the allies during the war (111). They were mostly black, probably Afro-Americans, considering that they constitute a considerable Muslim population in the United States, and they would say to the locals "we're Muslims."[53] At this point, one cannot help picturing the American Muslim soldiers praying at a mosque in Afghanistan. The natives used to practice their English asking them for cigarettes. As transliterated in the novella, they would ask in mixed linguistic codes: "give me one cigarette ya khawaga," "ya" being an expression of interpellation and "khawaga" meaning foreigner and Westerner (such as British and French).[54] A line needs to be drawn between the quality potential of the American presence as captured in the first part of the exchange between the local people and the Muslim American soldiers on the one hand, and on the other hand the aggressive context of their presence and the far more violent history of the French and British in the area. The Americans were dragged into the region by the Europeans, or more precisely the European war that became a world war. Old World forces from Europe (and nowadays from the region itself, from pre/early Islamic times) forced Americans to enter through war. A better scenario might have been if opportunities like the "we're Muslims" moment had been taken and pursued. If more Americans, Muslim and non-Muslim, exchanged more visits with Middle Easterners and Africans and if more of the peoples befriended each other in peaceful contexts and non invading modes of

[53] One of the reasons for the large following that the Islamic faith has among African-Americans is its emphasis on the equality of all human beings. That is also the reason as well why the African slaves of pre-Islamic Arabia were among the first to join the prophet Muhammad in the earliest days of Islam.

[54] The generic term "khawaga" is, in a sense, symptomatic of the local population's lack of knowledge about and differentiation between the various peoples who make up "The West." It is telling of the fact that the natives, also, see the French, British and Americans as being all the same, allies in a war against them.

positive tourism, cultural dialogue and humane connection, they would have known each other's common humanity better and forged better relations. Instead, the aggressive encounters between the Western forces and the indigenous culture have outnumbered the positive contacts and introduced a number of negative changes in the local ways of life and death, as the film demonstrates.

The film is mentioned in *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*. Its author, Viola Shafik, states that *al Kitkat* was "one of the most successful Egyptian works of 1991" (57), and that it "ran for more than fifteen weeks in Cairo cinemas" (106). She includes in her book a few commentaries on the work. One of the passages offers a summary of the film. It reads as follows (italics mine):

> The blind Sheikh Husni owns an old house there [*al Kitkat*] in which several people show economic interest. Yusuf, Husni's son for example, wants to finance his immigration by selling it, whereas the neighbor, a wealthy butcher [named Sobhi], dreams of pulling it down and putting up a more profitable building in its place. But to everybody's displeasure, it turns out that Sheikh Husni has pawned his house to a drug-dealer in exchange for a daily supply of hashish. *In spite of, or just because of, his handicap*, Sheikh Husni succeeds in playing off all parties against each other and denounces their selfish intentions to the whole neighborhood (57).

In order to introduce intricacies that bear on Husni's life as an Egyptian blind man, it would help to recapitulate and elaborate on the above-presented summary. The sight-disabled central character of the film, Sheikh Husni, is a poorly paid and retired music teacher. He is an owner of property in the alley that he inherited from his father. The

property includes a family style apartment building referred to as "the house," and a coffee shop. Husni owns as well a space that he would later try to convert into a grocery store business. The café had been rented for a long time to a man called Boss Atia. Husni profited from that symbolically as well. His status as owner of the place helped him secure a part of his subsistence and affective needs. He was celebrated as a popular figure and offered three daily coffee servings gratis in his capacity as owner. He was called *Sheikh* as a term of endearment. The title is usually conferred on persons of Arabic Islamic knowledge and profession. In Husni's case, he was so called after his grandfather, as a remembrance of the founding father of *al Kitkat*. Husni was called *Sheikh* also, out of affectionate respect for his role within his alley culture. He was a central figure of entertainment and counsel in his community. He was a story and anecdote teller, a musician and singer who hosted hashish smoking nights. He was sollicited by neighbors for advice and intervention (for instance, he was called on by one of the alley characters to intervene in a case of marital crisis). We learn from the novella also, that he was occasionally chosen for the role of prayer leader called in Arabic *Imam*.

As times change and *al Kitkat* metamorphoses under materialistic and modernizing pressures, Husni's teaching pension and rent money become insufficient. He grows aware of an increasing incapacity to meet his expenses and obligations. He is also pressured by his sense of duty to help his son, Yusuf (the Quranic Arabic translation of the name Joseph), with his immigration dreams to leave Egypt and live in Europe. As Husni desperately seeks change and escape from a limiting reality, one in which he cannot get the help he needs for himself and his kin; he finds a refuge in drugs and develops an addiction to hashish. His drug provider, Haram, and Sobhi (the modernizing

housing entrepreneur mentioned in the summary) conspire against him in order to dispossess him of his father's house for their mutual profit. According to the deal they strike, Haram would trick Husni into giving up the house and sell it to Sobhi. The latter is willing to pay and bribe a high price for it because he appreciates its central location at the heart of Cairo by the Nile banks and its historic significance for local and foreign tourists. He intends to demolish it and rebuild in its place a modern and profitable apartment complex of the kind called in Arabic "imara" rather than house or "bei*t*." The imara or modern apartment complex tends to be impersonal compared to the kind of housing where Husni grew up, feels at home and is able to "watch" and care for his neighbors. Haram urges Husni to pawn the house building to him as a method of payment for the hashish that he provides him with. In his need, Husni has difficulty paying for the substance. His manipulative drug provider, Haram, takes advantage of his situation. Under the pressures of poverty, Husni finds selling the house to be the only way available to him for securing his daily dose of hashish and staying the happy figure he has always been known to be in his community. Haram makes Husni sell him the house on paper and sign the documents in a moment of hashish induced ecstasy. Within months, Haram goes through with his plan. He re-sells the property he bought with hashish to Sobhi for money. He forcefully exacts payment in cash from Sobhi and uses the money to acquire a new modern apartment for himself.

The transfer of ownership cannot be effected to Sobhi's benefit soon because the inhabitants of the house building are staying there. Husni sets in motion an intricate landlord/tenant game that is all too common in property matters of the Arab World.[55]

[55] The Algerian novelist Rachid Mimouni documents this legal fact in his novel *Tombéza*: "la loi les [long standing occupants of a property] considère comme occupants de bonne foi. En tant que tels, ils bénéficient

Husni still occupies his old apartment and the other inhabitants refuse to leave and demand payment from Sobhi to evacuate their lodgings. He keeps paying them and they keep taking money and staying. Husni's act, in a sense, benefits his poor tenants-neighbors. In fact, he tends to play games that help people who are low-income and blind like him, as we shall see in due time. Boss Atia plays the same game. He stays and keeps running the coffee shop. Boss Sobhi becomes exasperated after paying him repeatedly in vain. Animosity settles in to the point of violence as Sobhi hires someone to cut Atia with a knife in order to oblige him to hand over the coffee shop. Near the end of the movie, we see the coffee shop dramatically lost. We watch it being evacuated by Atia who has been renting it from Husni and managing it for decades. He was forced to abandon it through violent back stabbing by one of Sobhi's hired and bribed hands. We see the waiter, Abdallah, sad and weeping for the loss of the workplace he felt at home in for a major part of his life. Concerning Husni, however, the final scenes of the film are evocative of the first one: Husni is in his son's company, singing and laughing. Yusuf tries to get his father to admit that he is blind but Sheikh Husni playfully reiterates his usual claim of seeing better than everybody else. The film offers us a sense of how a blind Egyptian man could survive in reality, through oral self-education, emotional intelligence and verbal ability. Husni's humor, denial of disability and resourcefulness help him save what could still be saved, namely himself and his house for the rest of his lifetime at least.

It is worth remarking that neither in the film nor the novella do we see Husni evacuating the house. We can imagine that Husni did not die anywhere else than at home,

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de plein droit du maintien dans les lieux. Ce qui fait qu'en pratique, il vous est impossible de les expulser" (259 - 260).

that he did not die drowned, anonymous or alone in a stand (for cigarettes or alcohol) on the street. We can safely assume that (the real and fictional) Husni died the way of death that is highly desirable and dignified in his culture: death at a family home owned (not even in a hospital), surrounded by son and family. We can assume that based on a statement made by Ibrahim Aslan during an informal interview mentioned in Hassan Hamad's critical study of the novella. As mentioned earlier, we learn from Hamad's literary study that the real Husni died after the publication of the fiction work. As for the fictional Husni, we read that he died, in a part of the novella written in Yusuf's voice, in which the son recollects the day that begins the narrative and recalls that on that rainy day his father "who was [then] alive," talked to him (69). Yusuf writes in the narrative again years after that and there is no mention of Husni evacuating or being evicted from his home. Yusuf, in his turn, kept the house. Extending over the span of long years, the novella ends with the son in the same room of his father's house as the one in which the narrative presents him on the first page in Husni's days before the storytelling begins.

Haram and Sobhi targeted Husni and forged an alliance against him thinking that he would be an easy prey on account of his inability to see. They decided to alter the healthy working of his mind with drugs in order to make him sell the house. Husni, however, plays off his abusers one against the other and, against all odds, he manages to stay in his home environment. He has been all along a mastermind with a far reaching vision. It seems that Husni has independently and insightfully studied and envisioned the possible consequences of his signing a house sale for Haram and that he suspected plots from community members. Unable to see, Husni had to manage a number of difficulties daily in order to survive in his environment. Walking without a staff or a companion, he

had to get by and challenge countless physical and social obstacles. He lived with the suspicion and fear of being tricked by his sighted fellows. To counter such possibilities, he repeatedly voiced his suspicions by reminding them that they would be unsuccessful at tricking him

Moallem Atia, the coffee shop tenant and manager hears Husni negotiating his gratis demands with Abdallah the waiter, he walks up to him and tells him to stop thinking himself entitled to the free servings. That precipitates one of Husni's rare confrontational and serious statements. In a touching moment that endears him to the spectators, Husni argues that by rule of law, he has, as the owner of the place, a right to free orders for the rest of his life. Atia tries to set the record straight by pointing out "the ex owner!" Husni grows furious, ignores Atia's words and goes on with his tirade, making reference to laws from the Egyptian legal register and uses Arabic legal terms that he seems to know better than his opponents. Husni retorts "I understand the law, the law of *watha' al yadd wa attaqadum* [which can be tentatively translated as the law of handplacing and seniority] and the musical law..." With reference to property issues, Husni was evoking the aforementioned local laws that protect the right to stay of the person found to be in long standing occupation as tenant of a disputed lodging. That person would be said to have his hand placed on the property. Should matters reach court, it is more likely than not for evidence of physical standing and living in the lodgings to be allowed to override paper claims advanced by a theoretical landlord.

Husni communicates his understanding of his abuse through his language. When he found out (from his son presumably) that Sobhi was behind his misadventure in the Nile, he run to confront the neighbor in outrage and reproach. Sobhi silently listens to

Husni's tirade with an expression of tender understanding and amusement. That was one of the most touching and funny episodes of the film. It had the quality of the rare scenes that elicit tears and laughter at the same time. It was also, one of those scenes in which an actor cannot help laughing. The actor playing Sobhi could not help smiling as Husni kept shaking him. He also did not try to fight him back. This reaction could be read as a measure of Sobhi's ambivalent feelings toward Husni, a mixture of love and hate. In his revolt, Husni reiterates that he hates to be tricked or fooled, in a closer translation of his words "to be treated as if he were blind" (his expression in Egyptian Arabic being "ma bahibbich illi *yista'mani*"). The purpose of my close and literal translation of the expression is to highlight the originality and richness of the verb. It seems to be unique to the Egyptian dialect. It is a conjugation according to Arabic verb structure that takes up the classical and originally Quranic word for "blind" that is *a'ma*. It is noteworthy that the Egyptian expression as used by Husni seems to be absent in its verb form from literary and classical Arabic texts. He has invented or revived the expression, thereby supplementing the source language. It is successfully rendered in the English subtitles of the film as "to exploit" or "take advantage of [Husni's] blindness." However, the unique character and nuance of the Egyptian expression is lost in the subtitle translation. Husni repeatedly and passionately uses a uniquely Egyptian meaningful one-word expression that can be approximately translated as "to treat as if blind" or "blinden," combined as "to make blind by treating as if blind, unable to understand or act." The form used by Husni is a conjugation of the verb stem in the third person. The result in the infinitive form is *yista'ma*. "I hate who *yista'ma-ni*" that is "I hate who *yista'ma* me." Husni uses an almost untranslatable one word Egyptian expressive verb which could be

translated with a certain degree of satisfaction as "to blinden." There exists, however, another form that corresponds exactly to "to blind." Besides, this translation comes short in conveying Husni's understanding and meaning. What Husni is saying is "I do not want to be treated that way, I do not like whoever *mistreats-me-as-blind* (the hyphen is an attempt on my part to convey the one-word sense), i.e. whoever *mistreats-me-as-if-I-were-blind.* To treat Husni as blind implies insulting his intelligence by mistreating him as if he were "blind" or *a 'ma* according to what constitutes a major part of people's concept of the state of being "blind." To mistreat Husni as if he were blind implies in his eyes, an underlying belief on the part of his abusers that he is, because of his blindness, incapable of seeing and acting, defenseless, easy to deceive, and powerless despite his knowledge and his voice.

Armed with his knowledge of his rights, Husni envisioned that he could count on the law if matters came to court, which is unlikely to happen. The parties involved would think twice before resorting to the lengthy and unsure courses of law. They would count on bribing to secure an ear for their cases and bogus papers over the oratory of Sheikh Husni. It is an instance of their reluctance to approach courts that they decide to solve differentials among themselves using money and violence. At such a threat, Atia eventually complies and abandons the coffee shop. Husni is threatened in his life too, by Sobhi's attempt to drown him in the Nile, but his response is to confront his malevolent, Sobhi, and throw a tantrum to his face. That would discourage Sobhi from hiring someone to drown or assault him again. As far as legal documents and police force are concerned, we can fill in the blanks drawing on information suggested by Husni himself in the fiction and film about the slow process of the law in his culture. We can imagine

nothing happening and no eviction being forced based on what we see in the novella and film of police ways of working. So long as a higher impersonal authority such as the Government has not decided to overtake the area for tourism promotion purposes that require the demolishing of Husni's house for example, there is still hope for the man. There are limits to the violence that neighbors dare inflict on Husni. They fear his powerful voice. He is able to defend himself against them. He can denounce them and involve agents of law that would side with him over their unsound papers. Most of the times, the policemen of the area do not fulfill the orders of their superiors. They are easily tricked by cunning *al Kitkat* members such as Husni and Haram. The police do not hear or speak as they pass by the hashish smoking place where Husni and his band audibly talk and sing behind the door. They break up the gathering once and prepare to conduct the band to the police station. They become the laughing stock of the hashish smokers when they ask for the "blindman" who was with them. Husni sneaked and they did not see him. The police do not harm individuals they sympathize with at heart. They do everything they can to keep the "Government" out of their interpersonal relations. When they capture suspects they are again easily tricked into releasing them. Police complicity with and sympathy for popular community figures would prevail. That makes unimaginable a scenario where police help to drive Husni out of his house. Moreover, should matters reach the courts of law, questions arise as to the validity of the papers signed for Haram, a reputed drug dealer in and out of jail. Despite his abilities at fooling the police and his associates, and taking account of possible bribing, it is difficult to imagine a court of law siding with Haram and his papers over Husni who once had a

prize from the government for his musical education. Lawyers would defend him and he would defend himself voicing all it takes to survive.

Husni's chances of survival are favored by a culture in which it is highly unlikely of the police to evict long-standing tenants let alone original owners. The combination of such factors has the potential of helping Husni. Such a cultural trait as the slow course of the law in his society and the lax working of the police constitute a protective environment for him. The process promises to take at least long enough for him to finish his days in his environment and not die the kinds of death he feared such as death by drowning (which is evocative of a suicide that takes place in the novella, that of an internationally successful but poor soccer player, Hacine, whom Husni identifies with) or the lonely death of an old neighbor named Uncle Mojahid who died alone in his small stand of Egyptian beans on the street.

What there is in Husni's culture to hurt individuals with disabilities needs to be rectified and resisted. What there is in it to protect community members needs to be revived, saved and improved time and again in order to better the conditions of the Husnis of the Arab Islamic world. Husni's endearing insistence on his free daily coffees can be read as a call on his own behalf and others like him for a level of social service that offers a safety net to individuals with special needs, an environment where their basic necessities in terms of community housing and subsistence are ensured. That is not alien to his culture. He comes from times and places where apparently more people liked and afforded to be generous, Arabian Islamic style. The gesture of drink offerings used to be more liberal, respectful and genuinely affectionate. The novella more than the film gives us glimpses of such other times, before change. Husni's father for instance, did not

collect rent from the coffee shop manager who ran the place before Atia. People used to own and offer houses even, with largesse. The written and unwritten laws that still existed in Husni's time seem to have helped him stay at home till the end of his life.

A considerable space has been devoted in this work so far to the question of whether Husni lost or did not lose his father's house. Reconstructing the memory of Husni's life and death is fundamentally important. It means the difference between owning a home and being homeless. People throughout the Arab/Islamic world place a high value on home ownership. This cultural trait functions as a safety net for the disadvantaged members of the community, by securing them, at least, a roof over their heads within the father's house. We can further appreciate the implications of the degree of importance that the people of the area invest in saving the father's house and owning a house of one's own, by tracing parallels across world cultures. Researchers in the United States have studied Hispanic communities inhabiting a space called *Colonias* and situated within border zones in Texas.[56] The name of the neighborhoods connotes poverty and substandard housing given the defective state of a large number of the homes of the area. Some of them lacked running water, for example, while others were built over swamps without the owners' prior knowledge. The reporters observed that despite such problems, Hispanic families, who tended to invest life savings into a house as soon and as quickly as they could, would keep such houses, fight for them legally if necessary and still buy property in the area once they had enough money. The researchers linked these cultural facts to the inexistence of homelessness in the *Colonias*, as disadvantaged members of the society could count on the extended family to secure them shelter and support in the

[56] My statements are based on an American television documentary about the *Colonias* area.

father's house. Likewise, in *al Kitkat,* home ownership vestes such vital meanings in the eyes of its characters. It is a matter of life and death for Husni. His father's house represents the spirit and identity of his father, family and people. Throughout the Arab/Islamic world, even the expression "the father's house" is emotionally and culturally charged. As the Iraqi song that we hear for a moment during the film testifies, the father's home is the place where daughters, brides and mothers-to-be, and boys, fathers-to-be are cherished, protected and valued. It is the place from which the community knows and appreciates their worth, accepts, solicits and helps them secure the continuity of their people. In addition to all that, Husni's house represents his obligation to the special history and memory of the place. His father created the house by "taking" bits and pieces of construction materials that the khawaga were using to build *al Kitkat* area. He forcefully denied the theft charges and said that he simply took his share and did not prevent anyone else from doing the same. He would add that it sufficed that the khawaga were planning on using the materials to build a large pub for the consumption of alcohol (*Malek al Hazin*, 113). Husni's house was built at the same time as *al Kitkat,* out of his father's act of claiming the natural and constructive resources of his country as well as a share and place in his homeland. That is why it is not for sale. Moreover, if it were sold, Husni would sell something else, another piece of his soul and balance. More of the neighbors would do the same and possibly soon afterwards, modern apartments for the well to do and hotels for the tourists will be competing for the horizon of *al Kitkat.* According to such a scenario, the area will shortly become home-less. As a consequence, its original inhabitants will be left without a share of the pie. Once they lose their houses, they may end up homeless. The house of the father and family is the place to go back to

during meal times, at the end of the day, when a woman is divorced (like Yusuf's girlfriend), and when a man does not have anywhere else to go. Without a home, individuals find themselves entirely left to their own devices, possibly with the most dangerous consequences when such persons have disabilities.

Throughout the film, we get glimpses of what Husni is capable of doing when he is left to his own devices. Some of his own tricks, motor and boat rocking for example, are not only suicidal, but can also be harmful to other persons, especially visually disabled individuals like him. In a number of entertaining scenes, Husni indulges his passion for mechanical and mobile vehicles by riding motorcycles and rowing a boat. This wishful enactment of what sighted persons do is evocative of the scene of the blind man driving a car in the American film *Scent of a Woman*. The disabled could get killed during these desperate adventures were it not for the sympathetic and supportive presence of a son figure. Likewise in *al Kitkat*, Husni is twice saved by his son from a possible death by drowning in the river where he heads a motorcyle or rows a boat. We can read a different message in Husni's acts. He could be offering advice on ways to help the blind in the future, particularly in his part of the world.

In an August 9th 2000 episode of the American series *Ripley's believe it or not*, we see two men with a sight disability supporting each other to accomplish the feat of riding bicycles. The leading person, Dan Kish, is called "Bat Man." He uses a technique called echo location or sonar to become more mobile and even ride a bike. The technique allows people to perceive objects from a distance. Dan creates an echo by making clicking noises with his tongue or clicker, and the echo helps tell the size and location of objects around him. He is teaching others how to use this technique as well. In this light,

Husni could perhaps be read as an ambitious Egyptian who is as gifted and fond of movement as American individuals, wants to have what they have, and who intuitively predicts that knowledge and technology would someday enable the non seeing to safely ride motorcycles and even drive cars (as Al Pacino does in the American film). He performs life-threatening tricks out of a sense that the sight disabled could live better lives. It would please Husni's spirit if readers embark on the cultural work necessary to transport echolocation canes to Egypt and similar societies where the blind lag behind in terms of the services they are entitled to.

A downside to Husni's indulgences is that he endangers the life of another sight-disabled person, called Sheikh Abid, whom he convinces of getting in a boat with him. Husni loses control and the man falls in the water. The movie suggests the notion of harming other blind through the boat accident. The larger work of Aslan develops certain issues differently from the film. In fact, Husni's treatment of other blind persons in the novella is apparently more negative and complex than the film scene may lead us to think. In a part of *Malik al Hazin* titled in translation "The Hunter of the Blind" (11-12), we see Husni hunt for other blind men with the help of the coffee shop waiter, who sees them for him, in order to trick and rob them. Need drives them to malice. Husni had mixed treatments for the blind. While tricking some visually disabled men, he used to collect donations in the name and benefit of the blind. The narrative tells us that Husni helped many blind men. For instance, he found suitable jobs for a number of them. He harmed those he did out of need and because his time and place were changing.

The film gives us a measure of certain transformations that were impacting the affect of the community. The changes taking place are in a sense saddening. They have

an impact on human relations within the community. The materialistic conduct of certain community members threatens to deprive Husni of certain human resources of help. He had the basbousa seller read out the novella to him and in the novella, the coffee shop waiter watch out for other blind on his behalf and. Aslan describes that the coffee shop waiter used to see for Husni, to serve as "sighter" for him which would translate the coined Egyptian expression used in the novella: *nathourji* (p. 11) and *shawafa* (p. 132). Even though the end of his services was suspect, what Abdallah (the waiter's name) does for Husni is touching as a gesture of help and loyalty, yet despair, also. The poor waiter used to fantasize about leaving his job under his Master Atia at the coffee shop and devoting full and free time to hunting the blind for Husni in the whole area, finding them by the thousands and leading them by a staff to his friend's official desk to work on their money. Poverty and drugs made Abdallah hallucinate at the expense of the blind. The rise of modernizing individuals like Sobhi in the alley power structure would translate into a decrease in the number of friends and neighbors who are willing to see and read for Husni. The Sobhi types threaten the very existence of simple alley figures such as the loyal coffee waiter Abdallah and the popular basbousa man. In the novella, Moallem Sobhi is compared to a cancer threatening to destroy the alley. With Sobhi come the Harams who would trick Husni into signing what he cannot see and read for himself. This could be an occasion to reflect on the limited access to braille in Husni's time and place and to what extent assistance and access have improved since then. A tentative comparison with better scenarios from other times and cultures might be useful. I will read from an American newspaper article dated of July 26, 2000 and subtitled "Americans with Disabilities Act has made life for some '1,000 times better.' The

leading character of the news piece is a blind man named Thomas Heinl. He is a tax information specialist. To enable him to fulfill his professional tasks and progress in his work, "reading materials in Braille [were made] available at his office." With that he says "my chance for advancement has greatly increased." As he cites technological advances that facilitate his life such as verbal phone directories, he comments "I believe we still have 1,000 times more to go to complete the integration of the disabled into society." With respect to Husni, the Egyptian man of the 1930s-80s (my calculation), there is reason to wonder what kind of education was provided for him and other sight-disabled Egyptians to enable them to read and live independently. Husni may have asked for the story to be read out loud to him out of a preference for orality. He may also have done it for lack of options. We may question the availability of sufficient and adequate support services such as special legal assistance in matters of paperwork and procedures of importance in a blind individual's life.

The transformations that *al Kitkat* is undergoing bear on many aspects of neighborhood life including street names (treated like human characters) and housing styles. We learn from Husni that "Mourad street" was changed into "Market street." "Mourad" is originally the Turkish name of a political figure from the time of the Ottoman Empire. This information is stated in the novella as well (p. 112). The use of street names in the novella is meaningful. Most streets are given male names and are treated as if they were familiar human characters and family members from home. The renaming of "Mourad street" as "Market street" is suggestive. The modern market values impinging on the alley neighborhood favor the replacement of houses by impersonal European style apartment complexes and introduce changes in community relations.

The job market, also, has been changing for Husni. A musical career is a result of Husni's negotiations with the educational and employment system of his culture. The market seems to be particularly limited when it comes to an individual with a disability. Such a person has to choose carefully among a scarce number of vocations what makes a marketable life investment. Instead of studying to become a traditional Quran reciter or teacher of Arabic, Husni follows his passion for music and takes risks. It seems from the economy of scarcity we observe at work in *al Kitkat,* that poverty would have been still inescapable had Husni chosen any of the common work venues open to the blind in his culture. Apparently and as relations within the alley community demonstrate, material gain can be accomplished only through betrayal and deceit. Working heartily and decently at what one is passionate about is not sufficiently rewarding. Such limits exacerbate Husni's vulnerability.

Husni's mother blames his musical vocation for his poverty. She thinks that it would have been better if, instead, he had studied to become a Quran reciter or an Arabic language teacher. As we learn from the novella, Husni has deliberately avoided such an occupation. He was probably discouraged from associating with religion by the un-islamic behavior he observed around him and by the religionists' misreading and misinterpretation of Allah as a God who would punish human beings for laughing, contemplating beauty and dreaming. In the film, we will see an example of a guilty and repressed style of feeling in the character of Sheikh Abid. Husni's son disagrees with the mother and even thinks that his father should have invested himself even more in music.

Yusuf thinks that his father should have studied, taught and practiced music at a deeper and higher level. Being especially vulnerable from the start, a person with a

disability such as Husni owes it to himself to give all to his passion and go all the way in order to secure a happy place. In order to be recognized, persons with disabilities are required to be overachieving and extraordinary. Modest aspirations to be ordinary seem to lead to poverty and unhappiness. Overachieving to a certain degree in music earned Husni a graduation prize from the government but no special support beyond that apparently. We read in the novella that Husni worked with highly successful Egyptian singers and composers. It is worth asking why, assertive and creative as he is, he does not seem to have succeeded in spreading his name and realizing fame. His creativity is evident in the songs that we see him performing in the film. They represent a different style and genre. It is possible that he needs more work and support to be able to compete with the classical figures of Egyptian song on the one hand, and Western/American music as well as the Westernizing trends in Arabic musical clips, on the other hand.

The comment of Husni's mother on the alternative she thinks her son should have pursued, the study and teaching of Arabic, can be justified. Work in the field of Arabic language and literature is encouraged and valued in the Middle East (more than in francophone North Africa for example, where French has been privileged over Arabic). While it is difficult to support a hypothesis that Husni would have fared financially better if he had studied Arabic and managed (despite his blindness) to find employment as Arabic teacher, it is possible that he would have enjoyed the additional prestige attached to such a profession.

We can also speculate as to whether having invested in Arabic the level of excellence and creativity he manifested in his musical work, might have brought him more notice and support to create and live happily. Husni himself evokes the famous

Egyptian critical Arabic writer Taha Hussein who was blind as well. Husni speaks about him with envy. He states in the novella that he had to struggle harder than the Arabic language student and writer. Taha Hussein was supported in his language and literary studies by the Egyptian government. Scholarships made it possible for him to advance. He completed his studies in France and returned to Egypt for a writing and teaching career. He served as university dean. From the *chosen few* disabled we see and hear about in the Arab world, it seems that limited resources are devoted to notice and support other individuals like them. A small number of overachieving individuals with disabilities is selected. The support offered them is publicized and applauded. There could have been a hundred blind boys of Taha Hussein's potential waiting to be seen, presented, supported and integrated. Without adequate cultural and institutional support, individuals with disabilities turn to family and personal resources to survive and advance. Husni does not seem to have been able to support himself in the pursuit of longer and higher musical study. At that period of his youth, starting a family with a supportive wife have promised to help Husni and did help him see his way through a major part of his life.

It is worth noting that even though the film shows him walking through hard times, we learn from the novella that Husni has not always looked poor. The novella informs us that his state changed after his wife died. When she was alive, he used to dress better. It seems also that he used to fare better financially. The prices were lower. His gain from his coffee shop seemed secure. Moreover, we learn in the novella that his wife, Nour, used to collect Husni's salary directly from his educational establishment and leave him only cigarette money.

Al Kitkat situates Sheikh Husni within his community and reflects on his position and role as a blind man within the transforming *al Kitkat* culture, affect and environment. Change includes the physical space. Traffic invades the alley zone without any protection or guidance for the blind. Materialistic values impinge on the social space of Sheikh Husni and make it harder for the sight-disabled to navigate their ways in their home countries. Sheikh Husni dramatizes the traffic problem when he role plays sighted with the visually disabled Sheikh Abid. Husni offers to help him cross the street. When Sheikh Abid thanks him, Husni says to him that it is the duty of "the able-sighted like me to help the sight-disabled like you." The joke cannot be lost on the viewers. Yet, a serious point is made in the scene about space and safety issues concerning the blind. Husni and Sheikh Abid do not even have the kind of white canes that help with walking and crossing streets. In case the sight-disabled had ways of working with the lights, the traffic light equipments available in popular and poor areas of Arab countries may be less than adequate or reliable for the blind (as they break down frequently). The Egyptian traffic culture is challenging. Drivers tend to be less organized and respectful of signs than those in other parts of the world. The culture of the area is largely oral, verbal and gestural. Accordingly, a good deal of outloud body language is used by pedestrians for communication on the road. Drivers tend to be considerate of gestures, especially those made by individuals who act and look unusual and vulnerable, such as the waving and shouting of persons who limp, the elderly, the blind.[57] Such a statement (which can hold despite the high rate of road accidents in the Arab world) is based on observations of

[57] In Tunisia, an Arab country in North Africa with a similar traffic culture, I heard that a deaf mute person used to affect a limp in order for cars to slow down and allow him to cross the streets in his village. The trick used to work for him. It comes from the individual's cultural knowledge of a shared code that shapes his expectations and dictates his neighbors' actions.

traffic scenes in Egyptian films. It would be an interesting cultural road work to study drivers' responses to disabled individuals shouting and gesturing to cross downtown streets and freeways of non-Western societies, and to compare the findings to a similar study to be done in Western countries.[58] In Cairo streets, Husni relies on shouting to cross the street as he guides Sheikh Abid, all the while cautioning him from oncoming cars and scolding motorists for not minding them as pedestrians. The blind need to have a strident and assertive voice to survive in that kind of culture.

As a creative solution to this problem, Egyptians have recently come up with a new way of helping the sight-disabled in such situations, crossvoices combined with crosslights. In the scarcity of assistive devices - Husni and Sheikh Abid do not seem to have white canes (despite the fact that Husni has one in the novella) - famous movie actors and actresses were engaged and allowed to offer recorded directions from loudspeakers at intersections.[59] This is a creative use of popular and friendly actor voice. The idea has been that of imaginative cultural workers, probably artists and agents of ministries of culture and transportation. It highlights the orientation of the culture toward orality, speaking and hearing/listening. That is also in keeping with the dramatic (and pleasantly fussy) nature of the Egyptian people. Crossing the street becomes an experience that is warmly shared with a beloved cinema figure through feeling, voice,

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[58] An American channel has recently (October 2, 2000) aired a show called "Real TV" along such lanes. We see a lone man trying to cross a multiple lane freeway near Toronto, Canada. The speaker comments that asking nicely does not work, nor does waving hands or yelling. The man found a way that worked like a charm: pointing a fake gun. The speaker says that at this point all speeding drivers became polite. The man crosses several lanes with a pointed gun and a lot of eye contact. He approaches his destination. A few lanes short, the man is knocked flat on his back by a speeding car! Fortunately, he was not seriously hurt.

[59] I have read this piece of information in a French language Tunisian daily *Le Temps*. The newspaper article dates of April 28th 1999. It reads: "Pour aider les aveugles à se mouvoir dans les rues... Des stars égyptiennes donnent leur voix aux feux de circulation .» The lines translate as « In order to help the blind move about in the streets... Egyptians stars give their voice to traffic lights. »

performance and advice. Being especially vocal, the blind would welcome the sound of a human voice in the midst of the traffic noise invading their neighborhoods. Perhaps the Egyptian blind would prefer this kind of voice assistance to mechanical or digital gadgets such as canes emitting vibes or sounds. Even better, they may prefer indigenized assistances that combine humanity and technology at home (perhaps some sort of Arabian Nights'style magic carpet).[60] In *al Kitkat*, we see Husni rely on his voice to survive in his unsafe and competitive environment. He cannot confidently expect to find someone to help him cross the streets in the rush of bread winning.

The alley community members are overwhelmed by economic difficulties, which seems to alter their relations. They risk to radically lose the code of mutual endearment and support they grew up on. The formerly endeared Sheikh Husni becomes a target of individualistic scheming. He is the object of conspiring and divisive social and financial negotiations between more able-bodied community members. Former friends become divided between old bonds and new bondages. They betray mixed feelings toward Sheikh Husni's disability. They seem to treat his blindness in incidental and even considerate ways. Yet, certain individuals capitalize on his special vulnerability to the effect of jeopardizing his survival abilities and chances. The mixed feelings become more complex with increasing economic demands. Yet, there will be moments of crisis when we will get a glimpse of old love and mercy reviving for an instant between new enemies. That

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[60] In a famous operette, the old Egyptian singer of Lebanese origin *Farid el-Atrache* praises the magic carpet of Arab folklore. He asks the carpet to take him on a tour throughout the Arab world. He chooses the carpet over modern means of transportation. He sings:

O wind carpet, beautiful and comfortable, and all safety, better than the pullman
[take me to] Syria and Lebanon... Tunisia the green
I miss the Nile river... Egypt

In *al Kitkat*, the wife of Husni's neighbor proudly compares the car her husband has bought to the wind carpet. *The Arabian Nights* are a formative text in the Arab world. Husni would use storytelling to his purposes, to learn and teach his lessons.

usually translates into a passing gesture of understanding, tenderness and even help such as a scene we will witness of Haram offering a lending hand to Husni.

The film's opening scene offers the spectators a glimpse of the mixed views and treatments that Husni's community reserves for his sight-disability. Husni, an appreciated singer, lute player and storyteller is surrounded by friends in a small closed garage. Sheikh Husni seems to enjoy a special place among his friends. His blindness is playfully mentioned time and again and appears to be treated incidentally. The men tease Husni about his blindness and he responds with jokes. On the other hand, the seemingly incidental teasing occasionally borders on offense. Husni sings of the joys of company when a member of the audience betrays a playful fixation on his blindness and insistently asks him about how he became blind. He voices societal curiosity and the inquisitive attention of the larger audience:

- Tell me how you became blind
- What? Blind? I see better than you in the light and the darkness
- You see in the darkness only! Enough, leave that and tell me how did you become blind?

As a reaction to this questioning, Husni uses jokes and playful swearing to voice his statements on the treatment of his disability. He tends to avoid confrontation and uses funny, evasive and imaginative retorts to make his points about how his blindness is and should be treated. To answer the question, he makes up a fantastic tale about how he lost the light or how "the light was gone"- expressions that he seems to prefer to "going blind" as we shall see ahead.

Sheikh Husni's humorously evasive and escapist narrative as to how he acquired his disability sounds like a tale out of the *Thousand and One Nights*, (as a matter of fact, the *Arabian Nights* are filled with disabled characters). The characters in the *Nights* tell the stories behind their disabilities. The collection of stories forms and transforms beliefs about disabilities in the Arab Islamic world. We will get a glimpse of this formative aspect in Husni's transformative story ahead:

- I was ten years old. That was before my stepmother, may God be merciful on her soul, threw us out of the house. The air was still as if God's anger was bearing down on the earth. Yet, Satan woke me up. I discovered the best scene I had ever seen in my life. Guess what?
- The devil?
- The devil doesn't appear at dawn!
- A female Jinni?
- I wish! I saw a human female bathing!
- Did you know who she was?
- Your mother!

(Laughter)

- I stared at her. That was my mistake, the fact that I *stared* at her! Ten days later, the light was gone.
- You went blind? ['*amit* in transliterated Arabic]
- I said "the light was gone" [the word for light in Egyptian and Quranic Arabic is *Nour*, Husni says: "*Nour* was gone"] not "I went blind" ... Have vision!

Instead of actively and genuinely caring for his actual predicament, the sighted men demand the story of Husni's affliction for the purpose of their own entertainment. Husni rejects his fellow men's insensitive interest in the cause of his disability. He also imaginatively dismisses the social beliefs and moral interpretations that may be invoked to explain disability. His invented story hints at popular explanations of disabilities such as God's anger, divine punishment, devil possession and extraordinary abilities, the ability to connect with jinnis, for instance. Husni invokes such deeply rooted beliefs only to negate them. Tracing the roots of all such beliefs back to their formative texts and contexts warrants a book length study. For this part of the work, it may suffice to point out an *Arabian Nights* connection in respect to Husni's statements. His mention of God's anger and Satan in association with blindness could be read as an unrepenting critique of the attribution of moral reasons to disabilities and the belief that erotic dreams and acts are signs of a moral corruption and sinful nature that causes blindness. In the Italian Pier Paolo Pasolini's film adaptation of the Arabian Nights, an initial scene features a blind man. The setting is an Oriental open market where men are bidding for a slave girl. The master who is selling her has instructed that she be allowed to choose who can buy her. At one point, an old blind man bids for her. She looks at him and says: "if he were any good, God would not have blinded him!" Accordingly, Husni's passing linkage of susceptibility to satanic night and day dreams with divine punishment through blindening could be read as a reflection and critique of popular beliefs about blindness from old times.

In his account, Husni moves on to focus on other issues as they bear on his disability including the language used to represent the blind. Husni's sense of humor in

his response to his audience is touching and thought-provoking. It comes from deep feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. He is aware of his vulnerability. His jokes appeal to his fellow men's communal sentiments and values to spare him the hurt and harm they are bound and able to inflict on him. His forceful endearment and humble entertainment of his companions serve to appease them as he declines their claims, narrative or financial. Sheikh Husni has the power of his story-telling ability to decline his audience's demand to know how he went blind. His tale diverts his audience's attention from his person and directs their vision to complex and pertinent issues of their culture including the representation of the blind through Egyptian Arabic language.

In his fantastic account of how he lost his eyesight, Husni sets out to edit his society's customary language of representing the blind. At the level of language, Husni voices objections to the expression "become blind" or "lost sight/vision" equivalent to the transliterated Arabic verb "amit." His sighted companions use the term "blind" or "a'ma" in transliterated Arabic. The term is relatively pejorative and connotes total lack of vision. Husni explicitly, yet humorously, reiterates this objection to the language of representing the blind at the beginning and end of the above quoted exchange. Another scene in the film offers him the occasion to voice his reflection on and apology for the language used to designate his likes. He encounters another man who lost his eyesight. As Husni leads a conversation with Sheikh Abid, the latter imparts that he used to be a teacher of Arabic. Husni is surprised to hear that and asks him:

- Please tell me how did you work as Arabic teacher despite being - *no blame* – [an Egyptian Arabic expression that is relatively equivalent to "I beg your

pardon."] *kafif*, no blame I mean [*kafif* is a literate/literary classical Arabic term for *a'ma* or blind]

In this response, Husni draws on the Arabic language and revives an older word for "blind," a more respectful and merciful expression: *kafif*.

Husni says "no blame," an Egyptian expression of apologetic hesitation. It is pronounced *la mouakhza* in transliterated Arabic. It seems to function similarly to "excuse me" or "no offense" but its literal translation into "no blame" is more adequate and telling. In order to communicate his question, Husni has to name Sheikh Abid's matter of fact condition, that of being non sighted. The language available to Husni is limited. The customary word *a'ma* (blind) comes to his mind but he dismisses it. The spirit of his statement seems to say "don't blame me for being direct and naming your disability, don't blame me if the word *a'ma* is coming to my mind and threatening to come forth, don't blame me for the word I will use! Our everyday, popular vocabulary has become impoverished but I will go back to the source of our language and draw a better expression than *a'ma*." Husni chose the formal and literary word *kafif*. It is more nuanced in its use and translation than "blind." In both Arabic and English, *a'ma* translates only as non seeing. The expression *kafif*, however, combines different and positive meanings. *Kafif* is derived from the root *kaffa* which means to cease. Therefore, the adjective *kafif* could be understood to designate someone who ceased to see. It is considered to be a polite form of saying "unable to see." Another possible root for *kafif* is *kafa* and it means "to be sufficient." Compared to "a'ma," *kafif* has the advantage of connoting sufficiency and independence with respect to the persons who function without eyesight. It approximates in spirit the American expression "a person *with* a disability."

The related episode could be read as a wish on Husni's part to be a sufficient, independent person and to be called *kafif* instead of the harsh word "a'ma." Husni, the novella's author and the film director work on reviving and reactivating non pejorative expressions from the Arabic language source for future use by the audience.[61] Husni seems to be rebuking his sighted audience for using the harsh term. He shares the compassionate alternatives to such terms with a person like him, Sheikh Abid.

Husni's treatment of the Sheikh is a funny mixture of help and hurt, apparently inspired from the experiences of deception he has previously had with his sighted neighbors. Such a mistreatment seems to sow division and exploitation among the sight-disabled. The encounter between the two men verges on the comical. Sheikh Abid approaches Husni in the street mistaking him for a sighted person. Sheikh Husni takes advantage of the situation to role play a seeing assistant. He makes Sheikh Abid think that he is the sighted person he thought him to be. He guides him and meets with him subsequently to indulge in a curious simulation. He represents for him their environment as he sees and experiences it. He gestures frantically warning him against the approaching cars, imaginary and real. Husni exagerates in his warnings to Sheikh Abid and rebukes to drivers. We see him putting up a scene when there are no cars near the companions. Husni does that in order to further mislead and convince Sheikh Abid into thinking him sighted. He tells him about the changed street names in the *al Kitkat.* He asks Sheikh Abid questions and tells him about himself. He shares with him that his father had placed him in a Quranic school as a child. He adds that the school's location

[61] In one of his short stories about *a -kitkat* people and Husni, Aslan suggests another polite and compassinate term. It figures in the title of the piece *Fi Jiwari Tharir* in transliterated Arabic. It translates as "Near a Blindman." Compared to "blind,"*tharir* has subtle and merciful shades of meaning. It connotes

was in "Mourad avenue' which has been changed into 'Market avenue." It is significant that he shares this information with a non-seeing person. His statement invites his companion to reflect on what could be the impacts of such a change on the alley community and sight-disabled individuals like them. It can also be inferred from the simulation episode that the way Husni treated Sheikh Abid is in part a wishful statement as to how he would like to be called and treated. There figures also a latent wish for enablement by community members in order to attain decent self-sufficiency.

On the other hand, Husni's mistreatment of Sheikh Abid in misleading him into believing that he is assisted by a sighted person and in jeopardizing his safety could be read as critiques and objections by Husni against the examples set by the sighted for the treatment of the blind. It could function as a demonstration of how not to treat the blind. Nonetheless and overall, Husni's example with Sheikh Abid is an indication of how he wishes to be supported, protected, enabled, entertained and communicated with by his sighted companions. Husni does not want to be treated as a site of curiosity by his sighted audience. He suggests an alternative line of questioning disability, one that is motivated by pertinent concern and interest in the environment in which his people live.

Husni's curiosity as to how Sheikh Abid could have secured an employment as Arabic teacher departs in spirit from the inquisitiveness of his sighted companions about the cause of his blindness. Husni does not ask Sheikh Abid about whether he was born without the eyesight faculty or why he had lost it. He seems to suggest that the causes do not matter and that he accepts him for who he is at the present. Till the end of the film we never find out how Sheikh Husni lost his eyesight. There are no indications that he was

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vulnerability because it is derived from *tharar* or *thor*, expressions that imply "hurt," "pain," "harm." This term is used in a short story that highlights Husni's extraordinay sense of touch and sensual liveliness.

born blind. We see him teach his mother how to tell time from his father's watch. The scene is thought provoking and could be interpreted as a statement that he was born sighted. Otherwise, it could be read as a reflection of his management to learn how to tell the time on his own (in the absence of special watches for the blind in his time and place) as well as of his attachment and nostalgia to his father's legacy. Overall, we are left to infer that he lost his eyesight during his childhood. The novella and film leave it up to the spectators to imagine how he could have lost his eyesight in view of the surrounding signs of poverty. The *al Kitkat* space reflects the social conditions of its inhabitants. The availability of adequate and accessible healthcare is to be doubted. We learn in the novella that the eyes of Abdallah, the coffee waiter, were diseased. The eyesight of the friend who used to see for Husni may get poor. He is at risk of going blind for lack of care in his poor environments. He strains his eyes watching the moves and dealings of the trio Haram, Sobhi and Atia in an attempt to find out what would happen to the coffee shop where he has been working for a long time and in respect to which he has developed a strong attachment. Narrow alleys, crowded houses, shared facilities connote an unhealthy environment in which children would be at risk of contracting illnesses such as trachoma. We are left to imagine a similar cause for the protagonist's loss of his eyesight. In his exchange with Sheikh Abid, Husni seems to care for the accomplishment of the disabled person in view of the available opportunities he knows of. Husni finds Sheikh Abid's employment as Arabic teacher surprising. A conventional occupation for sight-disabled persons in the Islamic world is that of Quran reciter (we see an example near the end of the film). Husni's surprise at Sheikh Abid's profession indicates the limited number of work venues available for persons with sight loss. Husni's surprise at Sheikh

Abid's appointment could function also, as a reflection on the absence of teachers with his kind of disability in most critical subjects of learning. It seems that the blinds' lack of access to the profession has partly led Husni to doubt the ability of a sight-disabled person to teach Arabic or language. Husni himself used to be an Arab music teacher, (mainly an oral and auditory performance that would be less visual than language spelling). It seems to have been more common for the blind to be entertainers, Quran reciters, artists, singers and music instructors than teachers of other subjects.[62] An exception that Sheikh Husni, being Arab and Egyptian, would certainly have been aware of was the aforementioned famous Egyptian writer, professor and university dean who lost his eyesight as a child, Taha Hussein. Husni's asking the question despite this evident fact could also be read as a statement that the likes of Hussein should not be exceptions. Based on blind figures we often encounter in literary passages about ancient, old and recent times, it seems that the blind have always played the role of teachers and guides.[63]

Husni's surprise at Sheikh Abid's access to the position of Arabic teacher "despite" the latter's blindness is reason for thought. It indicates the scarcity of blind teachers in his society. Where have the traditional and natural teachers gone ? Apparently, costly systems and lengthy programs have been set in place to make it difficult for them to access high level learning and teaching. In times more simple, they could teach and learn. Eastern style learning through storytelling in communal settings

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[62] One famous Egyptian lute player and singer named *Sayyid Mekkawi* is sight-disabled. He is particularly renowned for a song titled "The Earth Speaks Arabic." He composed some of the songs that Sheikh Husni performs in the film. This expresses the interest and encouragement of the famous singer for the project of making a movie on the blind in Egypt.

[63] We encounter blind teachers in Algerian fiction, such as Mohamed Dib's *L'incendie* and Mimouni's *Tombéza*, as well as in novels of the Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun, *The Sand Child*, *The Sacred Night* and *La Nuit de l'Erreur*, for example.

such as local alleyways, cafes and markets seem to suit the blind better than isolated, lengthy and rigid systems, and solitary methods. Sheikh Husni and his companion seem to occupy a transitional and liminal space. Their times are ones of accelerated westernization on various fronts of Egyptian life and certain professions, such as the teaching of subjects that are close to the local identity are losing prestige in the market.

Sheikh Abid's answer to Husni's inquiry as to how he gained access to the Arabic language teaching profession has a subtle and humorus effect:

- Oh no, it's that I lost my eyesight on the job[64]
- Ah, an occupational injury you mean, ha ha!

Husni's joke comes from an experience of the frustrating status and limit of the profession as they bear on persons like him. The specialization in and teaching of certain critical subjects does not seem to be accessible to persons with sight disability. Arabic language and music teaching do not seem to enjoy the prestige and worth they deserve. Husni seems to be expressing disenchantment with the way Arabic is taught and learned in his time. He jokingly implies that it could lead to disability. It would help to speculate further on the implications of Husni's educational criticism if we pair his statement with his refusal to become a Quran reciter early in his life as he told Sheikh Abid. He seems to believe that both occupations tend to encourage rote memorization and unreasonable

[64] The expression "on the job" is not problematic in English. The preposition "on" is correct. As for the Arabic original, it is worth noting that Husni observes Sheikh Abid's switching from Egyptian to literate Arabic and corrects his expression from "lost vision *in* the job" to the right Arabic preposition which would be "during." This could be read as a reproach on the part of Husni to Sheikh Abid for his lapses in his use of the source language. He seems to find that such a switch is not in keeping with the title "Sheikh" that Husni would not pursue for himself. Such a correction could be read as a voice of what Husni thinks of the possible limits of specializing in Islamic Arabic language studying and teaching toward earning the title of "Sheikh." Husni did not want to be limited to the kind of study the blind were led to pursue. He did not want to invest in a study that did not guarantee perfect mastery of the subject learnt. Husni was modest with Sheikh Abid, yet it is obvious that by being tuned to everything he could hear, from music to literature, he managed to reach a level of Arabic mastery that allowed him to compete with and correct the Sheikh.

correctness of conduct over the critical faculty and sensual appreciation. Sheikh Abid had certainly learnt the Quran by heart. The memorization of the holy Book used to be a prerequisite to qualify for teaching Arabic. The Quran was revealed, read and written in Arabic. The text is considered the source of the language in its highest style. The film shows us Husni testing Sheikh Abid's moral sense and memory. Husni teases Sheikh Abid and embarrasses him by describing to him the beauty of the women passers-by that he "sees." Sheikh Abid asks Husni to stop and says expressions of apology to God for his sensual digression in listening to his companion's portraits of women. Husni has always been a sensual man and refuses to give up that dimension of his being. As for the memory part, Husni does in fact warn Sheikh Abid that he is blind. In the film, he imparts the information in passing after a memory test. The following exchange takes place and Husni uses literary Arabic expressions and parodies of Quranic phrases to respect, impress and correct the Arabic language teacher:

- ... People call me Sheikh after my grand father, the man who founded *al Kitkat* and planted the big tree where we met. Remember the tree? Remember it?
- Yes, yes I remember!
- And despite the fact that the blind does not equal the one-eyed nor does the tall equal the short... I studied music...[65]

[65] In the Quran, God often says in the moral and metaphorical sense "the blind does not equal the seeing." Husni takes that up to coin his Quranic style phrase which at surface level is simply a statement on his part that he does not pretend to be Sheikh Abid's equal in knowledge. At a deeper level however, Husni seems to be trying to warn *Sheikh* Abid. The statement could have called Abid's attention to what might betray his companion's blindness or at least any suspect behavior of Husni. Sheikh Abid misses the warning. If the part "the blind does not equal" exists in the Quran, Husni's additional note about the tall and the short does not correspond to any Quranic statement about tall or short persons. He seems to be inspired in his invented phrase by the inequalities he may have observed in people's unequal treatment for short and tall persons.

Husni asks Sheikh Abid in an implicit way to tune his memory to what he is about to say next. Yet, the warning is lost on the Arabic language teacher who continues to trust and follow Husni to the point of risking his life. Sheikh Abid would not hear or remember. An excuse could be voiced on his behalf. He was engrossed in trying to find his way. The lack of assistive devices made his place of destination inaccessible to him and left him at the mercy of Husni. He was vulnerable and uncritical and that made it possible for Husni to take advantage of him. Sympathy toward Sheikh Abid for being a low paid teacher could be the reason why Husni does not take advantage of him financially.

Husni was disillusioned with the financial rewards of his own teaching career. The first explicit complaint by Husni about financial insufficiency occurs in the following exchange with an old man of the neighborhood called Uncle Mujahid. The old man survives by selling a typical Egyptian dish of beans. Husni has a special consideration and affection for the man. The man used to be close to his father. Husni would buy the beans from him for the double purpose of helping him out and communicating with him. He would continue to do that even after the popular dish became expensive for a blind retired music teacher like him. Husni goes to see Uncle Mujahid and buy the dish as usual. He sees that the old man is angry with him. He tries to soothe him and induce him to talk:

- What have I done to make you angry ? Yesterday too you did not respond to me. I thought about it and tried to figure out why you were upset with me. By God's book, I couldn't know, tell me...

At last, Uncle Mugahid replies:

- You sold the house Husni, the house that I built with your father! We carried its stones on our shoulders!
- And why did I sell it? Wasn't it so I can live. *The pension from the Ministry isn't sufficient anymore* ... for my mother's medications... Even the price of the dish of beans - excuse me - has increased. [Italics mine].
- Will you buy medication for your mother with Hashish! Thank God your father died before seeing his son take drugs

In another scene, Husni goes to see the old man and talks more at length about his difficulties and sense of helplessness. He tries to explain the reasons why he took refuge in hashish and sold the house. He did that out of poverty, loneliness and helplessness. Husni gives another reason why he needed the money he could get from selling the house. He wanted to give money to his son to help him with the expenses of travel for immigration purposes. Husni says: "... the boy wants to leave, he can't accomplish anything..."

Husni would give his eyes to his son. In fact, Yusuf (the name of Husni's son) was a source of light for his father. He had his own way of seeing for his father, without being invasive, condescending or controlling. He would be there to protect him in cases of need. Losing Yusuf to a foreign country would deprive Husni of a warm family source of assistance. Nonetheless, given the limits of the local environment and in order to see his son happy, Husni was willing to help Yusuf get out of the country and give up on the help his presence offered. Husni's aggressor, Sobhi, had a grasp of the importance of Yusuf's presence to Husni. He promised to sponsor him by paying travel expenses on his behalf provided he intervened in his favor with his father and persuaded him to leave the

house. He tempted him thus in order to disable Husni. The departure of Yusuf risks to blind Husni, to take light away from him one more time. The strong bond between Husni and his son is evocative of the Quranic story of Joseph and his father Jacob (Yaaqub or Yacob in Arabic).

The story in the Quran features the disability of blindness at the literal and metaphorical levels. The 12th *sura* or chapter titled *Yusuf* in the Quran recounts the plottings of Jacob's sons against their father's favorite, their half-brother Yusuf. They persuade their father to let them take their young brother with them on one of their commercial missions. He takes a convenant from them that they would take care of Yusuf and protect him. Once out of his sight, they conspire to kill Yusuf but eventually decide to throw him in a dry well. They make up a story to tell their father that the wolf killed Yusuf. They stained Yusuf's shirt with fake blood and presented their father with it along with their story as evidence for the boy's death. At this point in the story, the Quran reads: "he [Jacob] turned away from them, and said: O my sorrow for Yusuf ! and his eyes became white on account of the grief" (Quran- 12: 84). Eventually, Yusuf would overcome, raise to royal status (through the divine gift of dream interpretation which makes him a favorite of the king) and reunite with his brothers. Knowing what blinded his father, namely his absence, he also knows how to heal him. Yusuf says to his brothers: "take this my shirt and cast it on my father's face; he will (again) be able to see" (Quran- 12: 93). Jacob finds the smell of Yusuf on the shirt and regains his sight. Names are important in the novella and film. Yusuf's name suggests the drawing of parallels with the Quranic story connecting filial love, family-community support and disability, congenital, acquired and exacerbated. What constitutes Husni's blindness are

largely his limiting social environment. The growing mistrust between the community members threatens to rob Husni of his human sources of light and reduce him to blindness. Husni's blindness does not make him blind or disabled, unable in any major life activity. What makes him blind is the lack of human love and support.

We learn from the novella that the name of Husni's wife was *Nour* which is an Arabic word for light (in the film, she is mentioned only once and referred to as "Yusuf's mother"). This refers us back to the fantastic story that Husni has told about how he lost his eyesight. This detail makes us recall as well Husni's conversation with Uncle Mogahed. In response to the father figure's reproaches for consuming hashish, Husni points out to the old man that he should not be blaming him because he did not do anything to help him when he was hounded by the house hunters. He had no one to protect him from the harmful plots of other greedy *al Kitkat* men. He points out that he had no one to communicate with: "... after the mother of Yusuf died, there was no one for me to talk to." Husni has been feeling extremely lonely and helpless since the death of his wife. The information about the wife's name combined with Husni's expression in his fantastic tale "*Nour* [the light] was gone," make it possible to read Husni as meaning that his disability started the moment he lost his wife, the light and help she brought into his life.[66] After her, in his environment and circumstances, it was difficult for him to find a female friend and communicate with her freely. While, this kind of separation affected other community members as well, it is worth noting that given his sightlessness and situation, Husni seems to be more severely frustrated in his need for female

[66] A program titled "Favorite Poem Project" aired by PBS, an American television channel, relates a relatively similar experience lived by a veteran blinded during World War II at the age of 18. His daughter participates in the program and shares with the audience her reading of Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est." She recounts her father's life. She voices the words he said when his wife died after about 25 years of

companionship, advice and assistance. Egyptian women are known in the Arab World, particularly through telenovellas and films, for the effective financial planning and support they bring to their families. This is supported by information provided in an article written by Nawal al-Messiri Nadim and titled "Family Relationships in a Harah in Cairo." The term *harah* means alley. In *al Kitkat*, Husni's wife used to manage his salary on his behalf. His mother would do that afterwards. Nonetheless, he needs a female friend. Several cultural factors prevent that. The major one is that he is consumed by his daily humorous yet sad struggles to survive the competitive material demands forced on him by his neighbors concerning the house he owns.

Through the story he makes up about the cause of his disability, he seems to imply that what aggravates his disability is a set of cultural codes that alienate men from women. Husni's vulnerability is exacerbated not only by financial shortcomings but also by his lack of female friendship. He inhabits a context of surveillance in which men and women hesitate to communicate with and look at each other.[67] In such an oral and communal culture, blackmail and slander are overly practiced and feared. We recall that in Husni's humorous account of the cause of his sight loss (quoted earlier), a member of the audience promptly asks him about the name of the woman he claimed to have seen bathing. Gossip and slander are excessively feared and contribute to a large extent in blocking communication across gender lines. Men and women are discouraged from

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marriage. The daughter said: "... it was very hard on my father, because he relied on her for a lot of things. And after she died, my father told his friend, 'God took my eyes away from me twice."

[67] This derives from social enforcements of a strict Islamic code of inter gender relations. Looking at a member of the opposite sex is discouraged in Islam. Casting eyes down and looking away are important components of the Islamic concept of shame (see Ceasar Farah's *Abstinence in Islam*, 104-5).

looking at and relating to each other.[68] Individuals who are particularly vulnerable because of a disability tend to suffer the most from such negative aspects of their cultures.

It is significant that in the beginning of his fantastic account, Husni situates the loss of his eyesight in relation to the imminent loss of the house. The audience could have inferred that the blindness and the loss of the house nearly coincided in time. Husni lost the house once at the hands of his stepmother, in other words because of the custom of polygamy. This interpretation is made possible by several facts that we gather through reading the film and fiction. Husni's mother was alive. No divorce is mentioned in the novella or movie. Polygamy has been a common practice in Egypt (more than in other Islamic countries). The connection between the house loss and Husni's blindness is highly suggestive. It seems that losing his home threatens to blind Husni once more severely and desperately than the loss of his wife or the departure of his son. Losing the house could make Husni a homeless lonely blind street beggar. He nearly lost his father's house more than once. If targeted by more powerful social or political forces, he could lose it without chances of recovery. Nevertheless, he would fight for his staying rights with all his vision and voice.

Husni complains about his lack of communication to Uncle Mogahid. He gets no response from the old man. Eventually, Husni realizes that his voice has fallen on dead ears. He was talking to a dead man. The old man had died, alone, in the street. The absence of listening ears and loneliness may lead to a similar end for Husni and his likes.

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[68] This is implied not only in Husni's humorous statement associating his looking or staring at the female form with the subsequent loss of light but also in another scene. He takes Sheikh Abid to the cinema and spends the viewing session telling him what he "sees" on the screen. At one point in the imaginary film he makes up, he tells his friend that he sees a scene of a man and a woman. He adds : "the girl looks at him in

Husni indulges in the denial of his gloomy reality and prospects. He seeks refuge in drugs.

The use of drugs could be considered part of the changes that are impinging on the community life. Such changes aggravate the vulnerability of persons with disabilities such as Husni. The element of drugs in the fiction has a touch of local politics and colonial legacy.[69] We learn from statements made by Haram that police rigor in its crack down on drug dealers has been inconsistent. He speaks in passing about periods when "they" or "the government" were rigorous and how he could always get away and fool the police. In the film, we see the police being lax about drugs to the point of acting blind, deaf and mute as already mentioned. As for colonial influence, Haram makes a telling remark at the beginning of a smoking and drinking session with a local couple. He comments that their setting is too *khawaga,* a popular Egyptian expression that means foreign, Western and mostly British (for French, the same expression is used alternatively with *Franghi*). He asks to make it more local and popular style. He said "this sitting is too *khawaga*." "Sitting" is a closer translation of his Arabic expression *a'da* "a way to sit," which is an important part of the setting and may differ from culture to culture. We gather from the statement made by *Haram,* the drug dealer of the area, that the British have introduced a certain style of consuming alcoholic beverages such as beer. We can

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a strange way." Making up this kind of scenes, Husni seems to be affected by these cultural facts in his condition.

[69] In a Tunisian novella titled *Attout al Morr* in translation *Bitter Berry*, we find a disabled (crippled) woman asking a nationalist young man to get her hashish in order for her to escape her limited reality and prospects. This fiction explicitly shows the French and their accomplices among nationals deliberately cultivate hashish and its use to serve the colonialist design of weakening native resistance. The disabled woman, Aicha, is saved from drug use. As a crippled woman at the time (in the 1950s), she could not have independent access to the substance. Moreover, her request awakened the compassion of the nationalist who felt obliged to marry her as no one else would crippled as she was. Nonetheless, we can stretch our imagination to speculate on what would have become of her had she found someone to get her the hashish.

infer from this that even if hashish had already been used before foreign presence, imperialist presence introduced a certain style of drinking and smoking. Egyptians such as *Haram* and his companions further egyptianized the style by mixing old and new ways. What *Haram* wanted was to celebrate hashish over beer. What he meant was missing was a fuller enjoyment of hashish while sitting on the floor Arab style as he was and flirting with his companion's wife. The setting is also remindful of pre-Islamic and post-colonial un-Islamic nights of excess in the styles of the Arabian tales and Moorish Spain, (such a carnal indulgence and waste of time are the reasons behind Arab defeats). Drinking wine and alcohol, like the consumption of hashish, and illicit affairs are forbidden in Islamic principle (secularized practice however, departs from the Book of Islam, the Quran).[70] Such practices tend to have a most severe impact on vulnerable individuals with disabilities. Husni, despite his selective lapses, is endowed with the extraordinary ability to *see* the ills of his community. He allows himself to indulge his passion for hashish, the only sin of his life as he once says. He also tends to make erotic comments. However, when he has an occasion to flirt with a widowed female childhood friend, he seems to choose to set limits and abstain. He tends to catch the illicit acts of marital betrayal in his neighborhood. He tries to keep a watching eye on the honor of his neighbors. In fact, Husni is portrayed as someone who knows all and hears all. This functions at more than one level. It tells on different occasions about the importance of hearing and speech for the blind in an oral-oriented culture. It represents also one of the blind man's roles in his society, that of the watchman for the honor of the community.

[70] In post-colonial periods, a number of governments representing Islamic societies, allowed the commerce of alcohol. An irreversible course was set in motion when colonizers encouraged and spread alcohol

Husni for example gets a sense of the infidelity of a neighbor's wife as he goes up the stairs and hears her lover stealthily descending after a visit during her husband's absence. Were it not for his blindness, the lover would not have passed him by on the stairs almost brushing sides as they were. If Husni were a sighted person, he would have slowed down and perhaps greeted him. Husni indirectly confronts the wife but does not tell on her. He believes the family to be an important unit in the community. Husni would even intervene on behalf of the shy husband and accompany him on his visit to his mother in law in an attempt to find his wife and persuade her to come home with him. Husni also catches Haram hiding in the house of a neighbor after betraying him with his wife. Husni probably knew that it was Haram (he had a strong sense of smell to identify persons) and this time he makes a scandal holding on to him and shouting "thief!" and calling on the whole neighborhood with his strident voice.

Haram and his likes could be read as the embodiment of the ills that threaten vulnerable individuals in the community. Such ills include individualistic greed, deceit, adultery and theft. It is possible to argue that Haram resorted to drug dealing because of poverty and lack of employment options. His wrongdoing was also made possible by lax police ways of working. Yet, in his intention, Haram was willing to harm and sacrifice his blind neighbor for material products of Westernized Egyptian modernity. He was greedy in his blind pursuit of the goods of modernity. He was selling the substance for the purpose of attaining a different aspect of Western style modernity. He would use the gain he acquires from drug dealing to join in the Western style modernity rush. He would

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consumption. The westernizing choices of post-independence governments worked on consolidating the acquired foreign styles. They shaped societies that find themselves open to drug traffics made possible by immigration

use the profit to acquire a modern apartment at the expense of Husni. His practices drove Husni to sell the house. That was Haram's intention. He must have considered the consequences and chosen to sacrifice Husni. He undoubtedly knew that losing the house threatened long term to impoverish Husni and predicate for him an end as a poor, homeless man living in a rented room, working behind a cigarette or newspaper stand to supplement his pension or squatting by the walls of the alley and begging (blind beggars are a common sight in Arab Islamic cities), dying alone behind in his stall like Uncle Mogahed. *Haram* does not seem to have minded such a predicament as he tried to dispossess Husni of his house.

Husni does not allow others to place him in a role of victim. He is touched to the core by the end of Uncle Mogahed. He sees to it that the men of the neighborhood organize to perform the customary funeral duties in honor of the old man, with a microphone. He refuses to sit back and watch passively as opportunists plot a similar end for him. Husni's survival trick is to combine storytelling with the technology he can access, a microphone to tell all, the whole story. He denounces the abuses of his neighbors to the whole neighborhood. He speaks for the community in order to prevent sad endings. He uses the funeral performance to teach his people a lesson by adapting the custom to his own purposes and the needs of the community. The Quran reciter asks Husni whether as rumored he sold the house to the "Franghi." This Egyptianized French expression tends to mean the Frenchman. Husni answers that he sold it to Haram, the drug dealer. He seizes the occasion to counter his lonely suffering, speak, make his voice heard and inform the present audience about the truth. He tells the story of the house and the major role of the local drug dealer in its loss. Husni manages thus to represent Haram

as the most deserving of blame for the loss of the coffee shop, (in the novella, most of *al Kitkat* characters blame and curse Husni for the loss of the coffee shop which they attribute to the mistake he made in signing the sale papers for Haram). Husni goes as far as to reveal where Husni was hiding hashish, in his lover's house, the wife of an *al Kitkat* neighbor. The microphone used to diffuse the Quranic reading is on. The larger neighborhood and audience hear it all.

Husni stages his revelations in an attempt to save *al Kitkat* from negative changes. He wants his neighborhood to stay the same as much as possible and he is determined to stay in *al Kitkat* till he dies. In order to secure both, he addresses the larger audience of *Imbaba* in Cairo where the microvoice reaches. He wants his people to help him save himself and his home *al Kitkat* by taking matters in their hands. Eventually, Husni manages to keep the house in part because it remains in individual neighbor hands. If it were a matter in which higher and impersonal authorities such as the government had actively a stake, Husni might have been more seriously threatened. If it were a situation in which the government had decided to tear down Husni's house to modernize the alley and make it a tourist market attraction or an industrial zone he might have figured among the individuals who get sacrificed for such ventures. A New York Times article of August 18th, 2000 describes a similar process that is taking place in some of the historic areas of Cairo. It is titled: " a Tentmaker's Wish: Make the Bazaar Splendid !"

The ultimate threat facing the *al kitkat* as a whole and vulnerable individuals like Husni in particular is that of being taken by a "khawaga," an Englishman with property ties in Egypt. *Al-kitkat* men read and speak about a newspaper article on a "khawaga" claiming ownership paperwork to *al kitkat* lands. This note is not fully developed neither

in the novella nor in the film. It remains at the stage of newspaper rumor. However, the fears it provokes sow further confusion and division amidst the community and feed the greed of changing alley members. Entrepreneurs feel uncertain about what to do as they fear to see their projects aborted and demolished by a court decision in favor of the Englishman. Others feel that they cannot afford to wait to see this happen and believe that they may reverse such a possibility by seizing property and projects as soon as they can. The note is left open. One wonders what would be the impact on individuals like Husni if Westerners revisited Egypt to occupy and exploit its alleys. The changes they would bring may be too drastic for him. They may deprive him of possibilities of warm native language human voice personal assistance, the kind he received from other threatened neighbors such as the old bean seller and the coffee shop waiter. On the other hand, visits in person and in print of cultural workers, consultants and advisers from Italy, Britain and America may help the likes of Husni and improve the quality of his life. Disability studies on disabled Egyptians by natives of the larger culture as well as interested Western disability consultants from leading countries in the field such as America would be highly useful. The disabled in countries like Egypt need much of the digital, technical, mechanical devices, human resources and services that seem to be more easily available to the disabled in the USA. Lack of services drives them to dream about better lives elsewhere.

Husni's son dreams about leaving the country to Europe. Husni supports his son's project. This support functions as a subtle statement on the blind man's part. It possibly articulates his reflection on his position within his own society and space. It seems that he finds it unlivable. The able-bodied young members of the society who cannot accomplish

their dreams of possessing a family house and a job plan to leave. The disabled who suffer more from loneliness and unemployment yet may be more sensitive and attached to their place only wish to escape. They long for better conditions at home. For Husni, his love of life, his homeplace and family and community prevail. This love for the home culture seems to have prevailed on the son as well. Husni does not lose his son to immigration. Yusuf stays and starts to help his father with his motorbike riding tricks. As a consequence, Husni is able to continue enjoying his way of life. His treatment of his condition continues to be dismissive and humorous till the end of the film. He continues to sing and laugh. He keeps indulging his passion for the mechanical. Near the end of the film, he rides a motorcycle once more, this time with his son behind him after singing together about "escaping the day and the place."

Sheikh Husni closes the film on a renewed gesture of denial and defiance. Admitting his blindness would involve accepting the fact that he is vulnerable and unable to do everything the sighted do. That implies also admitting that he had to sell the house mainly because he was blind and unable to read or have his documents transliterated in braille for him. It involves also facing the bitter truth that much of his experiences are happening because he is blind. Admitting that his friends were taking advantage of his disability threatens to disable some of his vital emotions : his trusting love for the neighborhood men and his life embracing spirit. Husni carries on with his way of life based on the endearment of his neighbors. We can imagine him continuing to wish for a kind treatment from his neighbors. He will continue to hope and urge that they offer him, as usual, three daily servings for free at the coffee shop that is part of his father's house. There is hope that Husni will be helped.

Caring gestures are still to be found under the surface of intricate mixed feelings and treatments toward the blind man. Husni once went to Haram's place to find out what was going to happen to the old house he had sold him. It seems that Husni was secretely hoping that in case the sale was effected, the drug dealer would at least symbolically and kindly reverse the selling by keeping the house safe and unchanged. Haram scolded him and tried to evade answering the question. It seems that Haram wanted to spare Husni the pain and guilt that a serious mood and an immediate answer would exacerbate. Yet, he would still answer Husni and inform him of the truth, namely that the house changed hands and that Boss Sobhi would tear it down in order to build a modern apartment complex. Husni wanted also to borrow a sum of money from his drug dealer. Haram harshly refuses. Some time later, after three sleepless nights in jail, Haram comes to the coffee shop to see Husni. He sits down at his table and gives him the money he asked for before he goes to sleep. He tells him to take part of it as a monetary payment for the house (a few hundreds to clear his conscience!) and to treat the rest as a loan. Despite the ambivalence and partially self-serving nature of the lending gesture, there is human kindness in the move. Deep down, Haram has a good deal of affection for Sheikh Husni. He may have been feeling guilty for making him sell the house for drugs. Yet, the reality was so harsh that community members felt obliged to hurt and betray each other in order to survive. However, there is reason to hope that they will put out a helping hand when they see one of their own in need. Father figures are important in the culture of the area. Husni cared for his father's friend, the bean seller. Husni is called Sheikh after his respected and remembered grandfather. Husni and his son would do anything for each other. Haram deeply cares for older Sheikh Husni and regards him as kin. He would not

go to sleep without having spoken with him and loaned him the money he asked for. There may be hope as long as *al kitkat* is still in natives' hands.

Husni survives and keeps his house thanks to his resourcefulness and an enduring set of values that connect the people of *al Kitkat*. Husni will survive against all odds. In his culture, the blind need a strong and articulate voice to live. In the Arab Islamic world the blind tend to be verbally assertive.[71] Their apparent verbal aggressiveness tends to be misunderstood. A reading of Husni's story and his well-founded suspicions might be helpful in understanding the reasons behind the blind's need for a self-defensive voice. Husni has a powerful voice and an eloquent tongue. Were the threat of the alley's overtaking by an Englishman to become real, the blind man can and will speak against the exploitation for his own sake and that of his people.

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[71] The fiction of the Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun presents examples of this inclination.

Conclusion

The final note of the part on *al Kitkat* can be read as a thesis conclusion in its own right. It connects with the *Tombéza* chapter in particular. In case of (neo)colonial aggression, we can imagine Husni acting to the best of his abilities to save his country and using for that purpose all the available resources, of memory and technology as well as combinations of both. He, like Tombéza, will employ verses of *al Qur'ăn* and media of communication to voice his message. Nevertheless, it will be useful to attempt writing a conclusion to the present dissertation, which I regard, primarily, as an open-ended project and a beginning.

The concept of "voice" is central to my conclusion because it is intimately related to what I have been trying to accomplish in my work. My critique of misrepresentations of the disabled in Post-colonial Arab/Islamic societies is an attempt at re-representing them. That includes, among other senses, representing a category of characters and persons who, because of their physical features, have been considered to be non *présentable*, with a French pronunciation as a cue for possible Post-Colonial connections. I argue that one of the reasons why the disabled are deemed unfit for sight in North Africa is their societies' assimilation of European norms of *mode* and *physique*. This internalization is manifest in considerable part in code switching in favor of certain French expressions, for example: *présentable*, *normal* and *handicapé*. Accordingly, able-bodied Arabs/Muslims see their disabled fellow citizens as deviant from the new look norms, are unable to accept them and by extension, reject and oppress them.

We see a wide range of ableist oppression directed against individuals with disabilities in the select works of fiction. The fictional representations of the plights of the disabled mirror the mistreatment of persons with similar conditions in reality as we can gather from observing their positions within their societies through the media, rare sociological studies and medical literature. In my opinion, characters with disabilities in fiction represent in large part real individuals in similar states. They are not entirely metaphors for their lands. Nevertheless, the metaphor-person duality is almost inevitable and worth exploring case by case. On many occasions, a metaphorical reading of disability teaches us about the disabled characters' context. A case in point is *Pingouin*'s disability to move, which I treat in the introduction.[72] What I would like to caution my readers against, however, is the interpretation of disabled characters as metaphors of anything but, disabled persons.[73] We have a good deal to gain from acknowledging the disabled persons in disabled characters. That is a major motive of what I try to do in this project.

I document and demonstrate the predicament of the disabled in my culture and, by the same token, defend them. Husni, like many blind men in the streets of Arab/Islamic countries, speaks for himself loud and clear. *Pingouin* is in Mimouni's words *diserte* (eloquent) and stands for many women of her wit. A question to ask is whether such

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[72] It is worth adding that *Pingouin*'s story is telling about a certain code switching in her context. This is an open note for the readers to explore the implications of expressions such as, *fiancé* and *robe blanche* in a French language fiction about Algeria.

[73] It may be useful to point out that writers from a disability perspective themselves, possibly due to a hard-to-escape double consciousness, lapse in parts. For example, Sanjeev Kumor Uprety in his brilliant article "Disability and Postcoloniality in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Third-World Novels" published in the *Disability Studies Reader* of 1997 (366-381), interprets the sterilization performed upon the midnight's children to be "a fictional representation of the forced vasectomy that was imposed upon the subaltern by police and state power during the emergency period in India in the seventies" (375). The practice can be further read, however, as a fictional representation of the various (test)ectomies performed

representative characters can be said defenseless. The answer is that as we see in their narratives, they are oppressed, in large part and on many occasions overpowered by able-bodied majorities within their societies. We see them struggling to defend themselves, voice their concerns and tell their stories. *Pingouin* retells her story as many times as her doctor asks her to. Husni uses loudspeakers to tell his larger community what is happening to their society. Fatima has an argument with her storyteller regarding her narrative treatment and recasts her own story with an emphasis on her social mistreatment. My representation of these characters is an attempt at helping them to defend themselves by projecting their voices to a further reach and telling their stories to a larger audience. The world is bound to gain from allowing them to fulfill their potential, live a full life, share their stories, teach their values and make their contributions toward a safer global village and family. Husni tries to root out drug dealing and marital betrayal from his community when he denounces secret dealers and lovers. We can read the creative energies of the disabled women in their words and tactics. We can assess the potential contributions of such characters when we follow the Quranic directive to look at a person's heart, as Allah does, instead of focusing on the image. The heart can show that a disabled person's impairment is only physical and partial, and that he needs compassion (as we all do, albeit in a different degree and form) in order to surmount any handicaps that his environment and society may present him/her with.

In this period of Arab/Muslim-American dialogue, my intended audience is international. My American public readership includes American disability scholars in the hope of seeing them engage with Arab/Islamic North African and Middle Eastern

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upon the disabled precisely. This note may help make us more careful not to overlook the disabled in any sense.

creativity. This project has been a place for me to teach my American readers about aspects of Islamic, Arabic, North African and Egyptian cultures that are relevant to issues of disability and beyond. One purpose of the general information that I offer, particularly in the chapter on *al Qur'ān* such as, the long linguistic, literary and theological view - for my secular scholarly project is both faith informed and informing - on the *basmalah* expression "in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Compassionating," is to explain to American readers the true and positive meanings of certain common Islamic phrases that they have been hearing about in the recent past, negatively on occasions.[74] French language speakers in the large sense are addressed as well and invited to reexamine their standings on questions of disability and Post-colonial relations in light of Arab/Muslim responses and American sensibilities.

My fellow North Africans, Arabs and Muslims are a major part of my audience as well. In my chapter on *al Qur'ān*, passages from our Holy Book are included at a certain length in order to offer a context for the verses treated at a given point. For the sake of variation and out of consideration for my Arabic reading audience, I start with the Quranic passage occasionally, rather than the English translation.

Among my Arab/Muslim audience, I address the able-bodied and the disabled alike. I appeal to the former to help their lesser able fellow citizens and to the latter to further pursue their self help endeavors. It is my hope that the disabled in my area of the world become all literate and articulate in all the languages that they can learn. The teaching of foreign languages to the deaf, blind and developmentally challenged, among others, needs to be pursued so that they can learn about different realities and aspire to

[74] It may be helpful to revisit the translations of al Batouty's case, the pilot of the well-known doomed Egyptair flight.

better lives. The conditions of the disabled are inseparable from those of their societies as a whole. The improvement of the positions of their fellow citizens in the large sense should have a beneficial effect on individuals with disabilities, of course provided that the public is educated by various teachers and made aware by the media regarding the problems of the disabled. When the people are educated, free, fulfilled and prosperous, they can be generous. When they can own the fruits of their labor, in short when they have, for example housing and business, they can share and give. They cannot give when they "have not" or when the resources available to them are made scarce.

In this project, I often demonstrate situations of scarcity in various senses. My purpose in doing that is to explore their repercussions on the disabled and able-bodied parties involved. This part is meant to address and relate questions of purpose and audience. I anticipate, particularly from some of my fellow North Africans, that they accuse me of displaying our dirty laundry and criticize me for replaying Arab/Islamic stereotypes. That could be directed respectively at my comments on Fatima's secluded life in her family's prison house and my observations on the practice of physical punishment in traditional Quranic schools. My self-defense against such reproaches is the affirmation that those are facts of our societies in certain contexts and that they bear most negatively on the disabled as I demonstrate consistently with the purpose of my project. If I betray in any degree, it is to serve and love my culture and people. Furthermore, I have been trying in my work to balance my representations of my culture by combining my critique of its negative aspects with a celebration of its positive points. The objective of my balancing acts is to do justice and give credit where due, and at the same time offer a faithful and global view of Arab/Muslim societies.

Moreover, disabled and possibly able-bodied individuals with disability sensibilities may catch instances where I, inadvertently, "use" disabled characters and represent them pejoratively. In such a case, I would blame the double consciousness that one (even the disabled within and among themselves) may develop as a result of living in ableist societies. Worth reiterating, however, that I have been driven by positive intentions. One has to be blind not to see that, an expression that can be read as symptom of ableist consciousness. It is the work of disability scholars, including myself, to purge our languages of phrases that are closely or remotely demeaning to the disabled. This project sees the beginning of such work on my part with a focus on Arabic social language.

Finally, I would like to close with a note about certain points that I make and that may seem to be in contradiction with others. I would like in this part to bring up a few discordances for the sake of argument. In my chapter on *al Kitkat*, for example, I write about the father's house in positive terms whereas I do the opposite in my chapter on *l'Enfant de sable*. A possible way to resolve the seeming contradiction is by affirming that both representations are true. Alongside happy households, there exist prison houses in the Arab/Muslim world. Rather than contradiction, the case is one of conflict between good and bad, to put it in simple terms. Fatima's predicament in the family house make us think about what might have been, a better scenario, a potential for bonding and support that her family members, for different reasons, chose to lose. Moreover, my argument that Arab/Muslim disabled women suffer most severely from their societies' treatment of disability is an open one. In certain cases, they do benefit from a special protection as one can observe in society. Some of them may "benefit" from their isolation

as they find themselves with solitary time and quiet to read, study and become well learned, provided they are literate. An educated Arab/Muslim woman with a disability may receive a special recognition and support, particularly thanks to programs of international education and cooperation.

Worth remarking at this point as well that not all the westernizing changes that are taking place across the Arab/Muslim world are essentially or irreversibly negative. We can juxtapose the Beethoven fountain that Ben Jelloun writes about, as mentioned in the introduction, with a special space called "Miami" in Tunisia. It is a complex of cafés and restaurants by le *Lac de Tunis* that bear, in major part, the names of American places such as Miami, Miami Beach and Las Vegas. Such a place is definitely open to criticism and improvement. What I would like to point out, however, is that this space benefits in a certain measure disabled individuals living in Tunisia. There, particularly in the summer, we can meet a person that I would call the "Jasmine Lady," a girl in a wheelchair who sells jasmine necklaces. There, we can also help a French deaf mute woman by purchasing the key chains that she sells and that feature the names of various countries in the world inside a colored glass shell. That is to say that Miami is at least a place where disabled persons are seen in public more frequently than in other places and where they cease to be metaphors in Tunisia. To be sure, such individuals need much more help and can do much better than that. We can learn how to help them more humanely and efficiently by emulating the disability services and counseling that we find in the United States, where the treatment of the disabled is, in many cases, more Quranic than in Muslim societies.

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