

**An Indecent Society:
Humiliation as a Catalyst for Migration in North and West African Novels in French**

Prof. Mary Vogl

Abstract

While many literary narratives of migration over the past century have probed the humiliation that immigrants feel in the host country, this essay considers novels in which protagonists flee a home country where their self-worth is trampled. Three novels by Moroccans and one by a Senegalese give voice to those who desire to leave their country to escape the humiliation cast on them by cruel fathers, violent authority figures, or by the failure of the state to create the conditions necessary for a dignified life. Indignation and revolt may lead to a positive outcome but when the odds against the protagonists are too high, the result is resignation and self-destruction.

While many literary narratives of migration over the past century have probed the humiliation that immigrants feel in the host country, this essay considers novels in which protagonists flee a home country where their self-worth is trampled. Three novels by Moroccans and one by a Senegalese give voice to those who desire to leave their country to escape humiliation cast on them by cruel fathers, violent authority figures, or by the failure of the state to create the conditions necessary for a dignified life. Indignation and revolt may lead to a positive outcome but when the odds against the protagonists are too high, the result is resignation and self-destruction.

Globally, international migration is increasing in scale, with an estimate of nearly 272 million international migrants or around 3.5% of the world's population (International

Organization for Migration). Morocco's diaspora is estimated at 10% or more of its total population (Alaoui 7, Vermeren 210), whereas Senegal's diaspora of nearly 600,000 represents around 4% of Senegalese overall (International Organization for Migration n.p.). Although these countries have a reputation for political stability rather than violent conflicts, famines, or massive ecological crises, many inhabitants, particularly the youth, see their only hope in leaving.

Structural adjustment programs promoted by the World Bank and IMF from the early 1980s promised dynamic economic growth, yet Sub-Saharan Africans saw declines in per capita income, industrial and agricultural production, exports, and investment. At the same time there was a rise in unemployment, food insecurity, and environmental degradation. By the mid-1990s, the incidence of poverty was estimated to be as high as 40-66% (Stein and Nissanke 402). In Morocco, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line increased from 13% in 1990-91 to 19% by 1998-99, and 25% by 2005 (Catusse 17). The economic reforms required the governments to keep public expenditures low, which meant they provided fewer basic public services. Privatization ended up benefiting a small number of local investors and some large foreign groups, and it further concentrated the country's wealth and power (Catusse 9). With high rates of unemployment, particularly for young people and the rural population, migration becomes appealing.

The economies of Morocco and Senegal have also suffered from droughts. Senegal had six major drought events between 1977 and 2002 (World Bank Group). Morocco has also faced severe droughts that force people from rural areas to migrate to large cities in northern Morocco or abroad, to make money to send remittances back home (Karmaoui 2). Migration becomes "a crucial strategy to adapt to drought and climate change impacts" (Karmaoui 2).

Literature can help elucidate the phenomenon of migration, the desire for migration, and the vicissitudes that compel people to leave their homeland for a life somewhere else. The four novels we examine probe the underlying reasons for the desire to migrate that news reports and statistics cannot convey as vividly. Humiliation represents a driving force for emigration in each of these acclaimed French-language novels written around the turn of the twenty-first century: Mahi Binebine's *Welcome to Paradise* (1999), Youssouf Elalamy's *The Sea Drinkers* (2000), Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Leaving Tangier* (2006), and Fatou Diome's *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2003).¹

Outrage against violations of human rights & dignity in oppressive regimes

Throughout the post-independence era, North and West Africans have risen up to condemn economic exploitation and violations of human rights in their countries (Kew 9). The Arab Spring protesters were clamoring for dignity and political freedoms as much as they were denouncing the high cost of living, corruption, or unemployment (Eyadat 4). The Jasmine Revolution was sparked in Tunisia when Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor who was humiliated by a policewoman and snubbed by the governor, set himself on fire. The next month, two million Egyptians marched in Tahrir Square in the name of freedom, social justice, and *dignity*.

The participants in the February 20 movement in Morocco had similar aspirations. In 2016, “Mmi Fatiha”, a Moroccan widowed street vendor who was slapped by an officer, stripped of her headscarf, her wares, and her money, subsequently immolated herself in front of the police station (Sehimi 1). Later that year, a Moroccan fish seller, Mohcine Fikri, went to retrieve his confiscated fish inside a garbage truck and was crushed to death, igniting eight months of popular protests. Although Moroccans had already been using expressions like *ana mathoun* (“I am crushed”) and *tahnouni* (“they crushed me”) to express their powerlessness, fatigue, and anger with the system, Fikri’s death became more than a metaphor for the inexorable power of the system to crush the lowly (El Maarouf and Belghazi 636). The Popular Movement (*Al Hirak al Chaabi*) launched with this tragic incident represented the struggle of “a population hungry for equal opportunities and social justice” against the *Makhzen*, the Moroccan system of authority comprised of the monarchy and the political elite (E Malkin).

In Senegal, youths expressed their utter exasperation with corrupt and inept governance through such movements as *Set/Setal* (“Cleaned up”, 1988-89), *Bul Faale* (“Don’t Mind”, 1990s), and *Y’en a Marre* (“Fed Up”, 2011). The latter emerged in response to local power outages and later helped organize months of demonstrations that forced president Abdoulaye Wade to step down. Other Senegalese have expressed their desperation through radical acts such as hunger strikes and self-immolation. Documented cases occurred in 2007, 2008, 2011, and 2013, as well as in 2018, when Cheikh Diop, a man who had unsuccessfully sought justice for an arm amputated due to police negligence, lit himself on fire. His death, and the videos that circulated, galvanized the anger of the Senegalese over the regime’s treatment of the common person. A reporter compared the man’s despair to that of the Senegalese who left with hope in

their hearts but “who today, lie by the hundreds or even by the thousands at the bottom of the ocean” (Syn.p.).

The Concept of *hogra*

The Maghrebian Arabic term *al-hogra* refers to the humiliation and disrespect that people feel when those in power abuse it. This concept that has been felt in the public consciousness has been taken up explicitly by civil rights activists in the post-Arab Spring era (Bennis n.p.). Sociologist Abdelmajid Hannoum describes *hogra* as “a system of cultural violence [that is both] symbolic and physical” (112). It is an “attitude of the people trapped inside a pecking order, with the elite at the top and the unemployed poor at the bottom and ‘outsiders’ beyond the margins” (Hannoum 35). *Hogra* is even “present within families [and] exerted, with varying degrees, depending on one’s position within the unit, one’s gender, income, age, and so on” (Hannoum 112). It can take the form of psychological violence – insults, put downs, mockery, public shaming, disowning, or revoking a blessing – as well as physical violence such as beatings and rape. Another aspect of *hogra* is the sense of injustice experienced by “subjects” of the state who lack rights and who are victims of arbitrariness of its rules and judgments (Hannoum 150). Powerful elites control the state, while common people suffer from their disdain and condescension. Leila Slimani views the Moroccan fish seller’s tragedy as the incarnation of *hogra*: “the feelings of the lowly in the face of the machine that crushes him” (Slimani n.p.).

Dignity: Maslow, UN Human Rights

The recognition of an individual’s human dignity has been perceived as a basic human need. In his theory of the hierarchy of needs, Abraham Maslow posits that in addition to our needs for food, shelter, safety and security, employment, property, love and belonging, we must also have esteem (Maslow 1943). Respect from others comes in the form of recognition and status, but self-esteem is also important and relates to our feelings of dignity, confidence, competence, independence, and freedom. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights also guarantees the human right to dignity. Article 1 establishes that “All human beings are born free and *equal in dignity*.” It also stipulates that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or *degrading* treatment or punishment” (Article 5, emphasis added). People are

entitled to “the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for [their] *dignity*” (Article 22), they have the right to work and protection against unemployment (Article 23) and “the right to seek and to enjoy *in other countries asylum from persecution*” (Article 14, emphasis added).

Of the estimated 272 million international migrants in the world in 2019, about 26 million were refugees, defined as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence” (UNHCR “What is a refugee,” n.p.). Others, often labeled “economic emigrants,” leave because conditions in their home countries do not permit them to live with dignity. In cases of economic persecution or “severe economic deprivation that profoundly affects their quality of life and imperils their existence,” people may also not have a choice but to leave (Elmorchid and Hourmat-Allah 229).

The novels we turn to now were written at or after the turn of the twenty-first century during a period of growing awareness that undocumented immigrants were dying while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea or through the Atlantic to Europe on fragile boats, or hidden in trucks or airplane cargo holds. As Morocco and Senegal faced droughts, inflation, and high unemployment, at the same time, it became increasingly difficult for North and West Africans to enter Europe as workers or students and in 1990, the Schengen Convention instituted strict visa requirements. These measures did not dissuade the most desperate emigrants; they just made the crossing more dangerous. Eventually, news reports of deaths in the Mediterranean grew to such an extent that the public could no longer ignore the tragedy. A number of literary writers in the decade of 1999-2009 took up the theme and gave voice to the plight of anonymous victims.

Numerous recent studies on French-language literature of clandestine emigration have added to an existing body of scholarship on postcolonial literature of migration in French. Abderrezak, Esposito, Mazauric, Orlando, Pieprzak, Thomas, and others have cogently analyzed novels that explicitly denounce Morocco’s or Senegal’s socioeconomic inequalities and oppressive political structures, leading to the disaffection and despair of those at the bottom of the social scale. The novels considered here reveal the extent to which people are pushed to radical acts of migration not only by poverty and unemployment but, significantly, by the overwhelming sense of *hogra* that is the hallmark of the fundamentally unjust society.

Mahi Binebine's *Cannibales* (1999); Tr. *Welcome to Paradise* (2003)

In 1999, the year Mahi Binebine published his novel *Cannibales*, translated in 2003 as *Welcome to Paradise*, King Hassan II of Morocco died and Mohammed VI ascended to the throne, ushering in a new era. The four decades known as the “Years of Lead” that were rife with political repression and human rights violations gave way to a period of hope for freedom and dignity. An Equity and Reconciliation Commission was formed to redress the harms. Political prisoners were liberated, victims were heard and compensated. Binebine’s own brother Aziz had been interned for eighteen years in the infamous Tazmamart prison after being inculpated in a *coup d’état* against the king. Aziz’s father, a confidant and jester in Hassan II’s court, publicly disowned his son. Young Mahi’s views were shaped by this “Shakespearean tragedy”. He later remarked, “The paradoxes of my family are the paradoxes of Morocco” (Swift 197). Mahi left Morocco to live in France and the United States for more than twenty years, returning to live in Marrakesh in 2002.

Welcome to Paradise was inspired by an article in the French news on the increasingly frequent migrant deaths in the Strait of Gibraltar between Morocco and Spain (Swift 198-199; Esposito 305). Binebine lamented that articles on migrant deaths reduced the victims to “shadows, figures, anonymous ghosts” so to give them names, faces, and identities, he invented their stories (Esposito 305). In the novel, six men and a woman ready to risk their lives for a better future gather one night on a beach in Tangier, awaiting a signal from a trafficker to embark and cross the Strait of Gibraltar. Aziz, the narrator, sums up their collective mentality: “Just think! To be able to leave, leave and forget this devouring sun, this lethargy and idleness, this corruption and filth, this cowardice and deceit that are our lot here” (47). Each of the characters has faced a form of humiliation that pushes them to flee.

Aziz grew up poor in a village in southeast Morocco. He realizes that “school was the only way to get myself away from [...] my father’s fits of violence” (71). His father “never missed an opportunity to glorify the forces of law and order” (75). Aziz reproaches his mother for her weakness: “I was angry with her for putting up with my father’s violence, for the beatings she suffered as well as the blows that rained down on us. I was angry with her for bringing me into this world” (164). He escapes to go to school in Marrakesh and finds protectors at a school run

by Christians. Sister Benedicte gives him needed encouragement: “She’d told me how proud of me she was; I’d always lived up to her confidence in me” (141). But instead of finishing his studies, Aziz decides to go to France. As he says in another context, “a man from the South, *humiliated* as I was, is an unpredictable man, capable of the craziest things” (6, emphasis added). While Aziz has a fighting spirit, his sickly cousin Reda embodies humiliation. When Reda first appears in the novel, he is sick and weak. He gets insulted and chased by a waiter, and to Aziz, Reda “seem[s] far away, letting himself be put out like the rubbish” (5). The waiter’s “vicious kick” sends him “sprawling into the gutter” (5), reminding Aziz that Reda has always been a victim: “As kids, back in the village, everyone, even the puniest boy in our gang, used to beat him up” (5). Sadly, Reda “knew about fear too [...] the fear of being hit that he’d learned to live with since he was very young. Punishments that end in gangrene and losing both your hands, slaps from bosses in short-lived jobs, kicks from thugs in the street [...], the sudden swipes of Grandma’s stick, the lash of the teacher’s whip at the Koranic school, the beatings he took from policemen in the souk, yes, that fear that had pursued him all his young life” (125). The accumulation of *hogra* that drove his mother to suicide has a similar effect on Reda, but instead of drowning himself in a well, he seeks death passively by undertaking the risk of the Mediterranean crossing.

Two Malian characters attempt the crossing when they are out of options. One of them, Pafadnam, is on his third attempt to reach Europe. He had inherited a plot of land in Mali but drought left him unable to feed his wife and children. It took a month to cross the desert and two borders and en route, “the lorry drivers had robbed him blind for the passage north; the bogus traffickers had taken the rest” (62). Although he is handsome, well-built, a “colossus” of a man, “larger than life,” humiliation begins to diminish his emigrant’s body:

And yet he was humble and fearful and made himself as small as his gigantic frame allowed. Seeing him with his back bent double, folded in on himself, with the air of someone apologizing for existing, it was obvious he’d already slipped into the skin of a refugee. Perhaps we should have done the same and got into training for the future: learn how to become invisible, disappear into a crowd, hug the walls, avoid eye contact, speak only when spoken to, bury our pride and close our hearts to humiliation and insults [...]

learn to keep in the background, to be nobody: another shadow, a stray dog, a lowly earthworm, or even a cockroach. That's it, yes, learn to be a cockroach. (66)

The emigrant also takes a subordinate position vis-à-vis the trafficker, who in *Welcome to Paradise* represents the power wielded in an indecent society: “We didn't know his name, we just called him ‘Boss’ with a kind of fearful deference, the way you might a teacher brandishing a cane, a cruel-eyed policeman, a wizard casting spells, or anyone that holds your future in his hands” (2). Morad, the trafficker's assistant, is proud of his “noble title of European deportee” but the decade he spent in Paris as a dishwasher with the denigrating nickname “Momo, Chez Albert's little fuzz head” and his three years in a French jail for illegal entry are reminders of his humiliation. *Welcome to Paradise's* French title, *Cannibals*, is reflected in Morad's phantasmagoric story in which a North African man is eaten gradually by his French boss until all that remains is his head. The boss finds the head disgusting and, in a rage, throws it out the window into a garbage truck below. “Momo” awakens from his nightmare “just at the lorry's monstrous jaws were pulverizing his broken skull with a dull crunch” (104). This scene eerily prefigures Mocine Fikri's crushing in a garbage compactor. Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun explains the link between cannibalism and emigration in a review of Binebine's book in the French newspaper *Le Monde*: “These men and women who, every night, take their places in dubious boats, are ready to give everything, even their bodies, their lives, to no longer suffer the humiliation of misery” (Ben Jelloun, 1999, my translation). Binebine suggests, like Chraïbi, that Moroccan society at large cares little for the downtrodden who risk the clandestine crossing. “The world went on turning. No one bothered about us, it was as if we didn't exist, as if we'd never been born. So come on, honestly, what did it matter if we were devoured here, or somewhere else, or on the open seas?” (178). Binebine's hopes for a more decent society were not yet realized in 2006 when he lamented in an interview: “We were excited about Mohammed VI but we saw that things went slowly. He has not begun reforms. There is no justice: only a gangrene of corruption. [...] We have the structures of a viable democracy, but they are not inhabited” (Swift 198). In subsequent novels, Binebine has continued to depict victims of humiliation and his paintings and sculptures often represent bodies in boat-shaped vessels, people tied with string, and people climbing on one another, resembling the migrants who scale border walls in the northern enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

Youssouf Amine Elalamy's *Les Clandestins* (2000) Tr. *The Sea Drinkers* (2008)

Youssouf Amine Elalamy's novella *Les Clandestins* (2000), translated as *The Sea Drinkers* (2008), is a sharp, poetic depiction of human suffering. Like Binebine's *Welcome to Paradise*, it was inspired by a news article the author read about bodies washed up on the Moroccan shore (Orlando, *Francophone Voices* 165). Elalamy creates his own cast of characters, in this case, twelve men and a pregnant woman, who risk, and lose their lives. Each of these "thirteen gray shadows" has a painful story that underlies their willingness to risk crossing the sea on a wooden boat. Elalamy "underscores the fact that those who leave do so because they are already marginalized by poverty, illiteracy, and despair in a country that offers them few means to make a living" (Orlando 2009, xii). For these victims of unemployment, exploitation, violence, and shame, escaping from Morocco appears to be the only solution. The "lack of attention and human respect paid to the migrants" and their desire to be recognized are driving forces for their self-imposed exile (Munro 65, Orlando 2009, xii). Elalamy, a professor of media studies, also critiques the written and photographic representation of migrants in the press as another form of humiliation and dehumanization. *The Sea Drinkers* is set in the (fictional) northern coastal village of Bnidar. The inhabitants suffer from drought – "We didn't get a drop of water that whole year" [...We were] "waiting for the sky to piss down on us" (88). Under threat of famine – "nothing left to eat back home" – the sole remedy seems to be to move away: "if there's nothing here, might as well go someplace else" (88). The first character, Zineb, reflects the marginalized status of young women from poor families. At fifteen she is pressured by her parents to marry an older man. She flees the village, falls victim to prostitution, becomes pregnant, returns to her village in shame, and dies in childbirth. Her illegitimate son, Omar, is a social outcast and later his son Jibril, also conceived out of wedlock, is still in his mother's womb when they drown.

Another character, Louafi represents young men from poor families who see no prospect of improving their lives in Morocco and regard clandestine migration as the only option. Elalamy's narrative approaches the dilemma from shifting points of view, first his mother's, then his:

He talked about leaving, to find himself over there, on the other side, beyond the boats [...] leave instead of just sitting around here pounding dirt down a rat hole like my father and

his father and his father before him, following the course they've laid out for me, only to end up totally lost most likely. Tell me why the land of my birth has to be where I die someday, why the world has to end right there where the waves lay the sea down on the sand? No Amma, I won't be some beast of burden with its eyes bound to the land that has stopped feeding it (106).

Louafi tells his mother, "I'll burn myself to see if I'm alive, I set my hand on fire to prove I'm still alive, and the thing is mama, I'm still alive enough to leave" (106) and his mother reflects, "Maybe that's what my child died from, drowned in the fire he had burning inside him" (106). This paradox of "drowning in the fire" is the reverse of what Hakim Abderrezzak has called "the oxymoronic desire to burn the water of the Mediterranean" (69). Moroccans refer to clandestine migration as "*hrig*," meaning 'to burn,' since migrants often burn their identity papers to make repatriation more difficult. Louafi's fire is fueled by the combination of humiliation and frustration that leads people to self-destruction, and it results in his drowning, a form of suicide akin to self-immolation.

The character Momo, "Fatso," lives in embarrassment and guilt about his "body three sizes too big, and too heavy most of all with those kids talking all the time behind my back [...] aching shame holding you tight, never letting you go" (112). His interior monologue continues, "I couldn't stay there pretending, I didn't see how the lights were ever going to go on in my life [...] There's Momo there's Fatso there's Momo there's Fatso [...] those voices chasing me to the water's edge, their laughter on the wet sand" (112). "With those looks [...], those voices [...], that laughter [...], I had to leave" (113). Momo ends up drowning his shame in the depths of the ocean.

Another marginalized character, Jaafar, satirically nicknamed Halioud (Hollywood), comes from a "place on the outskirts of the city [Casablanca], full of sheet metal and shacks" (134). Internal migrants from the rural areas come to the shantytown because "[t]here wasn't anything left to eat back where they came from. It seemed like somebody'd sent the sun just to drink the water out of the sky. In the end they didn't have any tears left over to cry for their animals. Whole families came to harvest the misery and sickness and bumper crop of bullshit that grows in this city" (134). The wives found work as maids and nannies "up till the day they had to be let go because

they took some sugar for their kids, or dared to push away the hand Monsieur was fondling their butts with” (135).

Jaafar and his friends notice the construction of a high, stone wall and wonder whether it will be a hospital, school, hotel, or mosque. They realize it is not an edifice to improve their lives, but rather a wall around the shantytown to hide from view “the kids in their dirty clothes, the sheet metal” (137). In his interior monologue at the scene of his death, Jaafar explains, “A wall isn’t such a big deal, I guess, but I couldn’t go on breathing any more behind it” (137). Once in the sea, he sees another wall: “When I saw that wave in front of us, I got one thing straight in a hurry. It’s like this, if you’re not born on the right side, there’ll always be a wall to hold you back. It might not be made of stone, but it will be there all the same” (137). This feeling of being marginalized is what causes Jaafar to take to the sea, despite the risk. Today a 6-meter barbed-wire fence stands between the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and its border with Morocco and in recent years, migrants have tried to storm it or swim around it, often to their own peril.

It is the frustration and shame of unemployment that drives several of the characters in *The Sea Drinkers* to embark on the wooden boat. Twenty-nine-year-old Salah is let go from his factory job. His mother bends over his bloated body on the shore and cradles him murmuring, “Poor Salah, poor little thing, you wanted to drink up the sea and the sea ended up drinking you” (141). Slim suffers a work injury and then is fired. As an unemployed person, he feels his worth is diminished:

Things are different when you’re working. You feel like you’re somebody then. [...] You’re not a man if you’re out of work. Jamal says it’s like prison, the bars may not be there in front of you but they’re inside you all right, and they don’t let you breathe. Something happened to him, he couldn’t move his arm anymore. [...] Jamal’s boss just told him ‘What good’s an arm if you can’t even use it to wipe your ass?’ which was another way of saying he’d lost his job. As if losing his arm wasn’t enough [...] Here’s you, a man with arms like tree trunks and you can’t even pay for a pack of smokes (146).

Abdou, nicknamed “Midnight” for his dark skin, holds a university degree but cannot find a job. Elalamy offers a window into his despairing thoughts: “All those nights in this useless body counting the hours separating me from day. All those days pretending, trying to look like somebody, clean shirt, pressed trousers [...] All the time on my hands with nothing to do [...]

counting to beat back the boredom perhaps and the *shame* most certainly as it weighs down harder on my nights and days as well. *Shame* that is stripping me naked” (153, my emphasis).

With other unemployed college graduates, Abdou stages a protest in front of the Parliament, as so many other Moroccans have done and continue to do, to no avail. When he finally lands a job, and he arrives in the south of the country to teach at a primary school, there is no actual school, just a cornerstone, and the villagers laugh at his dismay. In his interior monologue, Abdou’s falling self-esteem corresponds to his decision to “go to the sea.” Humiliated by his constant struggle to find work, and tempted by posters of Spain that suggest that life is better there, or anywhere else. Abdou thinks, “Every day I slip back a step, and while I may have been somebody once, today I’m nobody. I don’t exist anymore, not much anyway, just enough, unfortunately, to let them go on saying I exist. [...] The other day I went to the sea [...] You can’t spend your life waiting on someone to find you a job” (152).

Abid, the fastest runner in the village, had dreamt of becoming a track star in Europe but became discouraged. “I really and truly believe that if I still had life some life to run, I’d spend it running, never stopping [...] Carried away by my own illusions, that’s how I ran, the desire to go far, and further still, the ambition to become somebody. Over there” (155). Similarly, Anouar gets fed up and the wooden boat becomes his only recourse. He works in a café, waiting tables, sweeping, and mopping. He has “a big notch like a hare lip” (156) and as a result, “the women [...] don’t see me, the children whisper[] behind my back, my lip in the mirror” (157). One day, Anouar “just took off [his] apron and left. Over there, by the sea” (158). Elalamy condemns the way poor people’s lives are minimized in the press. The Moroccan radio announces that “Two careless swimmers were drowned near the little town of Bnidar” when in fact thirteen people were victims of human trafficking (103). Alvaro, a Spanish photojournalist, takes 138 photographs of the dead bodies on the beach. His principal focus seems to be their aesthetic quality. When one of the photographs appears in a French newspaper, it is with the headline: “WHAT A PRETTY LITTLE BEACH!” Elalamy gives voice to the grieving families for whom this pseudo documentation is desultory: “If only we could see [...] If only we could hear [...] [If only we had] some piece of paper for keeping an eye on the world [...] some photographs to say things with, to say what was [...] Then we might begin to understand how we could have seen the pictures without seeing a thing” (133). By contrast to the news reports, *The Sea Drinkers* memorializes the (fictional) individuals who drowned by reciting their names

and by telling “the story of this man and this woman who found death where they were looking for life” (124).

Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Partir* (2006), *Leaving Tangier* (2009)

Like the other novels considered above, Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *Partir* (2006), translated as *Leaving Tangier* (2009), focuses on young Moroccans who feel so humiliated in their country that they can only think about leaving. One of Morocco's most prolific and acclaimed authors, Ben Jelloun has often denounced the inhumane societal conditions that cause suffering. Two of Ben Jelloun's early writings treated the emotional and sexual misery of North African guest workers in France, the subject of his doctoral thesis in social psychiatry. The author has said that his aim was to alert the public's attention to “living conditions that are unworthy of what we call civilization” (Bordeleau 46). In his later books he continued to critique a variety of social ills in France and in Morocco, dealing with, for example, an infamous political prison in Morocco, Ben Jelloun's own incarceration as a teenage protester, government corruption, police brutality, gender discrimination, racism, and the Arab Spring uprisings. In the first scene of *Leaving Tangier*, the protagonist Azel gets drunk in a bar and insults the human trafficker who was responsible for Azel's cousin's drowning on a stormy night. Azel shouts accusations at the human trafficker, nicknamed Al Afia, or “the fire”, who personifies unscrupulous, powerful men:

Look at that [...] crook's belly, and that neck, it really shows how bad this man is—he buys everyone of course, this country is one huge marketplace, wheeling and dealing day and night, everybody's for sale, all you need is a little power, something to cash in on [...] that's it, my friends, that's Morocco, where some folks slave like maniacs, working because they've decided to be honest [...] and then there are the others, swarming everywhere [...] in our beloved country, corruption is the very air we breathe [...] I'm escaping into space, don't want to live anymore on this earth, in this country, it's all fake, everyone's cutting some deal [...] here you have to respect the powerful, that's all, but for the rest, you're on your fucking own. (9-10)

Azel, his sister Kenza, and many young Moroccans like them suffer from what Hakim Abderrezak calls “leavism” or “the insatiable desire to cross the sea, which precedes an actual instance of clandestine migration” (9). The would-be migrant is obsessed with leaving, is

humiliated, like a child abandoned by its parent and, as we saw in the previous texts, willing to risk their life.

Leaving the country. It was an obsession, a kind of madness that ate at him day and night: how could he get out, *how could he escape this humiliation?* Leaving, abandoning this land that wants nothing more to do with its children, turning your back on such a beautiful country to return one day, proudly, perhaps a rich man: leaving to save your life, even as you risk losing it... (15 emphasis added)

The themes of pride, shame, and humiliation underlie the narrative. Azel explains that his full name, Azz El Arab, means “the pride, the glory of the Arabs! It means I’m the best, someone precious, beloved and good...” (43), and his mother says, “I know my son [...] he has his pride...” (56). But Azel, like Abdou in *The Sea Drinkers*, has not seen his work pay off. At twenty-four, he has “a diploma but no money, job, or car. [...] just drifting, ready to do anything to get the hell out of here, leave this whole country behind” (29). *Leaving Tangiers* tells the story of his humiliation. After getting beat up by the human trafficker, Azel is raped by two policemen. Though he is encouraged to file a report, he recognizes that “a policeman’s word is worth more than mine!” (53). He tells his sister Kenza about the rape and she, “feeling as *humiliated* as Azel did, [...] promised she’d do everything she could to help him get out of Tangier and the country” (54, emphasis added). Azel finally finds an escape route, which is through a sexual relationship with Miguel, a wealthy, older Spanish man. Azel repeatedly expresses his shame for accepting this form of prostitution, saying “I’m ashamed. I don’t feel proud of myself. [...] I’m so humiliated” (83). One night Miguel throws a party, makes Azel dress as a woman, and treats him like an exotic object. “Azel could not understand why Miguel was trying so hard to show him off and humiliate him [...] he was flooded with shame but determined not to give in to regret and despair” (107). Eventually Miguel arranges for Azel and Kenza to receive visas for Spain. On the day he receives the visa, Azel writes a letter to his country that reads a little like a pastiche of the ending of Driss Chraïbi’s seminal novel *The Simple Past* (1954) where the protagonist looks down from the airplane and says his goodbyes with disdain:

Dear country [...] I finally have the opportunity and good fortune to go away, to leave you, to breathe the air of a new country, to escape the *harassment and humiliation* of your

police. [...] I'm ready to change, ready to live free, to be useful, to attempt things that will transform me into a man standing on his own two feet [...] I will finally earn my living. My land has not been kind to me, or to many of the young people of my generation. We'd believed that our studies would open doors for us, that Morocco would finally abandon its *society of privilege and arbitrary misfortune*, but the whole world let us down so we've had to scramble to make do and *do everything possible to get out* [...] I am imagining myself on the plane. I'm [...] curious, dear country, to see you from above, and I hope the pilot will have the bright idea to fly over Tangier just for me so that I can *say au revoir*, so I that I can guess who's in that distant shack, who's suffering within those crumbling walls, who lives in that slum, and now long they'll be able to keep bearing this wretched poverty. (69, emphasis added)

Azel does not thrive in Spain either. He does not love Miguel but takes his money. He doesn't work. He drinks, takes drugs, becomes sexually impotent. At various points he cries out, "I'm dirt, worthless, no self-respect at all" (188); "I'm ashamed of failing at everything, ashamed of clasp[ing] a hand held out to me" (241). He tells an acquaintance that he wants "to be cured [...] Of everything. Of myself, my life, my failures, my fears, my weaknesses, my inadequacies. I want to be at peace, that's it, at peace with myself" (217). Like Abdou in Elalamy's *Sea Drinkers*, Azel is educated but sees no future in Morocco. He tells his sister that he could have found a job, "respectable work, something to bring me prestige [...] but no: I was broken and I'm not the only one [...] There are many of us young people with blocked, rotten futures, nothing on the horizon [...] We're not proud of ourselves, no, I'm not proud [...] We've lost our dignity" (148).

Still, despite floundering in Spain, Azel does not want to be sent back to Morocco for fear of "the shame, the *hchouma*, and the *hegra*, the humiliation" (231, emphasis in the original). Only those migrants who can return with wealth and success can expect to hold their head up, "to return home like a hero" (144). Sadly, Azel instead meets a tragic end in Spain.

Ben Jelloun brings the voices of minor characters to the critique of Morocco. The Islamist recruiter tells Azel that, Moroccan political parties "have failed miserably because they haven't learned to listen to what the people are telling them [...] We know what the people want: to live in dignity" (17). Men in a café talk about leaving. They say, "We love our country, but it's our

country that doesn't love us! No one does anything to give us reasons to stay" (129). A character from other novels by Ben Jelloun, Moha, the old wise fool, comes to the café, lights a newspaper on fire and starts a monologue on immolation and *hogra* and migration:

I, too, am on fire. I burn like this paper that does not tell the truth, that says all is well, that the government is doing everything it can to give work to our young people, and that those who *burn up the straits* have succumbed to wild despair. And yes, there is good reason to have lost all hope, but life, it goes on and leaves us by the wayside [...] that's just life, but which life—the one that *crushes us*, rips us to pieces? (141, emphasis added)

Moha has the last word in *Leaving Tangier*, suggesting that migration is a temptation for people all over the world who live in an indecent society that does not show them respect: "We are all called upon to leave our homes, we all hear the siren call of the open sea [...] and we all feel the need to leave our native land, because our country is often not rich enough, or loving enough, or generous enough to keep us at home. So let us leave, let's sail the seas" (263).

Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006)

In Fatou Diome's first novel *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), winner of two literary prizes and translated into several languages including English as *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006), narrator Salie tells of her migration from Niodior, a small island off the coast of Senegal, to Strasbourg, France. On the island, Salie and other characters face humiliation due to some aspect their identity: poor, female, a second wife, an illegitimate child, an outsider to the island, or a Marxist. Those who leave Senegal for France are envied back home but face discrimination in Europe as Black immigrants. In Diome's novel, the Atlantic Ocean plays a role similar to that of the Mediterranean Sea in the Maghrebian texts: a path of hope for a better life and a tomb for the shamed who cannot recuperate their dignity. Salie ponders, "which waters could wash away the stain of failure"? (3).

Born out of wedlock, Salie battles humiliation from the time of her birth. Her stepfather rejects her, calling her "the incarnation of sin, the devil's daughter" (49), and when her mother has a son with the new husband, she considers this baby her first born. Salie is then raised by her grandmother, who braces her against the scorn she will face: "Born in the rain, [...] you'll never

be afraid when they spit as you go by” (47). Psychological and physical violence are her lot, through no fault of her own, because “in traditional society [...] those who aren’t baptised have the sole right to be thrashed by anyone who’s in the mood. No reason is necessary, as the never-forgiven offense of their birth justifies all punishment” (161). Because of this, Salie confesses, “I grew up with a feeling of guilt, an awareness that I had to atone for a sin that is my life itself” (161).

Ndétare, the schoolteacher, is also marginalized in the village for his politics and simply for not being born there. When children make fun of Salie’s family name, taken from her biological father, he comforts her, “You’ll always be a stranger in this village, like me. Anyway, it’s a beautiful name, it means dignity” (51). Salie reflects, “For the first time I was proud of my name. [My grandmother] confirmed Ndétare’s words and [...] told me a story about my father’s lineage that made me straighten my shoulders and carry my head high” (51). Salie knows her grandmother also faces dishonor for her role in raising an illegitimate child. In fact, children of unwed mothers were often done away with, like Sankèle’s baby who was taken at birth by his grandfather and drowned in the ocean to avoid dishonor on the family. Men hold the power in a patriarchal society and neither Sankèle nor her mother can contest the father’s wishes: “In this corner of the earth, a man’s hand is placed over every woman’s mouth. So be it!” (89). Devastated, Sankèle flees the village and sends back no news, though rumors circulate that she becomes a dancer in Dakar and then France. “[F]or everyone here, France – El Dorado – symbolized a kind of mythical place of perdition, the refuge for [...] the free birds who’d flown from every corner of the world” (93).

Salie also sees her marginalized status as predestining her for exile: “Already, as a child [...] I’d understood that leaving would be the corollary to my existence” (161). But leaving is also an opportunity to put her past behind and start anew, for “leaving means having the courage necessary to give birth to oneself” (162). Unlike the characters in the Moroccan novels, Salie does not leave as an undocumented immigrant, but through marriage to a Frenchman. When this marriage ends, Salie is “determined not to return home in shame after a failure that many had gleefully predicted” (26). She studies and writes, but also takes a cleaning job to send money home to her family.

Salie and Ndétare try to discourage her brother Madické from pinning his hopes on France, but Madické “ha[s] only one thought in his head: to leave, go far away [...] and not look back

[...] From his earliest childhood, his mind had been contaminated by the older boys. He'd grown up with the notion of leaving, of success to be found elsewhere, at any price; over the years it had become his destiny" (115). Salie worries about the risk too many Senegalese take to become football stars in Europe: "they're prepared to cross the Sahel on foot, die in the hold of a plane or on a raft launched on the slaughter-water from the Strait of Gibraltar" (171). For the youth on the island, the "Man from Barbès" is a model of immigrant success. Niodior's wealthiest inhabitant, he owns the only television set and has four wives. He grew up "indignant at his father's poverty" and proclaimed that "poverty is the visible face of hell, it's better to die than stay poor" (15). Though he led a "wretched existence" as an immigrant in Paris, he hides his struggles from the islanders and only flaunts the city's charms. The boys frequent his café where they watch European football teams and dream of joining them.

To counteract his influence and discourage the youth from their obsession with leaving, Ndétare the schoolteacher tells them the tragic story of Moussa, a young Senegalese man who dreamt of a glorious football career in France. To Moussa, the only son and eldest child of a large, poor family, "the future had seemed to him a ravine leading to a black hole" (63), but the enticement of a scout gets him to France where he begins "kicking a ball pumped with hope"(64). But as an African player he is the victims of insults, jeering, and the buying and selling of players "smacked of slavery" and "sordid calculation and contempt" (65-66). Before long, the coach cuts him from the team. Moussa's father sends a letter to admonish his son for not sending home money. "Spare us this shame among our people. You must work, save money and come home" (69), he tells him. After being harshly exploited as an undeclared laborer, Moussa is finally deported. "Seeking consolation, he made his way back to the village" and there "[h]e gave a brief summary of his experience of France. The explosion of truth covered him in ashes [...] Almost everyone *despised* him" (73-74, emphasis added). He tries to "escape his parents' guilt-inducing looks and his sisters' obvious *disdain*" (74 emphasis added), by spending time with the schoolteacher, but then the villagers speculate that the two must be "indulging in unwholesome activities" (75). Moussa becomes so overcome with shame that he heads to the ocean. "The tide rose even higher. [...] Moussa could hear it murmuring: 'Atlantic, carry me away. Your harsh belly will be softer to me than my bed. Legend says you give shelter to those who seek it' (75). In the original French text, the passage reads, "tu offres l'*asile*", you offer asylum (*Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* 128). Moussa chooses drowning. "The fishermen [...] caught

Moussa's inert body in their nets" (77).

The schoolteacher uses this true story as a cautionary tale to convince the boys not to "get caught in the net of emigration" (77). In Diome's novel, the educated characters, the schoolteacher and Salie, themselves outcasts, sympathize with the downtrodden and their yearning for respect. They notice, and lament, that in an indecent society, the humiliated take their refuge in exile or death.

In addition to these and many other examples of individual characters, Diome offers broader social critiques, for example of the neocolonial exploitation of Africans where foreign investors are allowed to buy up the most beautiful stretches of coast and employ locals at resorts for minimal wages. She summarizes the low value placed on human life in a sardonic sentence: "On the scales of globalisation, the head of a third-world child weighs less than a hamburger" (130).

The Belly of the Atlantic is marked by intertextual references from two classics of Senegalese literature in French which focus on characters whose humiliation drives their exile and despair. One is the novella and film *La Noire de...* (1962, 1966), translated as *Black Girl*, by Ousmane Sembene, a Marxist writer and filmmaker, on whose work Fatou Diome wrote her doctoral thesis. A second is *Le Baobab fou* (1982), translated as *The Abandoned Baobab* (1991), by Marietou M'baye under the pseudonym Ken Bugul, a Wolof expression meaning "the person no one wants." Sembene and Bugul, like their protagonists, suffered from exploitation and alienation in Europe but also recognized the "push" factors of their own emigration and evoke them in their writings. Each work portrays (using Diome's words): "those who were afraid to go home with their suitcases stuffed with failure, humiliation and disappointment" and who were "unable to cope with the shame of repatriation" (Diome 172). The letter Moussa receives from his father "to encourage him, or edge him closer to suicide" and to remind him that "every scrap of life must serve to win dignity" (15-16) echoes the letter that Diouana, the Senegalese maid in *Black Girl*, receives from her family, increasing her sense of guilt and shame, feelings which eventually lead to her suicide.

Comparing *Black Girl* and *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Cilas Kemedjio sees the texts as testifying to a "complex decomposition of the social bond" that is akin to *hogra*, or to an indecent society (Kemedjio 346). For Sembene, and even more for Diome, exploitation that grew out of colonialism is certainly to blame for the breaking of social bonds, while the corrupt

political regimes and systems of oppression within West African and Maghrebian societies continue to drive their inhabitants to flee and perish.

Conclusion

A 2018 article in *Courrier international* entitled “Ready to die in order to live” reported on the sinking of a boat carrying 200 migrants from Tunisia’s shore. Journalist Inès Oueslati summarized the tragedy with the observation that “So many have preferred the mirage of a decent life in an unwelcoming host country to an indecent life in a country perceived as a bad mother” (Oueslatin). I have argued that in these five novels, the authors strive to give a voice to the powerless Moroccans and Senegalese who yearn for employment, better living conditions, and inclusion in a decent society that shows them respect and dignity. The novels can be criticized for airing the nation’s dirty laundry to the world or lauded for their call for empathy and actions of solidarity with the wretched of the earth.

¹ Other writers who have explored the theme of humiliation as a catalyst for migration include Moroccans who write in French such as Abdelhaq Serhane, Mohamed Leftah, Abdellatif Laabi, Abdellah Baïda, Mohamed Nedali, Abdellah Taïa, Halima Ben Haddou, Touria Oulehri, Bahaa Trabelsi and Leila Slimani, Arabophone writers such as Mohamed Choukri, Mohamed Zafzaf, Leila Abouzeid, Khnata Bennouna and Fatna El Bouih, and Laila Lalami who writes in English. Senegalese authors who have written in French on this theme include Ousmane Sembène, Ken Bugul, Aminata Sow Fall, Felwine Sarr, and Khadi Hane.

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