

Critical Reflections on Hassan Zrizi's Novel: I shall await you at the Threshold of Hope



Dr. Ilham EL MAJDOUBI

Literary and Cultural Studies Hassan II University (UH2C), Faculty of Arts and Humanities (FLSHM), Morocco

ABSTRACT: This study examines the thematic exploration of social and spatial dynamics in *I Shall Await You at the Threshold of Hope* by Dr. Hassan Zrizi. The novel presents a decentralized social vision, inspired by the experiences of marginalized individuals. The novel portrays a poignant landscape characterized by suffering and expectation, with recurring motifs of disappearance and the tension between life and death. The author employs the metaphor of the mountain's base to represent the social proletariat in the ancient Roman sense, thereby highlighting a static, hierarchical structure. The narrative arc involves the reintegration of this base with the pinnacle, encouraging reflection on concepts of verticality, horizontality, and transversality. Artistically, the novel adheres to postmodern aesthetics through the fragmentation and re-appropriation of space, confronting the threat of oblivion while offering a message of boundless potential.

KEYWORDS: social vision, decentralized framework, postmodern aesthetics, verticality, horizontality, transversality, spatial dynamics.

The novel under scrutiny, *I Shall Await you at the Threshold of Hope*, may be interpreted as a requiem for the living. Its author, Dr. Hassan Zrizi, has previously penned two other novels: *Jomana* (2006) and *Back to Bahja* (2010).

In addition to his fiction, Professor Zrizi has ventured into literary criticism, contributed to the translation of a collaborative encyclopedia, and published numerous incisive scientific and educational works.

I Shall Await You at the Threshold of Hope distinguishes itself from Zrizi's earlier works. It employs an omniscient narrator, whose all-knowing voice unfolds the tale of a train that never arrives—a metaphorical groom absent on his wedding day (p. 5).

The novel is structured into ten interconnected chapters, each linked by the recurring announcement of the train's delay. Symbolically, these chapters evoke the image of rudimentary locomotives, representing a modernity stalled in archaism. The narrative is infused with multiple layers of tension, both between and within the characters.

While *Jomana* and *Back to Bahja* can be categorized as urban fiction rooted in the cityscape of Marrakesh, particularly at the Place de Jama'a L'Fna, *I Shall Await You at the Threshold of Hope* shifts to a rural setting. The author not only alters the geographic orientation but also ascends in altitude.

The feminized landscape, symbolically named Arwas, is depicted with vivid realism. Only later does the narrative unveil its true toponymic identity: Arwas, gradually revealed like a bride on her wedding day, is in fact the village of Imilchil, nestled in the majestic High Atlas Mountains.

The narrative unfolds with deliberate slowness, mirroring the exhaustion of the travelers, whose weary bodies on the station platforms speak volumes about their passive resignation. The train, conspicuous by its absence, ironically becomes a central presence within the story. Its delay, repeatedly announced like a ghostly refrain, serves as a *leitmotif* throughout the novel.

The absurdity of the situation is amplified by the incessant blaring of the loudspeaker, which further heightens the sense of frustration. Despite the railway company's endless excuses and the resulting atmosphere of weightlessness, the story advances with steady purpose towards its inevitable conclusion.

The isolation of Arwas makes access to services difficult, deepening the commuters' inner turmoil. In the face of widespread indifference, the population unites in solidarity. The sole dissenting voice, that of a traveler who courageously addresses the situation by remarking, "Chances are that the train passed before its time, and we missed our appointment" (p. 4), is swiftly silenced.

In Berber, "Arwas" denotes an infernal wasteland. Like other natural elements in the novel, the valley is personified as a female figure. Though endowed with serene beauty, she bears the marks of suffering. The cruelty inflicted upon her soul leads to her demise under the helpless gaze of her children. Ahmed, a man of noble ideals who describes himself as a "Don Quixote" (p. 14), likens her to a woman abandoned after being raped (p. 12). Mehdi, an expatriate who has endured exile, confides in an epistolary

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exchange with his friend Ahmed about his profound love for his native village and his deep regret for having left it (p. 39). Ahmed listens attentively as Mehdi comes to the realization that "elsewhere" does not equate to an *Eldorado*.

Each reading of *I Shall Await You at the Threshold of Hope* invokes powerful and insatiable specters. The novel transitions from images of a fertile femininity to a portrayal of symbolic anthropophagy, reflecting the impact of a "globalized" world (p. 15). The author underscores how natural landscapes are transformed by human activity.

The rural setting is consumed by the voracious forces of urbanization (p. 12). Once free from concrete and asphalt, Arwas is now rapidly succumbing to deforestation. Reduced to a state of desolation (p. 67), the land metaphorically "devours" its progeny out of a perverse form of love.

This sacrificial act of a disinherited motherland, which prefers to consume its descendants—who are fated to predation (p. 21)—rather than let them be buried under ruins, is vividly illustrated. The mythical image of Cronus devouring his children (p. 22) serves as a poignant symbol in this context.

As a symbol of fragmented modernity, the train in the novel emerges as a pivotal setting for exploring interiority. The narrative of the journey is shaped by the unfulfilled desires of the characters. Despite their hostile environment, these fragile beings cling to the passage of time. It is on the train that their anguish is articulated. They yearn for fragments of love and recognition within the labyrinth of the virtual world, constructing illusory realms where the boundary between dream and reality becomes blurred.

This dislocated condition is exemplified by Khawla, the "scattered woman" (p. 108), who becomes entangled in tumultuous passion. She is depicted as a woman estranged from herself, her potential lover severing her connection to her maternal instincts and causing her to forget her three biological children (p. 108). Gripped by a sense of emptiness, the characters exchange reality for illusion. Najwa's life is rife with deception; her hard-won job and her marriage to a "monster" (p. 90) are both illusions. Similarly, Doctor Salwa is disillusioned by her marriage to Othman, the smooth talker, while Mehdi has discovered that the proverbial grass is not greener on the other side.

In revealing the interiority of its characters, the train in Arwas functions as a barometer for their dilemmas. Disoriented (p. 29) and stripped of their dignity, they are reduced to mere bodies either piled up on station platforms or submerged beneath the ocean (pp. 47, 79, 86, 92).

Confronted with the void of their existence, the characters are drawn to the abyss that even the most virtuous men would prefer to avoid. Through the alchemy of his style, the novelist eloquently articulates the unspeakable. His incisive pen meticulously identifies even the smallest gaps. His profound indignation toward an intolerable human condition informs his intellectual approach, which transcends mere moral judgment to critically examine the conditions of suffering with a penetrating gaze.

This approach facilitates a more objective portrayal of what the novelist describes as "the fossilized bundle of suffering" (p. 33), offering a foundation for public decision-makers and civil society actors to collaboratively tackle complex societal challenges. As Stendhal asserts, the novel acts as a mirror that accompanies us along our journey. Thus, the presence of the mirror as a specular motif in our literary analysis is of paramount importance (pp. 17, 48).

In the novel, social and biological bodies are intricately interconnected. The metaphor of gangrene epitomizes the structural malaise afflicting Arwas. Chama, the archetype of the mutilated feminine, suffers from a malignant tumor that has been detected only belatedly (p. 17). The interplay among corporality, subjectivity, sociality, and spatiality creates a complex matrix, as illustrated below:¹

— *Chama appears increasingly faded and withered, identifying with the mollusks that drift with the tides. Her deteriorating state mirrors the growing fragility of her land, Arwas (p. 20).*

— *Such is the destiny of Chama, daughter of Arwas, and by extension, of Arwas herself. With each fleeting breath of hope, time threatens to sever your connection (p. 21).*

— *Chama and Arwas are two souls consigned to oblivion (p. 22).*

— *Chama's suffering has become unbearable. Her chest is gripped by pain, and her body is consumed in the same manner as Arwas, who devours her children at the heart of spring (p. 48).*

— *The labyrinth in which Mehdi has become estranged mirrors that of Arwas (p. 27).*

— *Arwas flows through Mehdi's veins, and when Catherina, intrigued by this deep connection, inquired about the nature of his devotion, he fervently responded: "Arwas is my identity, my essence, my soul. I left her only physically out of necessity, but she lives within me. I dreamt of her spring, but autumn has frozen her, and drought has withered her foliage. Arwas and I are one." (p. 28)*

— *Touda set out to reclaim the remnants of her soul, but the train of her life was intentionally delayed. In grappling with the bitterness of her loss, she found solace in Arwas, and their destinies were irrevocably intertwined (p. 30).*

Driven by a sense of civic duty, the novelist provides a clear-eyed depiction of rural life, becoming a voice for the voiceless—akin to George Orwell's concept of "Common Decency." The novel is marked by the stigma of social isolation and can

¹ All translations of the novel included in this article are mine.

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be interpreted as a plea on behalf of the most vulnerable. It serves both as a beacon and a lament against ignorance and intolerance. Its themes encompass a wide range of issues, including precariousness, corruption, friendship, love, marriage, divorce, life, death, identity, exile, tradition, modernity, and the public and private spheres.

The novel is marked by dialectical contradictions between life and death. The Arwas Valley, once an Eden, has now become a suffocating inferno. Chama faces the threat of surgical amputation; Touda's womb is tainted by paternal incest (p. 30); the dream of spring is thwarted (p. 43); and the hospital's sole oxygen cylinder is nonfunctional (p. 80).

This perpetual tension in the narrative culminates in the tragedy of Imlil, where the once-vital spring has run dry (p. 76), and the valley floor has been covered by cascading falls of blood (p. 116). Hatred has thus become entrenched, seeping into the very depths of the heart. As Nietzsche observed, hatred is but the "clatter of little dried-up feelings."²

The novelist, while condemning the barbarity of extremists, celebrates the nobility of individuals who cherish difference and embrace diversity. His novel exalts the marvel of human existence and the sanctity of life. A recurring motif throughout his work is the tribute to Louisa and Maren, two Scandinavian women with angelic smiles who ventured into the pristine nature of the High Atlas to engage with its generous inhabitants. Unfortunately, they fell victim to the brutal forces of fanaticism. The tragic fate of these exemplars of original purity echoes the suffering of other innocent victims.

The novel prompts reflection on the banality of real-life interactions. The characters' divided consciousness is marred by the elusiveness of an experience that remains eternally suspended. Living in a world characterized by rapid change and constant rupture is deeply unsettling. This existence relegates the characters to an anonymous realm of namelessness, facelessness, and meaninglessness. Their present becomes, as Victor Hugo articulates, "an empty-handed ghost who promises everything and has nothing."³

The theme of disappearance serves as the central axis around which the narration revolves. Death emerges as the void that the characters must confront or evade. These lifeless, spectral presences succumb to an inescapable abyss. Ghosts haunt both the living and their surroundings.

Widows, in their desperation, attempt to fend off the specters of their missing husbands in a bid to restore some semblance of life. Whiteness, symbolizing death, pervades the snowy landscape (p. 22) and envelops Touda in a decrepit hospital room; where everything, from the bed sheets to the white blouse, is starkly white (p. 32). This blankness also overwhelms the memory of a stranger who lost consciousness on the station platform (p. 82) and found himself at the mercy of chance.

Despite this pervasive desolation, the compassionate feminine presence in the novel—represented by teachers, doctors, nurses, and family caregivers—offers a glimmer of hope. The Arwas Valley has become a cemetery where female victims of "the male illness" (p. 53), as the author describes it, bury their depersonalized chests (p. 47). Their lamentations echo like the cries of wounded lionesses (p. 53). Men are not exempt from this affliction; the ravaged beauty of Arwas (pp. 33, 47, 48, 100, 103) has devolved into a collective curse.

The novel is imbued with a deep sense of soulfulness; the writer carves a path through the barren landscape as if to rejuvenate it. While depicting a poignant and desolate terrain, he concludes his narrative with a vision of hope: the vibrant colors of a rainbow, the luminous moon, and the song of life.

Arwas is portrayed as rising like a phoenix from its ashes, transforming the curse into a blessing. This message from the writer offers a hopeful vision for the future. The novel concludes by echoing its title, thus coming full circle. The foot of the mountain awaiting ascent mirrors the base of the social pyramid—the "proletariat," not in the Marxist sense but as understood in Ancient Rome, representing a completely static situation.⁴

Inspired by the lives of the humblest or most impoverished, the pauperized, the author embeds his social vision of space within a decentralized framework. The local focus seeks to reach the "forgotten" (p. 11). The movement within the novel, if one can be identified, involves the reintegration of the base with the apex.

In this respect, the novel encourages reflection on the concepts of verticality, horizontality, and transversality. Artistically, the fragmentation and reappropriation of space are in line with the postmodern aesthetic cherished by the author, whose fiction resists oblivion by offering hope and exploring possibilities.

Overall, *I Shall Await You at the Threshold of Hope* presents a meticulously crafted narrative that reflects a nuanced social consciousness and a nuanced comprehension of spatial dynamics. By focusing on the experiences of marginalized individuals and interweaving themes of disappearance, suffering, and hope, Dr. Hassan Zrizi offers a critical examination of contemporary social structures.

² Nietzsche, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, in: *Œuvres Complètes de Frédéric Nietzsche*, Volume 9, Traduit par Henry Albert, Société Mercure France : Paris, 1903, p. 254.

³ Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*, Volume 1, Adolphe Wahlen et Cie., 1837, p. 10. My translation.

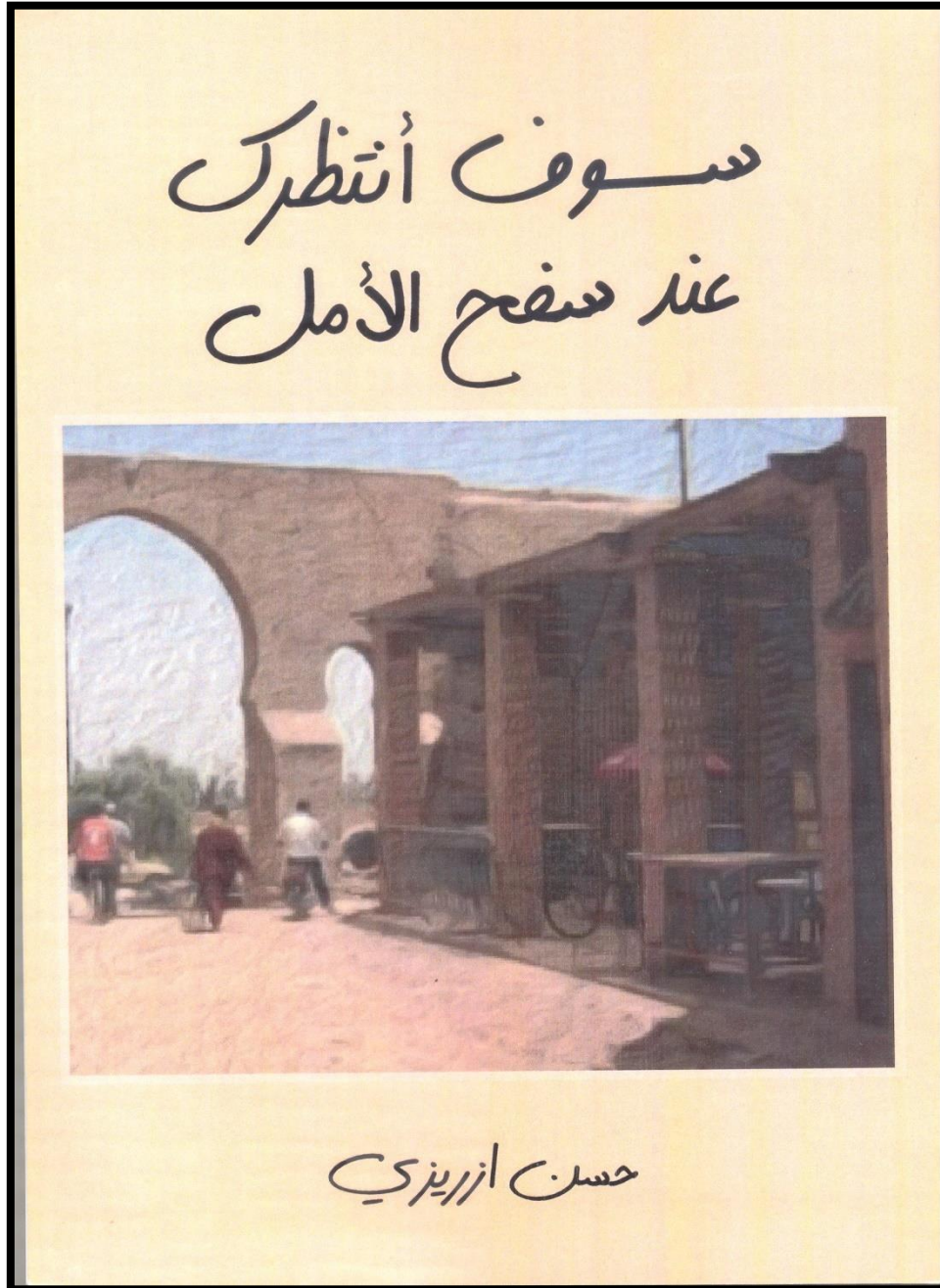
⁴ Oskar Negt et Alexander Kluge, « Ce que le mot prolétariat signifie aujourd'hui », *Variations*, 9/10, 2007, pp. 28-36.

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In a nutshell, the novel's use of metaphor and its investigation of spatial concepts challenge conventional hierarchies, articulating a vision of renewal. By employing a postmodern approach to fragmentation and reintegration, the novel not only addresses the forces of oblivion but also presents a forward-thinking perspective on the potential for limitless possibilities.

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