

# Disrupting Literary Rhetoric: The Poetics of Survival in Mohamed Zafzaf's Muh'awalat A'ysh

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## Abstract

This paper examines Mohamed Zafzaf's Muh'awalat A'ysh (An Attempt to Live) as a significant Moroccan post-colonial literary work that subverts nationalist and rhetorical literary traditions. Through a plainspoken narrative style and simple language, Zafzaf presents a vivid and honest depiction of Morocco's marginalised urban poor. The paper contextualizes the novel within the historical trajectory of Moroccan literature after independence, exploring how post-colonial writers shifted their focus from celebrating national liberation to criticizing post-independence political repression and socioeconomic marginalisation. The novel's stylistic simplicity, use of vernacular language, and avoidance of metaphorical language establish it as a distinctive work of literary resistance that reflects the lived realities of marginalised communities. By focusing on linguistic realism and peripheral voices, Zafzaf challenges conventional literary techniques and creates a powerful socio-political testimony.

**Keywords:** Mohamed Zafzaf, Muh'awalat A'ysh, post-colonial Moroccan literature, stylistic realism, peripheral voices, vernacular Darija, resistance literature

## Introduction:

Following Morocco's independence from French and Spanish colonial rule in 1956, Moroccan patriotic writers—motivated by their aesthetic contribution to the national struggle—were eager to see the Morocco they had dreamt of during colonial domination come true. However, they were confronted with the unexpected rise of a “Moroccan ruling [...] class [that] maintained and adopted ideological strategies of colonial determinism that was not serving national unity” (Simour, 2016, p. 30). Under colonial rule, various social classes and segments of the Moroccan society—namely, intelligentsia, peasants, workers, women, and the bourgeois—were committed to the national struggle and fought bravely for independence. Yet, once independence was achieved, the nationalist activists of the bourgeois class, who had been active during colonialism and were expected to contribute to the reconstruction of post-colonial Morocco, took advantage of the political vacuum left by the former colonizers and subsequently “seized governmental positions,” stepping “into the shoes of former colonial settlement, while deploying [their] class aggressiveness to secure the government positions previously held by the colonizer” (Simour, 2016, p. 30), often through many repressive measures. In the 1960s, when Hassan II ascended the

throne, he “applied a vision of authoritarian monarchy that [...] ended up hopes for a modern, democratic political system” (Cohen & Jaidi, 2006, p. 56). At this point, it became evident to Moroccan intelligentsia that the purpose of this ruling regime was not to reconstruct modern Morocco, the inspired nation-state, but rather to serve its own self-interests and ensure absolute control. This ruling class began to appropriate resources and gradually monopolize all the profitable sectors. It has also worked to pave the way for a neocolonial period by “mediating Western colonial capitalism in the country” (Simour, 2016, p.30), in order to exploit Morocco’s raw materials and resources.

This bureaucratic exploitation of Morocco’s resources, along with the ill-considered political cooperation between the Moroccan regime and Western powers—France in particular—resulted in extreme poverty and marginalisation among lower-class Moroccan citizens, who played a central role in freeing the country from the oppressive grip of imperialistic colonialism. Feeling deeply betrayed by their own people, Moroccan writers turned to literature as a means of social critique and political resistance. This disappointment gave rise to Moroccan post-colonial literature: a body of literature which sought to manifest the struggles of identity and cultural memory, expose the lasting effects of French and Spanish colonialism, and most importantly, engage with the socio-political realities of post-independence Morocco. It created a new kind of resistance literature, one not against foreign powers but against domestic oppression (Simour, 2016). Writers like Mohamed Zafzaf played a pivotal role in this literary shift, for they employed new literary forms and daring themes to shed light on the harsh realities of Moroccan society. *Muh’awalat A’ysh (An Attempt to Live)* is a great example of this literary shift. Through a simple, realistic style, straightforward language, and the use of Moroccan vernacular (Darija), Zafzaf deliberately subverts both rhetorical and nationalist literary conventions. The novel offers an honest portrayal of Morocco’s urban underclass, serving more as a form of literary testimony than as a work of literature. By focusing on marginal voices and rejecting metaphorical language, Zafzaf constructs a counter-literature rooted in social truth and linguistic authenticity.

## Literature Review:

### From Liberation to Disillusionment: The Shift in Post-Independence Narratives

The emergence of post-independence Moroccan literature was marked by a tension between patriotic optimism and socio-political realism. While the struggle against French colonialism was viewed as a fight for national liberation, cultural revival, and political sovereignty, the reality that followed independence in 1956 diverged significantly from these ideals. Rather than initiating a new era of self-determination and authentic national identity, the newly established regime replicated the authoritarian structures and cultural policies of the colonial administration. This continuity of oppression is critically reflected in the fact that “Moroccan writers, as well as the rest of the population, felt deeply disappointed by the narrative of independence and deceived by their own patriots who proved to perpetuate the cultural politics of the French colonizer” (Simour, 2016, pp. 24-25). This radical seizure of power caused a profound disappointment among numerous Moroccan activists who had envisaged independence as a radical break from colonial dominance, only to find that Morocco’s post-colonial state reproduced the same mechanisms of control and cultural marginalisation. Therefore, they sought refuge in various modes of expression, including music, with the legendary musical band of ‘Nass el-Ghiwane’ as an example, and literature. Moroccan authors and poets returned to literature once again to express their frustration regarding the socio-political conditions of post-colonial Morocco. However, this time, their critique was directed not at colonial powers, but at their compatriots. They shifted their

attention from resisting colonialism to struggling against the corrupt regime that aborted the aspirations of Moroccans to build a welfare state and allied, instead, with their former enemy, seeking absolute power and massive wealth. This thematic shift in Moroccan literature was the beginning of a new literary scene that is characterized by a strong sense of political resentment. During this transitional period, “Marxist and leftist thoughts prospered and became a viable and inspiring medium through which social injustices and political corruption were exposed” (Simour, 2016, p. 24). These Marxist revolutionary thoughts fuelled many Moroccan writers and poets with the determination to expose the corruption of the regime and to challenge the neocolonial cultural-political ties with France. As a result, several Moroccan intellectuals devoted their pens to serve the subaltern. Their efforts sought to establish a form of soft power capable of resisting those who turned against the will of the people, while also denouncing dictatorship and challenging internalized colonial legacies that continued to shape Morocco’s post-independence society.

### **Modes of Literary Resistance: Activist, Exilic, and Imaginative**

Moroccan writers and poets who stood against the authoritarian regime at that time can be broadly classified into three major categories. The first category was active during the 1960s and the early 1970s. It was labelled as an enemy of the state due to its political activism—mainly in leftist and Marxist movements—and numerous poets and authors affiliated with it were jailed. Its most outstanding figure is the leftist intellectual and writer Abdellatif Laâbi, whose critical engagement with sociopolitical issues through literature ultimately led to his imprisonment. Between 1972 and 1980, he was imprisoned and subjected to torture at the prison of Kenitra, primarily due to his outspoken literary works—comprising both prose and poetry—and his political engagement. Following his release, Laâbi was exiled to France in 1985. Laâbi is also known for founding the influential literary and cultural journal *Souffles-Anfās* (Breaths), which emerged in 1966 and initially published in French. Drawing inspiration from the leftist Parisian journal *Tel Quel*, *Souffles* became a powerful platform for intellectual and political discourse. It addressed all classes and segments of the Moroccan society—and the Maghreb as well—urging them to join their efforts and stand up for democracy. In 1971, the journal expanded its reach by launching an Arabic counterpart, *Anfās*, thereby becoming bilingual. However, the following year, amid escalating political repression, Laâbi, who was the chief editor, was arrested, and the journal was censored. Numerous authors and poets contributed to this journal, including Abdelkébir Khatibi, Ahmed Bouânani, Ahmed Gharbaoui, Abdelaziz Mansouri, Mohamed Ben Saïd, and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine, to name but a few (Orlando, 2009, pp. 09-10). The literary works of these figures functioned not only as a powerful testament to the defense of artistic freedom and political expression, but also as a significant contribution to the culture of resistance during that era. The second category consists of Moroccan Francophone writers and poets who lived abroad. The thematic concerns of these diasporas were based on their experiences of exile, addressing the hardships of being, nostalgia, memory, and identity. This is clearly manifested in the titles of many of their works, such as Abdallah Baroudi’s *Le Maroc ou la mémoire de l’exil* (Morocco or the Memory of Exile), and Nouredine Bousfiha’s *Safari au sud d’une mémoire* (Safari in the South of a Memory) and *Juste avant l’Oubli* (Just before Forgetting) (Orlando, 2009, p. 11). The third category was active mainly during the 1970s and 1980s. The authors and poets of this period “chose to alienate themselves from society and politics and sought refuge in the vast realm of imagination” in an attempt “to avoid censorship or trouble with official authorities” (Simour, 2016, p. 25). These litterateurs used to get literarily inspired from their own experiences or from the milieu they were raised in, speaking from the self and about it as a reflection of the Moroccan nation.

### **The Emergence of the Moroccan Novel and Autobiographical Discourse**

From the 1960s onwards, Moroccan literary production has witnessed a literary turn, marking the birth of modern Moroccan literature. In addition to the foundation of many literary journals and periodicals, such as *Aqlām* (Pens) in 1964 and *Souffles-Anfās* (Breathes) in 1966, the novel and the short story were developed noticeably as two genres that fit narrating the reality of post-independence Morocco and the aspirations of its citizens. This period also witnessed the flourishing of Moroccan autobiographical writings. Moroccan autobiography at that time did not “solely allude to a single individual’s experiences, but it is also a discourse on a nation, and the narrative can be read as an allegorical text about national identity” (Simour, 2016, p. 25). It is evident here that post-colonial Moroccan autobiography, while based on personal experiences, served as a mirror to the socio-political reality of Morocco, reflecting the complex interplay between individual identity and collective struggles and offering a profound commentary on the cultural and socio-political transformations of the nation. In this way, autobiography becomes a means of “national allegory,” turning the self into a symbol of the nation (Simour, 2016, p. 26). Larbi Batma’s *al-Rahil* (The Departed) is one of the most important autobiographical writings of that era. It stands out as one of the most significant autobiographies not only for its literary merit but also because of the deep insights it offers into the cultural and socio-political landscape of post-colonial Morocco.

### **Women’s Voices and Gendered Resistance**

Post-colonial Moroccan female litterateurs have also made an appreciable contribution to the literary portrayal of social realities, particularly by highlighting the role of women in the struggle for independence, in addition to expressing their profound sense of disillusionment and frustration with the socio-political status of women in post-independence Morocco. Their works sought to reveal the profound contrast between the promises of emancipation associated with independence and the continued gender-based inequalities that lasted thereafter. The most prominent female writers of post-independence Morocco include Khnata Bennouna, who is considered a trailblazer among post-colonial Moroccan female writers, and Leila Abouzeid, who is regarded as the greatest post-colonial Moroccan female writer. Bennouna is renowned for her collection of short stories *Liyasqut al-Samt* (Down with Silence) (1967) and her two novels, *al-Nar wa al-Ikhtiyar* (Fire and Choice) (1969) and *al-Ghad wa el-Ghaddab* (Tomorrow and Wrath) (1981); whereas Abouzeid’s fame is primarily due to her groundbreaking novella *A’am el-Fil* (Year of the Elephant) (1983) (Graiouid, 2013, pp. 220-223). Through their literary works, Moroccan female authors did not only shed light on their overlooked experiences during both the colonial and post-colonial periods, but also highlight the strategic yet marginalised role that women played in the struggle for national liberation. In this way, the literature produced by post-colonial Moroccan females served both as a form of resistance and a critical reflection on women’s status quo.

### **Experimental Realism and the Aesthetics of Social Critique**

In the beginning of the 1970s, experimental realism was inaugurated to the Moroccan literary scene “as an outstanding literary orientation in Moroccan aesthetics wherein much literary production attempted to consciously parody Moroccan Reality” (Simour, 2016, pp. 31-32). This alternative literary mode strove after narrating the true Morocco along with its socio-political reality instead of mimicking the canonical official narratives. It made a thematic shift from glorifying nationalist struggle against the colonizers that characterized Moroccan literature of the early years after independence to focus, instead, on Moroccan social reality during the Lead Years. The social and political conditions following independence, as

Simour notes, “furnished ample grounds for marginal voices to emerge” (2016, pp. 31-32). These voices aimed to depict the complexities of Moroccan society, often blending social critique with vivid portrayals of everyday life. In a neo-colonial society marked by “shattered dreams and false promises,” realistic narratives strived to portray a setting “where characters [...] endure imposed experience of agonizing alienation and painful dislocation while struggling for survival” (Simour, 2016, pp. 31-32). These narratives not only highlighted the characters’ struggle for survival but also criticised the lingering structures of power that continued to oppress and marginalise. The body of literary texts classified within experimental realism includes Mohammed Zafzaf’s *Muh’awalat A’ysh* (An Attempt to Live), *al-Mara’a wa al-Wardah* (The Woman and the Rose), and *Qubur fi al-Ma’a* (Graves in Water); Abdelkader Smihi’s *Ashyāun lā-Tantahi* (Endless Things); and Abdellah Laroui’s *al-Yatim* (The Orphan), among others (Simour, 2016, pp. 31-32). Through their stories, these writers conveyed the profound sense of existential struggle and the harsh realities of life in post-independence Morocco.

## Analysis

### Aesthetic Realism and Narrative Strategy in *Muh’awalat A’ysh*

Mohamed Zafzaf’s *Muh’awalat A’ysh* breaks with traditional Arabic literary conventions and subverts dominant ideological narratives by offering an honest portrayal of Morocco’s urban underclass. Rather than manipulating his characters to serve rhetorical purposes or nationalist agendas, Zafzaf lets them be themselves. He portrays their contradictions, their inner conflicts, and their cruel environments honestly. His realism is deliberate and ethical, not aesthetic. Through his unembellished realism, the author does not only construct an authentic voice for the marginalised, but also establishes *Muh’awalat A’ysh* as a powerful work of literary resistance. In the novel, Zafzaf purposely avoids the adorned or ideological prose often found in nationalist or postcolonial Moroccan literature. Instead, he employs a realistic, unsophisticated language that reflects the daily lives of the urban poor. The author’s straightforward, plain style highlights the struggles of those in the margins of society and places the story within its sociocultural context. The linguistic choice here is devoid of stylistic devices and sentimental rhetoric—not because the issues Zafzaf deals with lack literary merit, but because any attempt to beautify them would soften the brutal honesty they require. Thus, Zafzaf’s stylistic simplicity and narrative honesty—particularly his ability to give voice to marginalised figures without resorting to exaggerated rhetoric or linguistic embellishment—create a powerful narrative space for those systemically silenced in the Moroccan society: slum dwellers, street children, and informal workers; the oppressed, the overlooked, and the invisible. In *Muh’awalat A’ysh*, the language is intentionally simple, functional, and even brusque. It focuses on clarity and directness to convey everyday experiences just as they are. Zafzaf refuses to aestheticize poverty or portray the sufferings as a heroic struggle. Rather, he allows his characters to speak in rude, colloquial, and often vulgar language. Consider the way a ship guard addresses the teenage protagonist, Hamid:

- أنت هناك. انزل. إلى أين أنت صاعد؟

- سأبيع لهم الصحف.

- إنهم لا يقرأون. انزل.

- أريد أن أرى السينغالي.

- السينغالي خرج. اذهب وفتش عنه في المدينة.

ألقى حارس الباخرة بقايا سندويش في وجه حميد، وجرع دفعة واحدة علبة بيرة، ثم طوح بها تجاهه لكنها لم تصبه.

“You, there! Get down. To where are you climbing?”



“I will sell them the newspapers.”

“They don’t read. Get down.”

“I want to see the Senegalese.”

“The Senegalese has gone out, go and search for him in the city.”

The ship’s guard hurled the leftovers of a sandwich into Hamid’s face, then downed an entire can of beer in a single gulp and flung it towards him, but it did not hit him. (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 06; translation mine).

The ship guard’s sharp, intimidating tone and aggressive reaction are not only realistic but thematically important, for they convey the systemic hostility that society holds for people like Hamid. Zafzaf depicts the roughness of urban speech without filtering it for literary elegance in order to preserve its sociolinguistic significance. Even the narration, when not conveyed through characters’ dialogue, mimics the same linguistic plainness. When Hamid is searched and humiliated by a port guard, the narrator tells us with ruthless plainness:

أخذ حميد يفك أزرار سرواله، والحارس يساعده في ذلك. كان حميد يبكي. عالم قاس من حوله [...] تحامل على نفسه وغادر الميناء. عند أقرب جدار انهار تماماً، مدد ساقيه على الأرض وألقى بحزمة الصحف جانبا. ثم أجهش بالبكاء.

Hamid began to unbutton his trousers, with the guard assisting him. Hamid was crying. A cruel world surrounds him [...] He gathered his strength and left the port. At the nearest wall, he collapsed altogether. He stretched his legs on the ground, threw the bundle of newspapers aside, and then burst into tears (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 16; translation mine).

The language is deliberately unembellished, free of sophistry, and honest to the bone. It is not a language of literary salons, but rather the language of the rough streets, port checkpoints, noisy bars, and filthy shantytowns. There is no need for metaphors or conveying the scene in a sophisticated manner; the cruelty is presented as it is—unfiltered and shocking—to make the reader fully experience Hamid’s suffering. What distinguishes this narrative is its focus on truthful language; a language meant not to please or entertain the reader, but to present a realistic realm that affects the reader as much as it affects the characters. It is, by necessity, cruel because it mirrors a cruel world.

Throughout the novel, the language remains devoid of metaphor or any other figurative devices; it is raw, cruel, and graphic in its portrayal of suffering and struggle. The main character, Hamid, much like the narrator who recounts the events, speaks in a manner that is notably candid and blunt. Zafzaf does not attempt to soften the truth or narrate the story in a euphemistic manner. When Hamid is forced to undress under suspicion of theft by a port guard, the prose reflects the brutality of the moment with brutal, shocking directness:

- انزع سروالك. سأفتش كل شيء فيك.

أخذت بعض قطرات الدموع المستعصية تتسابق من عيني حميد:

- والله سيدي، ليس معي شيء.

- انزع وإلا أرسلتك إلى الشارع عارياً.

“Take off your trousers. I will search every part of you.”

A few persistent tears began to race from Hamid’s eyes:

“I swear, sir. I have nothing.”

“Take it off, or I will send you naked to the street” (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 16; translation mine).

The intimidation is not softened. The begging is not polished. The threat is not beautified. The scene is presented as it is, sharp and commanding, leaving Hamid with no choice but to comply and the readers but to engage with the disturbing depiction of an unequal confrontation between ruthless authority and powerless childhood. The reader is not offered the luxury of sophistication or mystery, for the novel

presents an unmasked brutal realism, far from rhetoric. The language is almost entirely action-based, dominated by commands and brief exchanges that emphasize the unequal power relations. There is no internal reflection or metaphorical symbolism, the scene is characterized prominently by overt expressions of fear, pleading and domination. What makes this language so affecting is its fidelity to the characters' everyday experiences. It does not beautify oppression, embellish marginality or aestheticize fear. It offers no comfort, no poetic escape, and no satisfying climax. Instead, it reflects the brutality of the situation and preserves the authenticity of the suffering endured by the powerless, whose pleas are ignored, forcing the reader to experience the emotional and psychological impact of such encounters. In this way, *An Attempt to Live* does not merely give voice to the marginalised but also embodies them. It lets them speak as they are: tired, coarse, frightened, anxious, angry, hungry, and more. The novel rejects the idea of literature as aesthetic, and instead presents literature as a form of testimony. Zafzaf's refusal to adorn the speech or thoughts of his characters into anything beyond their lived experiences and daily struggles is exactly what makes the novel so linguistically honest and emotionally affecting.

### **Language as Resistance: Darija, Dialogues, and Linguistic Authenticity**

Most importantly, Zafzaf employs a narrative style that skilfully amalgamates modern standard Arabic with Moroccan vernacular (Darija). This literary technique does not only reflect the authentic speech patterns of his characters, but also grounds the story in its sociocultural context. This linguistic blend effectively fuses the formal literary tradition with the vernacular realities of everyday life, capturing the complexities and contradictions of the Moroccan society in their entirety. The quote below highlights how this linguistic hybridity authentically reflects the tensions and emotional traumas of everyday Moroccan life:

الأب: "كل يا بغل. كتفاك مثل كتفي الجمل. لا ينفع فيك أكل."

الأم: "كل، تأكل فيه سما."

الأب: "متى يتدبر هذا الحمار أمر نفسه؟ هذا كثير علي، كثير علي."

الأم: "وأنا أنظر إلي. لقد جعلتم مني عجوزا قبل الوقت. اشتغلت كل الحرف لكي أطعم زوجا"

كالبعغل وأطفالا يأكلون كالجراد."

The father: "Eat, you mule. Your shoulders are like those of a camel. It is useless to feed you."

The mother: "Eat, you may eat poison in it."

The father: "When will this donkey figure out his own affairs? This is too much for me—far too much."

The mother: "And I—look at me. You have made me an old woman before my time. I toiled in every job, all to feed a husband who is like a mule and children who devour food like locusts" (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 26; translation mine).

The domestic language here is animalistic, offensive, and completely devoid of parental warmth. It is an extension of street language, reflecting the brutal realities of deprivation where affection is replaced with insult and poverty fosters verbal violence. The characters speak in the manner of those who grow up amid cruelty, where kindness is scarce and language is not a means of communication, but a tool of oppression. This linguistic tone is charged with anger and frustration; it offers readers with a profound insight into Morocco's socioeconomic hardships, while reflecting the daily struggles faced by the underclass. By employing diverse linguistic registers and adopting a narrative style that mirrors the everyday challenges of Morocco's slum dwellers, Zafzaf not only enhance the authenticity of his characters but also subtly captures the complexities of human experience within the Moroccan society. The deliberate avoidance of sophistry and rhetoric creates a form of language that gives voice to those historically marginalised and denied representation. Furthermore, the linguistic choice in *Muh'awalat*

A'ysh, besides enhancing the realism of the narrative, subverts the elitist tendencies of traditional Arabic literature. By incorporating Darija, the language spoken by the majority of Moroccans, Zafzaf gives an authentic voice to his characters, most of whom come from marginalised backgrounds. He thus allows them to speak in the language they use in everyday life rather than in a language that might not aptly capture their lived realities. This use of Darija also democratizes the literary space, as it gives voice to those historically excluded from the literary canon and makes literature more accessible to a wider Moroccan audience. Moreover, the use of Darija challenges the dominance of classical Arabic and French—languages often associated with formal education and colonial legacy. In doing so, Zafzaf establishes the vernacular as an eloquent tool of artistic expression, using language as a bridge rather than a barrier, as a means of inclusion rather than exclusion. His usage of Darija is therefore not merely a stylistic choice, but also an acknowledgment of everyday speech and a contribution to the enrichment of the Moroccan literary tradition.

In Muh'awalat A'ysh, Zafzaf often allows entire scenes to unfold through direct speech, without the narrator's intrusion. These dialogues, which often used to shed light on the characters' psychology or moral dilemmas, are also colloquial, sharp, and offensive. The dialogues are filled with survival concerns, insults, and brief exchanges. When Hamid was stopped by a port police officer, a tense interrogation quickly began concerning his presence there:

وقال الرجل ذو البدلة الزرقاء:  
- ماذا تفعل هنا أيها اللقيط؟ كم مرة قلت لك الا تعود إلى هذا المكان؟ هل عندك ترخيص لدخول الميناء؟  
قال حميد: كان عندي وضاع.  
- من سلمه لك؟ كم زجاجة ويسكي تهرب كل يوم؟  
- أنا لا أهرب شيئاً، شرطة الميناء هي التي سلمتني الرخصة، إني مجرد بائع صحف. صدقني سيدي.  
- هل تعرف أين نحتجز أمثالك؟ إنك تصلح لأولئك السكارى المهريين.  
- لن أكررها مرة أخرى. لن أدخل الميناء أبداً.  
- طيب، اجمع صحفك. إذا عدت مرة أخرى فسأعرف ما أفعل بك.  
أدخل حميد قدميه في فردتي الحذاء وأسرع إلى صحفه يتأبطها. ابتعد عن الرجل في خوف:  
شكراً سيدي. لن أكررها مرة أخرى، لن أدخل الميناء أبداً.

The man in the blue uniform then said: “What are you doing here, you bastard? How many times have I told you not to set foot in this place again? Do you have a permit to enter the port?”

“I had one, but it got lost.” Hamid replied.

“Who gave it to you? How many bottles of whiskey do you smuggle every day?”

“I smuggle nothing. It was the port police who gave me the permit. I am just a newsboy. Believe me, sir.”

“Do you know where we confine the likes of you? You are fit for those drunken smugglers.”

“I will not do it again; I will never enter the port.”

“Good, pick up your newspapers. If you return once again, I will know what to do with you.”

Hamid slipped his foot into the pair of shoes, and hurried off towards his newspapers, tucking them under his arm. He stepped away from the man in fear: “Thank you, sir. I will not do it again; I will never enter the port” (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 13; translation mine).

The above dialogue is marked by a plain, colloquial language and brief exchanges, which vividly convey the power relations. The interaction between the policeman and Hamid employs simple, straightforward language, characterized by short sentences and sharp questions, which highlights the confrontational tone of the scene. The policeman's speech is imperious and accusatory, characterised by the use of



derogatory terms like “bastard” and intimidating phrases such as “fit for those drunken smugglers”, while Hamid’s responses are explanatory and pleading, using simple and promissory phrases such as “will not” and “will never” to express submission. The dialogue’s pragmatic tone and functional language, devoid of any figurative devices, reflects not just Hamid’s personal hardship but also the everyday struggles of the underclass.

### **Profane Voices: Street Language in Zafzaf’s Depiction of Poverty and Irony**

Zafzaf deliberately avoids glorifying poverty or depicting kindness as something noble. The language of the novel is coarse when it needs to be, banal when it must, and overtly plain in capturing the details of everyday suffering. A vivid example occurs when the president of the newspaper distribution office, Si Idriss, explains the nature of the job to Hamid and inquires whether he drinks or smokes. When Hamid replies with no, Si Idriss responds ironically:

- مزيان أيضاً، لكن هذا غريب. إن الحثالة من أمثالك يكونون قد تعلموا هذه الأشياء قبل بلوغ العاشرة. لا علينا. إذا لم تكن قد تعلمت هذه الأشياء فالطريق أمامك مفتوحة.

كانت تلك هي الطريقة التي يتحدث بها سي إدريس بل أكثر من هذا، أحيانا يتلفظ بكلمات منحطة جداً، الأمر الذي يتناقض مع هيئته السمينة وشكله الموحى بالاحترام.

“That’s also good, but how peculiar. The likes of you, dregs, usually learn such things before even reaching the age of ten. But no matter, if you have not learned them yet, the path lies wide open before you.”

That was the manner in which Si Idriss talks—actually, at times even cruder. Sometimes, he would utter very decadent words, which contradict his corpulent appearance and the respectable impression it gives (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 22; translation mine).

Here, rather than aestheticizing Hamid’s poverty, Zafzaf highlights the psychological violence endured by the poor due to casual verbal abuse and constant humiliation. Additionally, even the moments of generosity are portrayed in the shocking reality of benefit and survival. The Jewish bar owner’s act of feeding Hamid is not motivated by genuine benevolence because her kindness is practical rather than generous. After Hamid carries the heavy baskets home, she feeds him and offers him leftover clothes, saying: “خذ هذه الأثواب، وغير خرقك البالية الممزقة تلك.” (“Take these garments, and change out of those outworn, torn rags of yours”) (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 47; translation mine). The kindness is pragmatic and purely utilitarian. The scene does not ennoble the giver or dramatize the receiver; it simply depicts a straightforward exchange rooted in human need and survival rather than altruism.

Even humor is often sharp, sarcastic, and cynical. It is conveyed directly, without rhetoric. This is evident when Hamid refuses a cigarette, recalling his mother’s warnings, and his companion responds with an amalgam of irony and mockery:

- دخن. هل ستظل مثل عذراء طاهرة؟

- لا يمكن أن أدخن. إنني أسمع كلام الوالدة.

- يلعن أبوك... لقد كانت أُمي دائماً تقول لي إذا دخنت فإنني سأدعو الله أن يدخلك إلى الجحيم. أنا أريد أن أدخل إلى الجحيم مع بريجيت باردو ومارلين مونرو. هل تعرفهما؟

- لا.

- يجب أن ترى كم هما جميلتان في السينما، إنهما من الكفار الذين يدخلون جهنم.

“Smoke. Are you going to stay like a pure virgin forever?”

“I can’t smoke. I listen to my mother.”

“Cursed is your father... My mother would always warn me ‘if you smoke, I shall beseech Allah to cast you into hell.’ Yet, I want to enter hell with Brigitte Bardot and Marilyn Monroe. Do you know them?”

“No.”

“You must see how beautiful they are in the cinema. They are from the infidels who enter hell” (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 42; translation mine).

This dialogue blends dark humour with absurdity, not as a moment of comic relief but as a literary testament of lost innocence and distorted aspirations. The scene, vernacular and profane, challenges cultural norms with the language of the street: cynical, brutal, and shockingly direct. The humour is absurd, vulgar, and linguistically bold—not because of any literary creativity, but because it mimics the unfiltered lifestyle of chaos, hedonism, and debauchery found in Kenitra’s streets and bars, which exposes the cultural emblems of Western hegemony that have permeated the lives of the slum dwellers: American fantasies, Western films, and adolescent rebellion.

### **Subversion of Literary Heroism: The Politics of Survival**

Notably, Zafzaf does not attempt to make his characters likeable in the traditional literary sense. He dismantles the convention of the heroic protagonist and replaces it with a character shaped by poverty and fear. There are no heroes or satisfying conclusion; instead, there is a cycle of dehumanizing encounters. This narrative form itself is a stylistic choice—resisting the temptation to comfort the reader or offer closure. Hamid, much like the other characters, is not a revolutionary but a survivor. He is portrayed with a subtle realism that highlights his daily hardships. His submission, contradictions, and silent resistance reflect the everyday strategies of the marginalised. When Hamid is kicked out of a bar for resting on a chair, the narrator simply states:

كان الجرسون واقفا بقامته الطويلة، ويتحدث إليه بعربية ذات لكنة:  
- هيه أنت، هل تعتقد أن هذا الكرسي سرير؟ غادر (البار) فوراً وإلا لقيت بك إلى الشارع من النافذة.  
قال حميد: أريد أن أستريح قليلاً.  
- اذهب واسترح في الخارج، فوق الطوار، أو في قمامة الزبال.  
لم يبد حميد أي اعتراض. تأبط حزمة صحفه، اخذ يخترق الزحام ليغادر (البار).

The waiter was standing tall, speaking to him in Arabic with an accent:

“Hey you, do you think this chair is a bed? Leave the bar immediately, or I will throw you out onto the streets through the window.”

Hamid said: “I want to rest for a little while.”

“Go and rest outside, on the pavement, or in the garbage bin.”

Hamid showed no objection. He tucked the bundle of newspapers beneath his arm and began to navigate his way out of the bar through the crowd (Zafzaf, 2019, pp. 35-36; translation mine).

The insult is neither analysed nor polished; it is presented exactly as spoken, as a gesture of linguistic fidelity that exposes the everyday verbal violence of poverty. Hamid does not protest against injustice; he simply leaves. At times, Hamid exhibits submission, as when a drunken American soldier tries to force pork into his mouth; he chews silently and spits it out once he is out. At other times, he displays internal conflict, as when:

مد علبة سجائر للحارس. تغير لون وجهه. أخذ يزرق قليلاً لكنه حاول أن يصارع تلك الحالة النفسية، حتى يبدو أمامهما قويا. نظر بعيداً إلى ما وراء النهر، الذي ينعطف ويحاصر القاعدة الجوية الأمريكية، ليصب في المحيط الأطلسي. استمر في النظر، كان فكر في رد فعل عنيف، لكنه وجد نفسه ضعيفاً أمام الحارس والحمال.

He handed a packet of cigarettes to the guard. The colour of his face changed, turning slightly blue, but he tried to fight back that psychological state to appear strong before them. He looked far beyond the river, which winds around and encircles the American air base, before flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

He continued to look, had thought of a violent reaction, but found himself powerless before the guard and the longshoreman (Zafzaf, 2019, p. 11; translation mine).

There is no heroism here, just a survival strategy. And yet, through these literary choices, Hamid reveals more about Moroccan marginality and oppression than any bold critique could. The narrative does not try to depict these as acts of heroism, but it reports them with simple, harsh colloquial words. Sometimes, Hamid considers fighting back, but his actions are hindered by his physical frailty and the cruel realities of society, as is so often the case for the poor. Through this portrayal of Hamid's journey as a circle of dehumanizing encounters, difficult choices, and moral ambiguity, Zafzaf subverts traditional notions of resistance, emphasizing instead the realistic survival tactics employed by those living in the margins of society. In a literary culture where eloquence is often mistaken for sophistication, Zafzaf's *An Attempt to Live* reminds us that there is nothing more poetic than saying things as they are, nothing more creative than letting the oppressed speak in their own authentic voice.

### **Beyond Metaphor: Realism as Ethical Aesthetics in Moroccan Literature**

This stylistic simplicity is not a limitation but a deliberate tool of narrative innovation. Zafzaf's characters do not speak eloquently because their harsh realities afford them no comfort; it affords them only survival. Their language is simple, coarse, sarcastic, and often offensive, but never dishonest. In this way, Muh'awalat A'ysh succeeds in narrating marginal voices without turning them into metaphors. They are what they are: anxious, hungry, insulted, exploited, yet still trying to live. The characters do not speak in metaphors, nor does the narrator impose moral lessons. Instead, readers are confronted with scenes and portrayals of life that are vivid in their simplicity, which emphasises realism and the complexities of everyday life. In this refusal to employ stylistic devices, Zafzaf constructs a novel that is even more impactful and subversive: he allows readers to feel empathy without emotional exaggeration, presents fear without manipulation, and most importantly, creates an honest testimony free from literariness. His language does not persuade through rhetoric but through being authentic. Its embodiment immerses the reader inside the slum, in Hamid's skin, where language is simple, crude, and aggressive. The novel's profound impact comes not from linguistic sophistication and sophistry but from its brutal realism and refusal to aestheticize reality. This is evident in its open-ended narrative, which confirms Zafzaf's commitment to portraying marginality not as a story meant to entertain, but as a perpetual condition that compels the reader to experience discomfort rather than seek a satisfying closure. Additionally, this deliberate avoidance of excessive literariness serves as a political function. Zafzaf presents the novel not as a traditional literary narration mainly focused on rhetoric and lyricism, but as a testament of reality. By subverting conventional literary forms and norms, he criticises their failure to represent the marginalised and portray the world as it is.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper has contextualized Muh'awalat A'ysh as an important work in Moroccan post-colonial literature. Mohamed Zafzaf uses plain language and a straightforward style to highlight the experiences of marginalised urban communities. Throughout the novel, Zafzaf refuses the temptation of rhetoric. He offers instead a cruel narrative that allows the voices of the poor to be heard, revealing their painful truth. In the novel, language functions as a mirror to social reality—simple, unfiltered, and cruel. It does not seek to beautify misery; it simply portrays it. And in that portrayal, it forces the reader to experience the harsh reality of being marginal in a world built to oppress the poor. Rather than crafting an allegory of class struggle, Zafzaf writes against the illusion of heroism. By stripping away metaphor, rhetoric,

and heroism, he draws attention to the language of survival and spotlights the subaltern voice. Zafzaf's realism is not only literary, but also ethical. It avoids speaking for the marginalised; it allows them instead to speak for themselves and gives them the chance to tell their stories in their own language. Through its stylistic simplicity, Muh'awalat A'ysh transcends literature and becomes an act of testimony; one that neither beautifies nor softens the cruel realities of Morocco's suburbanites. In doing so, Zafzaf's innovative style shifts the function of literature from expression to exposure, from beauty to truth.

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