

## “Aliens in their Own Land”

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Translated by Mohamed Daoudi

“*Di'menεraq di tmurt nsen:*” From the short story collection: *Rehriq n tiri (The Pain of the Shadow*, pp. 30-35)

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Darkness had just fallen when I arrived home. I got back from the city feeling my crowded and anxious mind weighing heavier than my body. I walked in wondering where my father could be, as I was trying to avoid him. He usually gets more upset at this time of day. This is the time he often walks outside the door to make sure the rope around the dog's neck is well adjusted. For if the loop comes loose, and the dog is released, the thing it loves most is to start charging around the field, sometimes ruining the potatoes in the neighboring parcels, or trampling on the barley field, turning it into a flat floor mat. Other times, it can be so beastly and out of control as to kill the hens and chickens in the neighbors' property.

After my father is done with the dog, he moves on to check out the cow, where he spends a good amount of time, trying to make sure the rope around the cow's neck is appropriately tied. Who knows? A rope twisting and tightening round the neck at night and strangling the cow might prove fatal. Losing a cow would be a real calamity. It would be like losing someone in the family, or even graver, for the cow alone amounts to half of all the family's assets. My father finally turns to the henhouse, and closes the gate, lest the chickens go out early in the morning and start roaming in the farming fields, both ours and other people's. In fact, many of the quarrels between the villagers were over chickens.

My father is very conscientious about all these things, but if only he could go about them without all the fussing and grudging. He is in no mood to be approached or talked to. He is usually angry and fusses constantly, spitting insults at anything that he crosses in his path. When he stumbled upon the handles of a wooden plow, he yelled angrily:

“Get out of my way, you broken old junk. I don't need any more misfortune.”

Our dog is lying motionless on the floor, as if it is afraid and expecting a smack or a kick. Only the donkey seems to be immune to all this. The poor creature is probably so used to smacking that it doesn't care anymore. As soon as it sticks its head inside the sack of barley forage placed beside a rock, it lowers its ears downward until they almost touch the earth; and during these moments, the donkey becomes oblivious and unaware of everything else in the outside world. It hears nothing. It sees nothing, and the whole of its existence is reduced to the sack of barley in front of it.

My mother takes no heed at all to my father's nagging because she knows how he is. I stood by the outside gate holding a newspaper tucked under my arm, and watching the chickens enter the house yard through the narrow path. I wanted to walk straight to my room without having to see my father, for I know that if I cross him on my way, it would be an opportunity for yet another argument that would not cease until my mother serves dinner. Only then would my father stop talking, because she would tell him it isn't a good thing to nag and argue at the dinner table. Conveniently, I find that he spares me at that moment, as it is time for the TV news. My father does not

understand a thing whatsoever watching the news. Even the walls might do a better job at gathering something from the words coming out of the screen. As soon as he hears the word Palestine on the news, an air of gloom settles over his face. After the news, it is time for the religious preaching programme. Once it starts, the whole room enters into a complete and oppressive silence. Nobody can even breathe. My father listens wholeheartedly, but he doesn't understand a thing. What could he even understand? The sermon is in Arabic, and my father knows only Tamazight. Every time the name of Muhammad is mentioned, he would repeat "Peace Be upon Him." But even if he understands nothing, no one can talk to him or really even utter a word.

I sat on a half-broken chair, the wood almost completely rotten, but it is the only chair we've got. None of my brothers dares sit on it when I'm home. They respect me, or maybe they fear me, for I'm the eldest. But I don't want that. I don't like the way certain entitlements at home depend on age: this one is young; that one is older. I don't want my brothers to grow up with the same fear I grew up with. I don't want my brothers to fear things just because they're told to. But who would listen! People don't seem to care. They seem to be content with the way things are. They don't realise that everything is bound to change someday.

My little sister is the only one who dares sit next to my father. She isn't fearful of him. He never beat her. Sometimes, she joins in the nagging, repeating after him every single criticism. My brothers sit next to my mother, and opposite my father across the table. My father does not actually beat anyone, but that would have been better and less torturous than his verbal quarrels.

I'm still standing at the outside door, thinking he isn't at home. But every time I expect him to appear from one corner, he suddenly shows up from the opposite corner. He sneaked slowly behind me and said:

"For God's sake, tell me what on earth you've been doing in that damn city. Why don't you ever care at least to pick some grass for the cow? Why don't you do some tilling so we could plant some potatoes? Or is it only the bread basket that really matters to you?"

I remained silent for I could not respond. If I did, it would have been like trying to put out a fire with gasoline. I stood there motionless waiting for him to move first. My sister followed him repeating everything he said. I then headed straight toward my room. We only have one gas lamp at home which is right now in the kitchen where we would meet at the dinner table tonight. I had one dirham with which I paid for the newspaper; I didn't have money left to buy a candle. So I walked from the door to my room in utter darkness. I know my way to the room, of course, as I am used to this every day. I even know the exact number of steps I make between the front door and my bed. I put the paper down on a shelf, and lay in bed. I shall read the paper tomorrow, that is, if my father does not send me out to run errands. I will read today's news tomorrow, and tomorrow's news the day after tomorrow. That's why I should have been brought to this world one day before I was actually born. I wait for dinner to be served, and after dinner, I go upstairs to smoke a foul-smelling Casa\* on the roof, then go to bed.

Nobody can really understand me, neither at home, nor in the whole village. I am having trouble getting along with my own father, let alone with others. I feel alienation consuming me in my own land, but so do the other folk here. All of them are aliens, stuck forever between the farming fields and sleep. Everything they do one day, they repeat the next. My father is an alien himself. He doesn't know what it means to have a

real life and to have a rightful share in it. To him, a man is alive if he can procreate and have as many children. He is not interested in the world of politics and its conspiracies, or what America means; he doesn't know what life means. For him, everything is foreordained by God. God creates those who are downtrodden. And God creates those who do the treading.

I'm tired, tired of being out of place. I'm going to sleep and forget about all of this. But I will have to wake up tomorrow again to the same city lying in wait for me, and to the same nagging from my father. Days run one after another in successive and boring semblance, all torn from the same branch in my withered hamlet.

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\*Casa: "Casa Sport," one of the cheapest cigarette brands in Morocco, especially in the eighties, which was thus generally associated with the poor and the working class.

**Mustafa Ayned** was born in Ait-Bouyghmaren in the region of Nador in 1966. In 1996, he published his short story collection "*Rehriq n tiri*" (*The Pain of the Shadow*). He has also briefly experimented with music, theatre and acting (in the Netherlands). In his short stories, Ayned writes about the daily paradoxes and miseries of the small Riffian village. His stories have a quasi-autobiographical character which Ayned treats with irony and sarcasm. The pain of the shadow is, in fact, the pain of the past. Ayned currently lives in the Netherlands.