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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Disability in Moroccan Literature: Nabil in *Au Pays*, Tahar Ben Jelloun**

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| ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to explore the representations of disability and People with Disabilities (PWD) in the Moroccan novel *Au Pays* by focusing on one character, Nabil, a trisomic child, and exploring how he is seen through the lens of his society. Sometimes seen as a gift from God and other times as a burden, Nabil epitomizes other people with disabilities who live in societies as outcasts. The analysis showed that the exclusion of PWD is the result of the continuous association of disability with abnormality and the inability to understand and thus accept difference. This association eventually yields disabled societies, which further contribute the systematic exclusion of PWD.

| KEYWORDS

Disability, Literature, Morocco, Society, Trisomy.

| ARTICLE DOI: [10.32996/ijts.2022.2.1.4](https://doi.org/10.32996/ijts.2022.2.1.4)

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**1. Introduction**

Disability has long been associated with inferiority, inability, and abnormality. The negative attitudes towards people with disabilities are present in many societies around the world. In the Indian context, for example, the notion of karma or the law of ethical or moral compensation that governs existence has a strong resonance with the cultural understanding of disability. (Vaidya, 2018). A person's disability is viewed as compensation for the sins of their ancestors, and it is thus a means of punishment. In cultures where identity is defined collectively, severe disability might be perceived as a shame to the whole family (Chan, 1986). These views generally result in attempting to hide the person from the immediate surroundings.

In Morocco, a number of different studies have investigated the perceptions of PWD in the country (Elouahabi and Bekkouchi, 2014, Khalil et al., 2018) and confirmed that these are, in fact, negative and that this category of the population undergoes mistreatment and exclusion because of these perceptions. When views towards disability are challenged and transcended, thus eliminating condescending attitudes, PWD leads better lives. For instance, Groce (1985) studied the population of Martha's Vineyard, a small island that is part of the State of Massachusetts in the U.S., and her result showed how hearing inhabitants learned signed language because there was a significant number of children who were born hearing impaired. In this case, hearing-impaired children were not considered outcasts but were rather a natural part of their society (Groce, 1985, as cited in Shridevi, 2006).

Becoming better educated and informed about disability is not limited to sociological or ethnographic studies, but works of literature can provide an even deeper insight into the personal, emotional, and social aspects of the lives of people with disabilities and the circumstances they live in. Even works of fiction are a window into the culture and its representation of disability. Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, *Au Pays*, is a Moroccan example of works of literature that represent people with disabilities (PWD). This representation, although peripheral, sheds light on their lives within and outside of the Moroccan society.

Most criticism of this novel centers around the issues of immigration and retirement, but none discusses the presence of Nabil, the trisomic character. This may be due to the subalternity of PWD in any society. Creating this character and putting him in a

direct relationship with the central character was not done haphazardly. His presence in this imaginary work draws attention to the way society deals with differences. As long as the general population associates physical appearance with mental ability, barriers will exist between able-bodied people and PWD, which, unfortunately, may lead to the development of a "disabled" society.

When a society links difference to a disability, it demonstrates its inability to transcend the norms that are set for an individual to be "normal". This attitude is the result of a normative social influence that eventually leads to the marginalization of people with disabilities. In *Au Pays*, the author illustrates the aspects of a disabled society, which can first be seen through the description of Nabil's characteristics and the way he viewed those in his homeland in Morocco. Second, by showing the different manifestations that disability might take through a comparison of Nabil's life in France versus life in Morocco.

## **2. Who they are and how they are viewed**

There is an enormous gap between the way society perceives trisomic children and their reality. The novel presents two perspectives through which Nabil is viewed. Mohamed, the central character, thinks of Nabil as being smart and gifted, whereas Nabil's mother has a different view. While Mohamed embodies a level of open-mindedness that accepts difference, the mother represents the social attitude that is based on misconceptions.

### **2.1. Nabil through the Eyes of the Central Character**

In creating a trisomic child and making his presence central to the main character's life, Ben Jelloun allows the reader to become educated about this category of children. The reader first meets Nabil when the central character, Mohamed, who is Nabil's uncle, talks about his children in the fifth chapter. While reading, one cannot help but recognize the positive effect that Nabil has on Mohamed's life,

Mes enfants s'appellent Mourad, Rachid, Jamila, Othmane, Reky, et le merveilleux Nabil qui n'est pas mon fils mais celui de ma sœur qui me l'avait confié dans l'espoir qu'il puisse intégrer un institut pour enfants attardés. Il est mon préféré, il est né avec un problème et je crois qu'il a transformé ce problème en quelque chose de formidable ; on m'a dit que c'est un mongolien, je ne sais pas ce que c'est, mais je sais que c'est un garçon étonnant (Ben Jelloun, p. 59).

My children are Mourad, Rachid, Jamila, Othmane, Reky, and the wonderful Nabil, who is not my son but the son of my sister, who entrusted him to me in the hope that he would be able to enter an institute for retarded children (sic). He is my favorite. He was born with a problem, and I think he has transformed this problem into something wonderful; I was told that he is a Mongolian, I don't know what it is, but I know that he is an amazing boy.

This excerpt provides some valuable information that raises questions in the reader's mind. To begin with, the relationship between uncle and nephew is revealed. Then, the revelation of a mother's decision to turn over her son to her brother's care prompts questions. Why would a mother send a trisomic child away? What assumptions can be made, based on this decision, about how this child might be viewed in Moroccan society? Was the mother ashamed of her son or simply being protective? Did she believe the child would be treated more equitably in France? Finally, even though Mohamed associates Nabil's situation with a "problem" that he does not understand, he still admires him and tells the reader that Nabil has transformed his disability into something great. Moreover, the fact that Mohamed does not give any description of his other children suggests that the presence of the child in the central character's life is significant.

The presence of Nabil in Mohamed's life is indeed significant as the latter describes the former as being a "gift from God and a light of life." (p. 64) In the description, Mohamed makes it clear that his life is more joyful with Nabil in it. He even considers him more than just a son, but a "compass," a "guide," a "ray of sunshine" that illuminates his life, and a "smile that erases all the sadness of the world." (p. 64). He thinks that his life without Nabil would have been sad and difficult. It can be inferred from these descriptions that living with trisomic children may not be as challenging as generally believed and that they, too, can be a source of happiness just like anybody else.

To have a clearer view of Nabil, he is described as being unable to read and having difficulty with writing. Yet, Mohamed, who himself cannot read or write, thinks that it does not matter because Nabil has a trait that Mohamed finds most extraordinary; he has an innate ability to read peoples' body language, particularly with respect to himself, and has a clear response to others' attitudes.

Quand il entre dans une pièce, il repère tout de suite les personnes qui n'admettent pas son état ou qui font la moue. Il les ignore. Il est incapable d'avoir des sentiments négatifs (Ben Jelloun, p. 64).

When he enters a room, he immediately identifies people who do not accept his state or who pout. He ignores them. He is incapable of having negative feelings (Linda Coverdale, 2011).

The ability to recognize people who do not like him and subsequently ignore them provides an example to the reader of the "interpersonal intelligence," honesty, and spontaneity of the trisomic child. This awareness does not stop at recognizing strangers and ignoring them but is also seen in his relationship with Mohamed. The latter states that Nabil is probably the only person who understands him because Nabil is intuitively able to recognize when Mohamed is "sad and pensive, which makes his eyes tear." (p.129). This trait shows how caring and smart Nabil is and how close he is to Mohamed. This is demonstrated repeatedly when Mohamed refers to how the mere thought of Nabil brings him joy.

Along with the gift of compassion and intelligence, Nabil is also talented. Mohamed recounts a time when they are in a restaurant in France, and suddenly, they hear someone playing the piano. At first, they think that it is a professional musician, but when they discover it is Nabil improvising, everybody is amazed. Mohamed thinks that Nabil "is an autonomous kid, meticulous, and a little bit manic" (p. 66), an image the reader is bound to keep in mind.

As death looms in Mohamed's final days, his wife beckons their children to come to his bedside, but none of them attends, refusing to believe that he is dying nor wanting to leave their work for such a purpose. As a result, upon returning to France, she is only accompanied by Mohamed's one true source of joy, Nabil

Sa femme était revenue avec Nabil; ses autres enfants ne voulaient pas la croire ni interrompre leur travail pour aller calmer un homme pris de délire. Nabil, fou de chagrin, se mit à parler distinctement et exigeait de celui qu'il considérait comme son père qu'il se lève et qu'il lui donne la main pour se rendre au hammam ensemble. Il tournait autour du fauteuil dont on ne voyait que les bras très usés et attendait que Mohamed se réveille d'un long sommeil. Il prit un seau d'eau tiède et lui lava la tête. Mais Mohamed dont la respiration était de plus en plus lente était en train de s'en aller. Il ne prononça pas un mot, esquissa un sourire puis sombra dans un long sommeil. (Ben Jelloun, p.187)

His wife had returned with Nabil; his other children wished neither to believe her nor to leave their work to go comfort a man in the throes of delirium. Crazed with grief, Nabil began to speak clearly, urging the man he considered his father to rise and give him his hand so they could go together to the Hammam. Nabil went around and around the chair, of which only the tattered arms could still be seen, waiting for Mohammed to awaken from his long slumber. Nabil washed the dying man's head with warm water, but Mohammed, whose breathing was becoming even slower, was going. Without a word and with a faint smile on his lips, he went into a deep sleep. (Linda Coverdale, 2011)

This passage conveys an image of a trisomic child as having an awareness and understanding of the essence of death and its consequences of having compassion for the dying and experiencing grief, just as any "normal" person would. The underlying theme of this novel, represented by the nature of the relationship between Mohamed and Nabil, is that while the "problem" that Nabil was born with might at first be considered a burden, in fact, in Mohamed's case, it provides joy and blessings to an otherwise sad life. The fact that Nabil is the only one who sees Mohamed before death reinforces the idea that trisomic people can care and are not necessarily a burden in one's life because of their disability.

## **2.2. Nabil in the Eyes of his mother**

It is a universally accepted view that a mother is the most important person in a newborn's life. After giving birth, it is the mother who normally provides nourishment and comfort to her young child and recognizes their unique needs. It is expected that a mother's love is unconditional, and she wants only the best for her precious child, regardless of any physical disabilities. Nabil's mother is no exception when it comes to loving her son. However, she does not fully understand how to manage and properly care for a child who is different.

C'est un enfant pas comme les autres, Dieu nous l'a envoyé, signe de délivrance et de prospérité à venir. Il faut le laisser faire ce qu'il veut. Il ne sait pas ce que c'est que le mal. Pour lui, tout le monde est bon. A deux ans il a marché, à trois ans il a parlé, on ne comprenait pas ce qu'il disait mais on devinait ce qu'il voulait dire, il faisait des signes, des gestes précis pour s'exprimer. (Ben Jelloun, pp. 98-99)

He is a child unlike others; God has sent him to us, a sign of an upcoming deliverance and prosperity. He should be allowed to do whatever he wants. He does not know what evil is. For him, everybody is good. He walked at two and talked when he was three. We did not understand what he was saying, but we guessed: he used accurate signs and gestures to express himself. (Linda Coverdale, 2011)

Both Fettouma, the mother, and Mohamed share the view of Nabil as being a "Baraka", "Angel," and "Gift from God". When Nabil's mother takes the position of the narrator to talk about her son and how she sees him, at first glance, she seems to have a normal relationship with him. However, things get a little bit confusing when she talks about his experience in the Quranic School. She says that he is a child different from the others but still expects him to learn in a school with "normal, ordinary" children. It soon

becomes obvious that the mother does not fully understand her son's disability and how the teaching methodology in a Quranic school does not meet her son's needs.

Moreover, in addition to the issue of his education, there are repeated examples of the mother's lack of understanding and ambivalence towards Nabil's disability. It starts when she says,

Si je l'avais gardé avec moi, il serait devenu de plus en plus malade et moi je serais devenue folle. (Ben Jelloun, pp. 99-100)

If I had kept him with me, he would have grown sicker and sicker, and I would have gone crazy. (Linda Coverdale, 2011)

Misconceptions arise as Fettouma is clearly perplexed by her son's condition and how to handle it since it is not a disease or sickness that requires medicine or can be cured but rather a permanent genetic condition that requires special care. Moreover, the mother's claim that Nabil is a "Baraka", and a "sign of a coming prosperity" is immediately undermined by her thought that she would have gone mad had he stayed; for how can one who is considered a good sign and a gift from God be a source of madness?

The mother is hardly to blame for her inconsistency. Various incidents in the story highlight how people attempt to explain his genetic condition. These explanations illustrate the general ignorance society has regarding disabilities. In the statement where Fettouma tells her story with the midwife, a very strange yet pertinent variable enters the equation of her having a trisomic child. The midwife tells her that "it is because you ate too much garlic, this is why Nabil is born different." (p. 98). When the reader questions the relationship between eating garlic and Down Syndrome in Moroccan culture, no logical answer is found.

Besides the midwife's and others' explanations, likely based on anecdotes, religious dogma, or legends, Fettouma is further confused by so-called experts. When the mother seeks a medical explanation for Nabil's situation, she is faced with a doctor who uses medical jargon that she cannot understand.

Une fois à l'hôpital de Marrakech, un jeune médecin essaya de m'expliquer, il me disait des choses que je ne comprenais pas : tu es trop âgée pour enfanter, cet enfant, tu n'aurais pas dû le faire, à présent il faudra vivre avec son retard, il n'est pas méchant, il est même très affectueux, mais ça sera fatigant ; il m'expliqua en faisant un dessin, une sorte de branche avec vingt-trois rangées de feuilles à droite et à gauche, puis il a souligné la vingt et unième branche en me disant : tu vois, là, il y a trois feuilles, c'est une feuille en trop, c'est ce petit trop qui fait le problème. J'ai gardé le dessin, j'attends que mon fils aîné revienne de l'université pour qu'il me l'explique. (Ben Jelloun, p.99)

At the hospital in Marrakech, a young doctor tried to explain to me, telling me things I didn't understand: You're too old to have children, you shouldn't have had this boy, but now you have to live with his disability. He isn't bad, he'll even be quite affectionate, but it will be tiring. The doctor drew a picture to show me, a kind of branch with twenty-three rows of leaves, right and left, then underlined the twenty-first leaf and said: You see, here are three leaves—one is superfluous. It's that tiny, superfluous leaf that causes the problem. I have kept the drawing; I'm waiting for my son to come back from university and explain it to me. (Linda Coverdale, 2011)

The doctor starts by mentioning that it is because of her old age that Nabil is born different. This is partially true because the likelihood of having a child with chromosome problems increases with maternal age. He makes no effort to explain to the mother, in words she can understand, why her child is born that way, but rather limits the discussion to being an issue of her age; nor does he provide any advice or recommendations for the care of her son.

Ultimately, it is clear that the doctor himself is "disabled" by his lack of knowledge about this "abnormality", nor does he possess the capacity to provide any type of guidance or help to a desperate mother. This is evidence of a systemic problem within the Moroccan medical community. Fettouma finds herself mentally and emotionally paralyzed in the middle of the midwife's interpretation and the doctor's unsuccessful attempt at explanation. If the doctor and the midwife are indicative of the Moroccan society, one can argue that it is not just the trisomic child but society itself that is disabled due to its inability to understand the essence of disability, which ensues negative attitudes towards difference.

It is important to note that both Fettouma and Mohamed see him as a "Baraka, angel, and a gift from God". However, this is not the only similarity. They both constantly refer to France as being the land where trisomic children have the same rights as any other child. Unfortunately, when it comes to Morocco, the author makes it clear that there is no place in that society for these special children.

### **3. When society is both disabled and disabling**

Describing Nabil's life in France compared to that in Morocco, using the passages provided by Mohamed and Fettouma, shows the difference between the treatment he gets abroad and that in his homeland. Following this comparison, it can be argued that the real disability lies in the social association of apparent difference with abnormality.

Nabil's life in France is completely different from his life in Morocco. While in France, Nabil leads a better life as he goes to public spaces, learns new skills, and enjoys a "normal" life. Mohamed confirms that "In France, he went to school, practiced sport, and learned music, he is happy." (p.66). Even Fettouma agrees with the fact that France promises a better future for her child's well-being. This is because of the existing special classes for people like her son and the adequate atmosphere for him to enhance additional skills, as she asserts in the following passage:

J'ai accepté de le donner à mon frère, il l'a mis sur son état civil comme si c'était son propre fils... et il l'a emmené en France, il va dans une école où une classe est réservée à des enfants comme lui. Il aime l'école. Il apprend la musique, fait du théâtre et pratique plusieurs sports. (Ben Jelloun, p. 99)

I agreed to give him to my brother Mohammed, who registered him as a legal son. After everything had been arranged, Mohammed took Nabil to France, where now he goes to a school that has a class just for children like him. He likes school. He learns music and theater and practices different sports. (Linda Coverdale, 2011)

These statements show how "normal" his life is in the sense that in France, he enjoys, like any other child, the right to education and after-school activities. On the other hand, Morocco stands as one of those societies which link the mental ability of a person with an apparent physical. When talking about the life he would have led in Morocco, Mohamed explains:

Je crois que s'il était resté au bled, il serait aujourd'hui comme un légume, bavant, sans envie de vivre. Chez nous, on ne fait rien pour ces enfants, on les laisse dans la nature comme des animaux, personne ne leur fait de mal mais on ne s'en occupe pas non plus. (Ben Jelloun, pp. 64-65)

I believe that if he'd stayed in the village, he'd be like a vegetable today, drooling, with no zest for life. At home, we don't do a thing for such children, just leave them to nature, like animals; no one hurts them, but no one takes care of them, either. (Linda Coverdale, 2011)

Morocco is thus represented as a place that does not care about trisomic children, where they have no rights and, eventually, no place in society.

The novel does not provide a clear explanation as to why this situation exists, but as illustrated in the previous discussion of the doctor's way of talking about Nabil, one can deduce that it is because they do not correspond to the profile of a "normal" person and that is mainly due to their physical appearance. Therefore, societal misconceptions, in Morocco at least, seem to be based on the judgment of trisomic individuals and their appearance as a reflection of their intellect and abilities.

The opportunities afforded to Nabil in France have a positive impact on his life. Thus, it can be inferred that when children are provided with a nourishing environment, educationally, emotionally, and physically, they can thrive and contribute greatly to society. Mohamed refers to him as "athletic, caring for and helpful to people in need of help" and adds that "he is not considered handicapped" (p. 66). Besides being physically strong and caring, Nabil is talented when playing the piano and acting in theater, and even his mother shows her contentment when she thinks that after sending him to France, he will become an "elegant, funny and intelligent man" (p.98) Moreover, the fact that Nabil achieves academic distinction is one of the significant effects because it shows that even if Down's syndrome is a moral disability, and not an illness as many would think, people with that condition can still learn and excel.

The attitude, acceptance, and participation of community members play a major role in providing an adequate atmosphere for PWD. A suitable atmosphere does not only include providing adequate logistic considerations that address the physical, emotional, and educational needs of PWD but also consists of acceptance and acknowledgment of the special skills and talents the PWD may possess. When the principal of the school congratulates and honors Nabil after excelling in his studies, it makes him happy and boosts his confidence, as Mohamed later states:

Nabil aimait qu'on lui fasse confiance, qu'on lui donne des choses à faire. Il avait toujours voulu grandir, être adulte avant l'âge, sortir de l'enfance qu'il confondait avec son retard. Il croyait qu'en grandissant, il deviendrait comme les autres: il disait moi mgolien ? ça va pas la tête ? moiseizans, champion, la pêche ! Allez Jeddi, on y va? (Ben Jelloun, p.137)

Nabil liked to be relied on, to be given things to do. He had always wanted to grow up, to be an adult at an early age, and leave behind the childhood he associated with his retardation...By growing up, Nabil thought he would become like everyone else. He used to say, Memgolian? Are you out of your mind? Me sixteen, champion, fishing! So, Grampa, shall we go? (Linda Coverdale, 2011)

Benjamin Franklin once said, "Tell me, and I forget, teach me, and I may remember, involve me, and I learn." It is common knowledge that when children are recognized for a good thing they have done or are involved by elders in certain activities, no matter how small they are, their self-esteem and confidence increase, and this is one of the ways they learn. Nabil here illustrates this best. As the passage states, he likes to be considered reliable because that allows him to transcend his age and eventually his situation. In his own bubble, he believes that once he is given tasks to do, he will escape from them and have the opportunity to be treated on equal footing as other people. He believes the intervention of other people outside his bubble is his only way out of their "normal" world; hence this illustrates the potentially significant impact a society might have in providing an adequate atmosphere for PWD.

Even though in France Nabil is integrated into the society, thanks to his education and places where he can play music and practice sport, the way he is represented in people's minds is shared in both France and Morocco. This appears in an incident that takes place at a restaurant when the people there are astonished when they realize that it is Nabil who plays the piano. One way of interpreting their astonishment is that it is unexpected that a trisomic child can show an artistic side of his personality. This, as mentioned before, is due to the association of physical appearance with mental, and here the creative, abilities of PWD. Hence, although the Moroccan society lacks special education or other programs for this type of citizen, and while these programs can be found in France, both societies show evidence of negative judgment against PWD as they are still viewed as being below normality. This fact remains despite the progress the French have made.

By comparing Nabil's life in France to his life in Morocco, it is obvious that he is more integrated into the former than the latter. This is mainly because of the presence of an adequate atmosphere which answers to his needs so and makes him lead a decent life. Nevertheless, it has been found that the provision of material needs does not cover-up the fact that in France, too, a form of social disability exists. Just like in Morocco, the link between mental abilities and physical differences continues to exist, and it will continue to be the reason for the existence of a disabled society with varying degrees. This form of prejudice is transferred from one generation to another, and the common misconception therefore remains: if a human being is born with a disability, it necessarily means that he is not "normal".

#### 4. Conclusion

The life of PWD differs from one society to another. When the means of leading a decent life are provided, they will have the opportunity to live with their disability not as a burden but as a steppingstone into a world that they may surprise. These means do not only include material equipment that would facilitate their integration into different aspects of social life but also their representation in the minds of "normal" people. We usually have the tendency to judge anything that is different as being abnormal; society believes that normality for a human being starts with a "normal" face, height, two hands, two legs, and a normal way of behavior. However, when a human being is born with a different condition from the majority, anything he or she does is questioned because, in common sense, the absence of an organ necessarily equals the presence of a problem.

If society had the ability to transcend its disability and accept the fact that the presence of a physical disability is not associated with the absence of creativity or academic excellence, PWD would not be as excluded as they are today. This transcendence cannot be achieved if PWD remains absent in the public sphere. When a problem is spotted, its solution may also be found. For that, it would not be a hallucination to say that subalterns' life can get better because the only reason they are marginalized is their surrounding society.

It is true that Benjelloun's novel is not about Nabil per se, but his presence is significant in the sense that it opens the door for further research related to the subject of disability in a broad sense. The main argument in this paper is that the real disability should not be associated with PWD but rather with a society that views difference as disability, condemning different categories of people to a pseudo-vegetative life and hence losing them as potential contributors to its development. The present study is an analysis of only one character in a Moroccan novel. Its results, thus, cannot be generalized to say that *all* Moroccan works have the same representation of disability. This is why we suggest that future research explores the representation of disability and PWD in other Moroccan works to check whether there is a recurring pattern in these representations. Other research can also study the works that were written by Moroccan authors with disabilities to explore how they represent themselves.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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