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## THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN TAHAR BEN JELLOUN'S 'THE PALACE IN AN OLD VILLAGE'

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### ABSTRACT



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One of the main themes of Francophone literature, a term that is used for the literature from Francophone countries outside France. Today modern usage includes any literature written in French. Francophone literature, therefore, applies to the whole French-speaking world in a broader sense. Tahar Ben Jelloun, is a Moroccan-French novelist, poet, and essayist who writes expressively about Moroccan culture, the immigrant experience, and the identity crisis that the immigrants face. Usually immigrants are considered a threat to the national unity of a country, but on the other hand, the effects of immigration on the immigrants, their identity and adaptation to a new country are much-debated issues which have attracted scholarly studies. The paper deals with the issues of migration and its harrowing results on migrants which is a debated topic in a multicultural society. Tahar Ben Jelloun has very well depicted the pains and the psychological implications of immigration in the novel "The Palace in an old Village" which represents the struggle of identity that is caused due to the migration of people from their roots to a new country in search of job and their dream of leading a better life.

**Keywords:** Tahar Ben Jelloun, A Palace in the old village, the quest for Identity.

### Introduction

The Palace in an old Village is a metaphorical autobiography of Tahar Ben Jelloun, a story set in France and Morocco. Ben Jelloun captures the stark contrast between the old and the new world of the home through the eyes of the protagonist Mohammed. The novel offers glimpses of the economic and social fissures of contemporary France where the author portrays every scene with accuracy. Tahar Ben Jelloun explores the themes of home, immigration, faith, social and cultural discrepancies between immigrants and their French

surroundings. He also tells the mounting estrangement between parents and their children in France. The Palace in an old Village is an intimate and touching portrait of an immigrant facing retirement, and the problems of identity that he faces. The novel depicts the elegiac and moving story of a simple man, Mohamed, who hails from Maghreb, a small village in Morocco who feels completely lost and alienated in the fast-moving, modern world when he comes to France to join the immigrant labour force. He is inducted into the Renault Automobile factory. Mohamed, speaks only his language, Berber, and never feels the need to

learn French beyond the basics. For him, France is a place where he can work, get paid and go to his village every summer with family on a vacation. The story narrates the various experiences, conflicts and difficulties he faces in France. Forty years later, when he is about to retire, loneliness preoccupies and worries him deeply. Hence we see that Mohammed becomes the spokesman for people like him.

The novel presents the generation gap prevailing in society through Mohamed's eyes and also depicts religious views through the words of a man who has a firm grounding in Islam. He felt that he had fulfilled all the needs of his children and believed that they too would imbibe his tradition. After decades of time-bound work at the automobile plant, he feels completely lost during the early days of his retirement. He goes on thinking how can he engage his time in France – "a place where he does not belong at all?" Time stretches without structure, and Mohamed decides to construct a palace in his own village in Morocco to lead his traditional life. He thinks that the house will reunite the family, bringing back the children to their roots. But, the house turns out to be a monstrosity, which emerges as a shapeless building that reflects the confusion of his thoughts. His family and the villagers do not accept the house as a normal dwelling place and they think that the house is inhabited by Satan, supernatural beings that are unforgiving to trespassers. This is the reward for his hard work and efforts to build his palace.

Ultimately, he realizes that his five children – three sons, Mourad, Rachid, Othmane, and two daughters Jamila and Rehya, who grew up in the French environment have become purely French. They did not come to Morocco for the house warming ceremony or to meet their beloved father who had longed to have them in the newly built house. He allows Nabile, a Down's syndrome nephew, whom he treats as his son, to stay with him. The novel ends with the tragic demise of Mohamed who had desired to pass on the family tradition to his children but was unsuccessful in his attempt. It is the story of the cultural shock of immigrants, alienation, unfulfilled dreams, and the

various identity crises, as seen through the eyes of the protagonist.

Tahar Ben Jelloun vividly describes the pain and sorrow of immigrants and also portrays the attitude of Mohamed towards his wife, and the inability and unwillingness to comprehend his children. He deftly blends the first person narrative with the third person to achieve the telling effect. Employing minimal characters and adopting a simple style, the novelist delineates the pathos, affection, and conflicts of immigrants in a touching manner. Tahar encourages the readers to see beyond Mohamed's narrow and naïve interpretation of his surroundings and reminds us to place our perspective in a broader context.

The story of Mohamed is characteristic of a generation that did not believe that one day the children would be more attached to an alien country, France than to their native land, Morocco. He does not realize till the end that he cannot get his children back. Mohamed does not dare to think that for the children of immigrants, their parents' homeland is a place to spend a vacation but not their home. These stories of filial indifference, of the fate of dreams deferred, are familiar. The novel reveals the extent to which Mohamed's story—even if we are aging and awkward and fresh off the boat—is inevitably different from our own.

#### Quest for Identity

The word identity is defined as the set of personal and behavioral features which define an individual as a member of a certain group based on race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture of the people that differentiate themselves from other groups. Persons may own more than one cultural identity as a result of geographical and social mobility and their desire for belonging to a particular community.

The Palace in an old Village is a powerful story on unfulfilled human aspirations and strained relationships. It explores the identity crises that immigrants face as a result of migration to a foreign land for their survival. It is not the choice of immigrants to go to a foreign country but the dire circumstances compel them to migrate. In this

process, the migrants encounter various identity crises that result in pain and sorrow. In the novel, the protagonist, Mohamed is portrayed as a representative of the immigrants, who tries to find his identity in an alien country and then in his own roots.

Maghreb is within Tahar Ben Jelloun hence the culture and people naturally find reflection in his work. The traditional Moroccan literature identity is based on the dialectic between the subject and the cultural, economic and social context. Identity oscillates between reality and dream and can only be pronounced in the interstices of the two. Through the perspective of the character, Tahar Ben Jelloun describes the identity crises of the immigrants face is mainly classified under religious, social, cultural, and psychological.

#### Religious Identity

Religious identity is a specific type of identity in the sense of group membership to a religion. Religious identity refers to a specific religious group membership regardless of religious activity or participation. Religious identity helps in identity development.

In this novel religious identity is explained in terms of a God fearing man, Mohamed, who takes great comfort in his Muslim faith, as is revealed in his own words, "God is great, and his word is the only truth." (10). the novelist reiterates this when he writes, ".....for whom Islam was more than a religion: it was a code of ethics, a culture, an identity" (112). Mohamed emigrates from Morocco at a very young age to work in Renault automobile factory in France. "His touchstone for everything was Islam. My religion is my identity. I am a Muslim before being a Moroccan, before becoming an immigrant" (134)

As devout Muslim, he has visited Mecca, and his faith plays a significant role in his life. He can cite the Koran in Arabic, but cannot express an independent thought in this holy language. However, he socializes with non-Muslims and readily acknowledges the advantages of living in a secular Western country like France.

On the other hand, he gets angry when his daughter marries a non-Muslim because Islam prohibits a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man. Islam's argument is that a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman without any problems, because the man is viewed as the stronger one, the more powerful one, as the one in charge. And if a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim man, this, in turn, means that their children will follow their father with respect to religion. Hence, the thought of his daughter marrying non-Muslim shocks him.

Nonetheless, though he is a staunch Muslim, he openly criticizes the jihadist imams of the neighboring Parisian slums and condemns the old world Berber practices of soothsaying and spiritual healing.

Tahar Ben Jelloun also portrays Mohamed as a very pleasant, quiet and guarded person. He is not a fanatic or a Jihadist. He is a very down-to-earth person. He is up-to-date with the happenings about Islam all over the world. He says that it is currently being manipulated by ignorant people – by very sinister people who pose a danger to the entire world. Here, we see the rationalist in Mohamed who holds pragmatic views on religion and God.

#### Social Identity:

Social identity is a person's sense of whom they are based in the group where they belong too. Here an individual does not just have personal selfhood, but multiple selves and identities associated with their affiliated groups. He may act differently in varying social contexts according to the groups to which he belongs, as his family, country of nationality, and the surroundings in which he lives.

Mohammed follows the family traditions like the others in his village and family. He marries his distant cousin at a very young age. When he could afford to bring his family, he brings them to France. He has three sons, Mourad, Rachid, Othmane and two daughters, Jamila and Rehya. He lets Nabile, a Down's syndrome nephew, whom he treats as his son, to stay with him so that he could be put in a special school. Nabile is very much attached to Mohamed. Being a staunch Muslim and

having been brought up in an orthodox family, Mohamed treats his children the same way, "But I'm not the only one in this fix. Did my father talk to me? It's true. He didn't say a lot to me but I knew what had to be done. He taught me the fundamentals of our religion. My son, Islam is simple: you alone are responsible for yourself before God." (43)

At the beginning of the story, we don't find Mohamed too concerned towards his children. He loves his kids deeply but he is unable to express it to them. His job was everything to him. He thought he was a perfect father fulfilling the wishes of his children but never understood that he had ignored them for 40 years. He never realized that he had lost his children who were lost completely to the enticements of the West. Four out of his five children were out of the house. Only his youngest daughter stays with him. All his sons have married out of Islam, which he accepts, but when his eldest daughter marries an Italian he disowns her because according to him: "The man runs the family and that Christian woman will convert to our religion in the end. No Christian man has ever sincerely converted to Islam to marry a Muslim woman." (114) This really upsets Mohammed who is a staunch Muslim feels that he has failed as a father and as a person in society.

**Cultural Identity:**

Cultural identity is self-identification, a sense of belonging to a group that reaffirms itself. It is the extent to which one is a representative of a given culture behaviourally, communicatively, psychologically and sociologically. It consists of values, meanings, customs, and beliefs. Tahar Ben's novel *A Palace in the old village* very well portrays the cultural identity that the protagonist undergoes.

Having lived in France for forty years, Mohamed could not successfully assimilate into French society. Indeed, unlike his children, he stubbornly refused to do so. The reasons for this, the novel suggests, have as much to do with the prejudices of French society as with the deliberate choices of this particular, possibly typical, Moroccan immigrant of two generations. He praises French hospitals and the social amenities from which he has benefited. He has been paid decently enough which

enables him to take his family for vacation each year. But he does not like to settle down in France. He feels that, at home, he will be free from the abrasive French culture. To Mohamed and those of his generation, France is to blame: "It's LA France keeping us from educating our children, La France giving them too many rights....." (23).

He longs for his home country. He has spent half of his life in France and is about to retire. He is facing mandatory retirement from the factory where he had worked all his adult life. This was his invisible, two-faced enemy because even though for some people it represented freedom, to him it meant the end of life Period. Without his job, he is lost. Work becomes a sort of escape from his fears and loneliness. He even considers volunteering to work in the factory; going back to the assembly line to offer a helping hand when someone becomes ill and is unable to work... But such opportunities do not occur. After retirement, he has too much time to think or, more precisely, over think his life. He longs for his old village and decides to take whatever little wealth he has amassed to return to Morocco. He figures, that only then his soul will find peace. Mohamed surveys his life and decides to go back to his village and build a big house or say a palace for his entire family. He starts his journey to his village and resumes the work of building his house which he had started five years ago and had stopped because of a shortage of money. Once he starts the construction again, it becomes a bizarre but Mohamed is least bothered because for him this house meant his dream come true - his family's return. Before the house is completed, Mohamed moves in and spiritually vacuum sets in when Mohamed realizes that all he loved was a mirage. In many ways, he is a Tevye figure - tragically left to sift through the ashes of his life. While the first two-thirds of the book is anchored in reality, the final part drifts into a sort of tragic magical realism. Mohamed roots himself to the chair in the middle of the house and awaits his children's return. They don't come home and finally, he dies. Hence, for Mohamed and his generation, France is, as an old shepherd that he expresses at the end of the novel Devourer of children (163).

**Psychological Identity:**

Psychological identity relates to self-image self-esteem and individuality. Weinreich gives the definition: "A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future"; this allows for definitions of aspects of identity, such as: "One's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity"

Actually, in the novel 'The Palace in the old village', when we go deep into Mohamed's mind, we come to know that it's not Morocco that has changed, the actual truth is that Mohamed has not moved on with time, he does not want to change, nor has he agreed to the change he sees around him. When Mohamed returns, he comes in contact with a kind of reality that he did not expect at all. Morocco was always his homeland; he never doubted that for a second. He never was interested in finding a new life in France; He just wanted to work, earn money, feed his family and then go back and settle down in his hometown where he actually belonged too. In short, we can say that the story of Mohamed is characteristic of a generation that did not believe that one day his children would be more attached to France than to Morocco.

**The Inner Conflicts in Mohamed:**

Maghreb is within Tahar Ben Jelloun, and hence the culture and the people with whom Jelloun lives and works, naturally find reflection in his work. Identity in the traditional Moroccan literature is based on the dialectic between the subject and the cultural, economic and social context. Identity oscillates between reality and dream, and can only be pronounced in the interstices of the two. This story is an intimate and affecting portrait of an immigrant facing retirement and the concomitant problems of identity.

At the beginning of the novel, we find Mohamed in his prayers. After the prayers, the fear of having a lonely death arises when a person has a feeling of insecurity. This, later on, builds into a feeling of identity crises. "Mohamed dreamed of a solitary springtime pilgrimage with only a few members of his tribe, just friends and family. Dreading violent situations, he was afraid of dying while in Mecca but was probably alone in his fear, for such a death sent one's soul straight to heaven."(2) Even after being in France all his adult life, Mohamed has deep ties with his motherland. La France is always a foreign country for him, utterly unreachable. "I work, they pay me, I raise my children, and then one day we all go home to our house, yes, because the house is my country, my native land." (135)

Mohamed's retirement from the automobile plant after forty years of dedicated service triggers his crisis of identity when he realizes that he is without the secure routine of his job at the automobile plant.

This voice of the protagonist gives a clear picture of how a person is very much attached to his roots and his true identity.

In the first part of the book, the incident takes place in a single evening where Mohamed sits down to pray. During this time, his thoughts go to every single phase of his life and his views on religion, work, and his family. Here we find Mohamed a very confident person whose thoughts are very clear and definitive, though at times, in his dreams, he comes face-to-face thinking about death and experiences a feeling of alienation and loneliness. However, the second part of the novel brings about a sea change in his character. He feels more alienated, lonely and displaced from his family and his society. The clarity of his thoughts begins to blur, and his life becomes haphazard, reflecting his thought process.

**Conclusion**

Tahar Ben Jelloun, through The Palace in an old Village, presents the problems of the first generation of immigrants. The novel conveys the dimensions of human mind ranging from economic

crunch to political exploitation to migration and throws light on the lives of the people and the problems these migrants face as they cross borders of all kinds. This novel represents varied viewpoints without resorting to epitomes. The novelist himself is a part of the process of travel, interaction, and exchange. The author, in this novel, uses poignant examples to explore the cultural and language divide.

Mohamed, like most other members of his generation who arrived in France in the 1960s, starts having very strange ideas about what life might be in France. Like others, he wishes to build a large, spacious house, for the whole family, which is just idealized as daydreaming. This particular dream in itself portrays that Mohamed has not even begun to understand what has been going on in France all this time. This is the root of his malaise; which could be said as the beginning of a kind of madness. The narrative Voice fuses with the character Mohamed, till the end, who never tries to understand where he belongs because he is such a person who is hard to convince. He never tries to stray away from his principles, common among his generation. He speaks about the freedom of an individual but forgets that these very principles apply to his own children. He thinks that his children belong to him, like an object. That's why he says, "You keep quiet and do as you're told because I'm your father."

This immigrant's tale is written like a personal tragedy. France gives Mohammed a livelihood and then takes away everything he has. In the end, Mohamed's story is altered from a convincing narrative into a strange and dejected fable. It describes the migrant's experience –the racism and preconceptions, and the nostalgia for home- a heart-breaking account of growing old. In his musings, conveyed in direct voice, Mohamed emotionally recalls images of different stages in his life: his childhood, his marriage... .. all those memories that he cherishes and compares with his life in France. It is a heart-breaking novel about the estranged relationship between parents and children, and an immigrant's abiding pursuit of home searching for his roots who has lost his identity in both the worlds.

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