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Where the Storyteller Speaks: An Interview with Mohammed Mrabet

Inass Essrhir
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
LLCIS Research Lab

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Inass Essrhir is a doctoral researcher and adjunct professor at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco. She holds a B.A. in Cultural Studies from Mohamed V University in Rabat and an MA in English literature and the History of Ideas from Abdelmalek Essaadi University. Her doctoral dissertation examines the role of translation as a means of preserving oral tradition in Paul Bowles' translations of Moroccan stories. Her research interests include postcolonial translation studies, oral tradition, migration and diaspora studies, and feminism. She also received Fulbright and Lois Roth Foundation grants at the University of Delaware, the University of Texas, and Columbia University.

inass.essrhir@etu.uae.ac.ma https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3413-8402

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Inass Essrhir
Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco
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ABSTRACT

This interview presents a vivid portrait of the personal and artistic journey of Moroccan storyteller Mohammed Mrabet,[1] with photographs captured during the encounter. His narration is spontaneous and genuine, creating unscripted tales that unfold like "fish gliding through water."[2] More importantly, this interview examines Mrabet's complex yet remarkable collaboration with American writer Paul Bowles, reflecting on tensions around translation, authorship, and linguistic mediation. Mrabet further asserts his authorial voice and creative agency, acknowledging Bowles's role as a translator who converted his Darija stories into English. Besides defending his authorship, the Moroccan storyteller also clarifies misconceptions about his books' autobiographical dimension and highlights kif's role in allowing him a more measured, imaginative storytelling stream. Beyond their artistic value, Mrabet's stories preserve vital elements of Moroccan intangible heritage, affording a close-up view into Tangier's daily life and culture. However, he shows frustration with waning public interest in oral storytelling and the lack of recognition within Morocco. The interview concludes with Mrabet's reveal of untranslated stories awaiting preservation and his modest prayer for a peaceful death: a profound contemplation on artistic legacy and mortality.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling

Tradition

Tangier

Translation

Agency

Note: The following interview was originally undertaken in Moroccan Arabic. It has been translated into English by the author.

When navigating oral tradition in Tangier, one inevitably encounters Mohammed Mrabet. Born in 1936, Mrabet occupies a distinctive position in the twentieth-century Moroccan cultural and literary landscape. His journey encompassed various occupations—fisherman, caddie, cook, and barman—yet he remains best known for his contributions as a painter and storyteller. His intricate ink and felt-tip drawings have established him as a significant figure among the post-colonial generation of Moroccan artists. Many of his works are housed in European and American institutions, such as the Special Collections at the University of Delaware. Mrabet achieved literary prominence through a complex yet unique three-decade collaboration with American expatriate writer Paul Bowles, who recorded, transcribed, and rendered Mrabet's stories into English. From the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, this literary partnership flourished, producing a rich body of works, such as *Love with a Few Hairs* (1967), *M'hashish*[3] (1969), *The Lemon* (1969), *Look and Move On* (1976), *Harmless Poisons, Blameless Sins* (1976), and *Chocolate Creams and Dollars* (1992).

Contact ✉ inass.essrhir@etu.uae.ac.ma

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For those familiar with Mrabet's tales, it is impossible to overlook his talent for vivid characterization, his keen observations of human nature, and his ability to weave humor and moral complexity into seemingly simple tales. As William S. Burroughs notes, Mrabet was "born a storyteller . . . who can talk to others around a fire and hold them spell-bound until dawn." [4] This description captures the sheer magnetic power of Mrabet, a man who commands any space through his spoken word.

Despite his remarkable creative output, Mrabet is known to be a man of few words in interview settings. Still, his reticence suggests not a lack of depth, but rather the profound wisdom that marks the oral storytelling tradition from which his tales spring. It is within this context of taciturnity that the following interview holds particular significance: a vivid portrait where the storyteller speaks. This interview would not have been possible without the scholarly network of Professor Kurt Hemmer at Harper College, who connected me with Swiss author and photographer Amsél Muheim. As a friend of Mrabet's, Muheim facilitated my visit to his house in Tangier, where I conducted an interview exploring his life and work.



Fig 1. Mohammed Mrabet with his paintings in his home exhibition. 2023, Tangier, Morocco.

In the summer of 2023, I had the privilege of meeting Mrabet, who was welcoming and generous, allowing me to explore his home and studio and discuss his personal and artistic journey.

Inass Essrhir: Who is Mohammed Mrabet?

Mohammed Mrabet: I'm a man who lives alone. I spent all my life by the sea. I'd go sit with the sea and the rocks. I speak, and the sea responds; the rocks speak, and I reply.

IE: Why?

MM: Why? Today, you wouldn't understand what people say, whether it's beneficial or not. So I preferred to sit alone. Tangier is where I was born, grew up, got married, and had children. I still want to know *man ana* (who I am). My life in Tangier witnessed financial struggle and social hardships. As a child, I noticed poverty all around me, so I had to earn a living and survive

through multiple jobs. I've worked as a fisherman, barman, driver, and painter, among others. This multilayered journey of hardship shaped who I've become, both as a person and a storyteller.

IE: Could you elaborate on the factors that guided your storytelling trajectory?
MM: *Hikayat* (stories). I listened to them, then I retold them and added a few words of my own. I made a number of books naturally, *m'aand Allah* (God-given). I speak, and I stop, then I keep talking. I have cassettes and radio cassettes. I like to talk about all matters, and I have many things to say. I've always had a passion for telling stories. Even before I met Paul Bowles, I would tell stories to any listening ears, whether in cafés or on street corners. Storytelling is inherent in my nature. At first, I didn't choose this tradition as a profession, yet later I saw how helpful it could be in securing a better financial future.

IE: Do you prepare your stories beforehand? What's your narration process like?
MM: I never scripted my tales: They just unfold spontaneously. When I sit down to tell a story, I don't chart an outline. The story goes on as I speak, like fish gliding through water. Each telling is unique, even if it's within the same narrative. This is because I engage with the current moment, with the listener, with all the inspiration that sparks my story.

IE: How can you describe your style and approach to telling stories? What's your creative process from beginning to end?
MM: I tell stories without breaks. Once I start, the words unfold seamlessly, without censorship or interruption. I don't worry or hesitate about structure. I follow the story wherever it takes me. Sometimes this means the narrative carries unexpected twists and endings. It can even digress into a seemingly irrelevant or absurd episode or scene. My style remains unfiltered and authentic. My stories emerge as they are, with all their chaos, spontaneity, and integrity intact.

IE: Is it true that most of your stories are based on your personal life? Are they autobiographical in nature?
MM: Well, they do say that I draw my tales from my personal life. However, the truth is otherwise. In no way do my books talk about my personal life.

IE: Then why are the main characters in your stories, such as *Love With a Few Hairs*, called Mohammed?
MM: The reason why I used my name as the main character is that it smooths my narration process rather than having to create names in every story. Yet there is an exception: the episodes that describe father-son conflicts, particularly when my father pulled me out of school and enrolled me in the *msid*.[5] Those parts are based on my personal experiences with my father. Aside from this, the characters and events in my stories are far from memories of my own life.

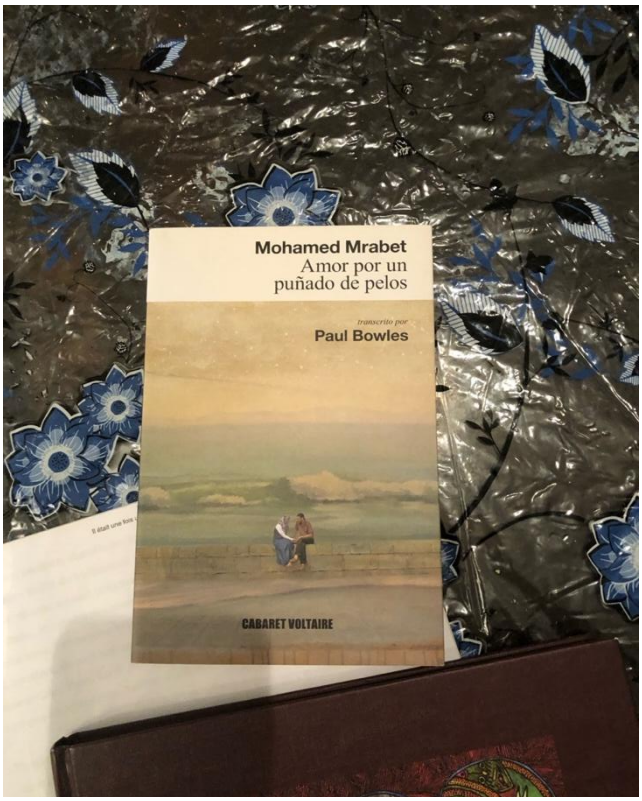


Fig 2. Spanish Translation of Mrabet's *Love With a Few Hairs*. 2023, Tangier, Morocco

IE: Could you walk me through your translation project with Paul Bowles?
MM: The relationship was tense at times, but it remains a collaboration. Despite Bowles' multilingual command, he was unable to communicate fluently in Darija (Moroccan Arabic). So, I'd tell my stories in Darija, and Paul would record them on his tape recorder. He didn't understand most of what I said at the moment.

IE: I've heard that you had to translate the stories into Spanish before Bowles rendered them into English.
MM: True. I told my stories in Darija. Since Bowles didn't speak this dialect, I'd translate them from Darija into Spanish for him. Then, he'd transcribe and translate them into English.

IE: Could he understand the meaning?
MM: He'd understand just a little, not completely. He spoke languages like French, English, German, and Spanish. Despite this linguistic tension, we continued working together because we both pursued the aim of preserving this oral tradition and obtaining monetary benefits.

IE: Authorship is a key question in your collaboration with Bowles. How do you perceive the authorial voice in this regard?
MM: I receive this question very often. I'm the author of the stories. These are my creations. Paul was the translator, the mediator who transmitted my words to an English-speaking readership, but he didn't create the stories. Bowles' translation skills are considerable. I respect his role in making my work accessible on a global scale, but I was never a mouthpiece. I'm the author of my stories.

IE: I've noticed that the theme of kif permeates some narratives like *M'hashish* and *Harmless Poisons, Blameless Sins*. What role did *Kif* play in the process of telling such stories?
MM: Smoking kif used to relieve my state of mind as I told stories. It allowed me to relax and experience a more fluid, imaginative world where the stories could flow more freely and smoothly. It helped me adopt a more measured pace, to approach the stories more vividly in my mind and to articulate them with greater clarity and detail.

IE: What do your stories represent? What is their cultural significance?
MM: My stories tell Moroccan culture. They capture the aura of life in Tangier, including the delights, the hardships, and the traditions. Through my stories, I preserve aspects of Moroccan culture that are fading, particularly heritage, now facing threats as today's public interest has turned to technology. My narratives open a window into a Morocco that may soon exist only in memory.

IE: How have your works been received in Morocco?
MM: We don't have someone who tells *hikayat*. We have someone who pats you, then you talk, and they transcribe. Now, with mobile phones, you speak and are recorded. That's what we have now in cafés and other places. We don't have an oral tradition in Tangier anymore. I don't know about Marrakech, but people are not interested in listening to stories. I currently possess a rich archive of stories, and yet it has gone unnoticed because whenever I ask for public attention, I receive none. It's frustrating and discomforting.

IE: How do you feel about your connection with your community in general? Do you feel understood and appreciated?
MM: Sometimes, people don't understand what I say, and they think I'm insane. I believe that a fish would make a better companion than people. I wouldn't be crazy if I said that a fish talks to me. I speak from the heart.

IE: Why do you believe so?
MM: I relied heavily on self-dialogue to develop my stories to the point of seeming eccentric. Many people who saw or met me said I was just a madman. If they want to say I'm crazy, let them say so. They can do whatever they want. They can say whatever they like about me. I don't care. What matters is what I said. What I say, no one else has the ability to say.

IE: As we conclude, could you share one last thought?
MM: I still have more stories to tell, waiting to be translated, and I ask God for a peaceful death.
IE: Thank you for your time and answers.

Notes

1. The spelling Mohammed Mrabet (with a double "m" in the first name) is by far the standard used in literary and academic contexts. It is the preferred form by major English publishers, including City Lights Books and Peter Owen Publishers. It is also used in *The Paris Review* and most university library archives. While some academic sources use the spelling "Mohamed" (with a single "m"), the double "m" version remains the standard used in his long-term collaboration with Paul Bowles and on the covers of his best-known English-language works like *Love with a Few Hairs* and *The Lemon*.

2. This quote is drawn from Mrabet's own words in this interview.

3. The prefix "m" is a common Darija construction that indicates a person associated with or defined by something. In this sense, "*M'hashish*" roughly translates as "stoned."

4. This quote appears in a letter from Burroughs to Mrabet, housed in the Special Collections at the University of Delaware (see Works Cited). Remarkably, the letter is signed under the name 'Bill,' one of Burroughs' nicknames.

5. *Msid* is a traditional Quranic school for children. It is often a room attached to a mosque where the *fqih*, a religious teacher, teaches children the Quran, the primary holy book of Islam.

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