

Imposter syndrome or the autodidact complex in the artist-painter Tahar Ben Jelloun.



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Abstract:

The autodidact complex often persists in the artist who composes his life in a skin that of his artistic creation. The pictorial sensitivity of Tahar Ben Jelloun perfectly illustrates the case of the one invaded by doubt. She has already experienced this penalizing feeling of inferiority with regard to his expression which also refers us to contemporary abstract art. So what to do? Stay in the shadows and let himself be taken by this feeling of impostor ship which inevitably leads to failure? The perseverance of our writer is stronger than the judgments which seek to destroy his artistic expression. This study, intended to be a methodological approach, aims to clarify this phenomenon and artistic and social through the case of Tahar Ben Jelloune, relying on his work *Poèmes Peintures*. To successfully complete our contribution, we have chosen, firstly, to focus our attention on the particularity of contemporary abstract painting and, secondly, to focus on the notion of imposture, not only as a lasting feeling that marks the life of our writer but as an aesthetic that internalizes sensitivity. Our interest will focus, thirdly, on the approaches, both discursive (the word as a link between oneself and others) and institutional (galleries) followed by our self-taught painter to avoid this feeling of strangeness, to feel recognized and consequently to appropriate a creative identity.

Keywords: imposture; abstract painting; self-taught; creative identity; contemporary art.

Introduction

The contemporary era is characterized by appearances and social hypocrisies, masks and artifices. It crystallizes the primacy of form over substance, where interest prevails over healthy values. In this environment that is as disappointing as it is frustrating, more and more impostors are taking their place. Evoking imposture in art means opening up to a field that raises as many questions as contradictions. This explains the choice of studying this problematic that cannot be reduced to a single phenomenon. Indeed, this feeling results from existential despair, from an absurd and derisory life where laws are flouted. It corresponds to an "other" posture that allows the being to change skin to access an "other" life. The artist, especially the selftaught one, perfectly embodies this feeling marked by a tear between reality and dreams. He acts by instinct while pursuing a specific goal, that of adapting the world to his expectations. Ben Jelloun's pictorial sensitivity particularly illustrates the case of a being invaded by doubt. The artist-painter has already experienced this penalizing feeling of inferiority with regard to his expression which also refers to contemporary abstract art with its multiple constraints. In this situation, what attitude should we adopt? Stay in the shadows, sink into insecurity, let ourselves be overwhelmed by this feeling of imposture which inevitably leads to failure? The writer's perseverance proves stronger than the

judgments which seek to destroy his artistic expression which represents an integral part of his self.

This study observes a methodological approach that aims to clarify this artistic and social phenomenon through a concrete and contemporary example, that of Ben Jelloun in his work *Poèmes Peintures*. To successfully complete this contribution, which unfolds in three linked moments, it is important, firstly, to focus attention on the particularity of contemporary abstract painting and secondly, to focus on the notion of imposture not only as a lasting feeling that marks the writer's life but as an aesthetic that internalizes a sensitivity. Thirdly, the discursive (the word as a link between oneself and others) and institutional (galleries) approaches followed by this self-taught painter to avoid this feeling of strangeness, to feel recognized and consequently to appropriate a creative identity will be considered.

A. ABSTRACT PAINTING: POSTURE OR IMPOSTURE

The work of the creator, painter or writer, reflects a certain view, born of some conviction or a desire that he would like to share with others. Some still find difficulties, hesitate or judge their work as insignificant to the point of abandoning everything. Others manage to overcome this. The way we look at ourselves is a key factor for success. However, it can become at any time a thorny weapon that gradually

tortures its author. This tacit pain represents an obstacle that persists ironically and feeds on silence and passivity, fear and doubt or even in some cases a disappointing environment incompatible with the expectations and aspirations of the artist. This discomfort can constitute in some cases a cause of decline or even ascension. In the artistic field, imposture is generally assimilated to the transfer of "a desired truth" for a "revealed truth". It is therefore appropriate to approach the pictorial and poetic expression of Ben Jelloun in this sense.

A writer who paints is like a craftsman who feels he must complete a work. There is not only misfortune, there is also something more beautiful, more soothing. I have always felt that there was a lack, a void, a space to fill. What is better than color? A range where color and feelings mix to deny fatality [...] I move forward with my emotions, my demands, my principles and I try, unlike desperate artists, to point out that there is life, joy and a little madness. (Benjelloun, 2022, p. 155)

This observation requires us to conceive of contemporary art, abstract painting as an example, as a posture adopted by the creator to escape shocking reality. "It is about thwarting the dull and predictable destiny of a mediocre existence by exploring the voices of the sublime, those of transcendence characterizing all forms of art" (Ben Jelloun, 2022, p. 56). Savés refines the notion of impostor:

The world is strangely full of people who believe in reality [...] or more precisely who believe in their reality. The impostor solves the problem by changing reality [...] by drastic measures [...] it is enough just to replace it with something else, with a substitute universe, a surreal one, that is to say a dream [...] The impostor is perfectly at ease, in this exercise of substitution-mystification." (Savés, 2020, p. 53)

Tahar Ben Jelloun, as an example, succeeds in mystifying talent. The brush was his faithful and precious alibi, an escape allowing him to play on appearances to reduce the strong tensions of a society of paradoxes. Although his art is a posture that helps him build his self and shape his identity and creativity, our artist-painter still doubts his abilities. He does not manage to take advantage of his success, to take advantage of it to evolve in the desired direction. This feeling of imposture tortures the writerpainter examined in the following axis.

B. TAHAR BEN JELLOUN'S FEELING OF IMPOSTURE

Ben Jelloun devotes much of his time to galleries and openings, which open the door to cultural and artistic life for him. An avid spectator of pictorial works, he regularly visits museums and art exhibitions. His passion for painting develops. He never stops looking at paintings, appreciating them

in order to discover the mystery that makes them so seductive. In addition to the visual exploration of these works, Ben Jelloun also devotes himself to reading and writing. The number of texts and articles he produces in this sense reflects the growing and tireless interest he gives to artistic expression and the controversies that cross the artistic scene. "Letter to Matisse and other writings on art", or his booklet "The color of words" testify, among other things, to a regular critical activity. This allows him to follow cultural novelties and to accompany painters in exhibitions and above all to communicate his convictions in matters of art without ignoring his part as a writer. He therefore has certain knowledge, an experience of the creative process and its variations.

By frequenting these places, the writer nourishes his pictorial sensitivity which turns into artistic activity. Indulging in painting, although it is perceived by the writer as a simple leisure activity, has become an inherent part of his creative identity. He throws himself into the pictorial adventure with real pleasure without having a predetermined idea about what he is going to undertake or about making known what his imagination or his interiority brings him. From then on, the little notoriety that Ben Jelloun's pictorial work knows is partly desired by the writer who cared little about the publication of his drawings scattered or frequently destined for the trash (Benjelloun, 2022). This silence in no way diminishes the value of the paintings recognized and defended by his friends (critics, painters, powerful men) who welcome them favorably. They give him heart to the work. Lorenzo is among those who never hesitate to encourage him to advance further and to shine. He enlarges Ben Jelloun's paintings and invites his friend to color them. Ben Jelloun admits that drawing, doodling, and diverting invitation cards or newspaper front pages refers to a recurring habit of his. His pleasure consists in adding a little derision to the seriousness of things and taking advantage of the opportunity to bring color to the ambient gloom and surrounding dramas. Without ever taking himself seriously, these drawings often ended up in the trash, until the day a friend recovered a few, enlarged them and asked him to add colors to them:

I have always drawn, made doodles, diverted invitation cards or the front page of a newspaper. I like to introduce a little derision into the seriousness of things and I might as well take advantage of it, make doodles, divert invitation cards or the front page of a to add color to the general grayness and the dramas that surround us. I have never taken myself seriously. These drawings often ended up in the trash until the day a friend recovered a few of them. He made them bigger and invited me to color them. (Jelloun, 2022, p. 154)

Are his paintings really enough to call himself a painter? Ben Jelloun himself openly and unreservedly declares his amateurism and even his fears. He perceives his scribbles as the expression of a mania without much interest. He never ceases to ask himself questions that call into question his art: "Is it enough for me to feel like I have become a painter?" (Benjelloun, 2022, p. 109). This uncertainty, this doubt, is at the origin of this feeling of imposture that prevents the individual from moving forward, that slows down his vital momentum. Instead of boasting about his achievements, he doubts them: two options emerge from this distressing situation: procrastination that delays the confrontation with his fears or even the intense effort aimed at alleviating anxiety. In both cases, individuals often succeed.

Before studying the approach adopted by Ben Jelloun to assume his strangeness and overcome this feeling, it seems wise to clarify further these moments of crisis when this fleeting sensation manages to sneak into the mind of our painter. What should we understand by impostor syndrome? The polysemic nature of this concept requires, for the sake of brevity, to approach it as a psychological feeling that represents a real enemy of self-esteem. An artist, who fears appearing illegitimate and who refuses to deceive others about his true abilities may, at certain times, be overcome by a feeling of remorse likely to disturb his tranquility and balance, leading to a perilous form of introspection. This last action of self-evaluation remains an implacable step in the life of any person. It represents a privileged way to question oneself and base one's journey on resilient foundations. Referring to Clance and Imes who coined this concept in 1978, the psychological state in question does not in any way reflect a mental disorder but rather designates "a mental trap" where the fear of failure reigns:

This syndrome reveals a paralyzing way of thinking that only privileges certain beliefs about oneself, where the impression of not being "good enough" and of usurping one's place is extremely present [...] Feeling like an impostor means living with fear in one's stomach, while displaying an apparent serenity. Fear of being unmasked when one is not up to the standards. (Élisabeth Cadoche, 2020, p. 17). From the above, it emerges that the feeling of imposture is not necessarily acquired or related to external factors. For example, specific living conditions can gradually instill this lack of confidence in the person. This is also often the result of striking achievements. If the lack of self-confidence can diminish over the course of actions and achievements, the impostor syndrome crystallizes a complex and paradoxical state: While lack of confidence can decrease through action and achievement, with impostor syndrome we are in

a thorny and perverse variant that can be described as follows: the more successful the person is, the more they doubt what they have accomplished. (Élisabeth Cadoche, 2020, p. 15)

An unexpected encounter can give the creator the impression of being an impostor or the possibility of becoming one. An unexpected question can shake him. In Dubai, during an exhibition with considerable success, Ben Jelloun meets a young princess who invites him to her home. A fairly long discussion, on literature and the Arab world, takes place between the two characters. The writer, a specialist in the field, develops a structured and rich speech on the subject. The next day, this same princess goes to the gallery accompanied by her friend. A spectator carried away by the strong desire to know the work exhibited:

She wanted me to explain my work to her. She asked questions about the meaning of a particular shape, a particular color. She wanted to find a message in each canvas. When I told her that I have no message to convey through my painting, she was a little disoriented, after an hour of visiting, she took her leave, thanking me.

(Benjelloun, 2022, p. 162)

This visit was decisive, let's say subversive, in that it plunged the painter into depths of reflection likely to destabilize his beliefs. What do you want to say with this painting? (Benjelloun, 2022, p. 162). This question deeply impacts him and makes him feel uncomfortable. The princess wants to hear something that will satisfy her curiosity. Doesn't such an answer mean that the painter is deceiving his audience?

The artist translates this overwhelming feeling of unease in these terms:

What do you mean by that?

Nothing

How is that possible?

And if nothing had the right to exist

To noise and perfume

To life to party

With that

[...]

Why put meaning

On everything that is exposed

(Jelloun, 2015, p. 98)

These simple examples, including the excerpt above, reflect Ben Jelloun's ambivalence. He oscillates between pride and discouragement, serenity and uncertainty, disengagement from painting, and his desire to give it an existence. It is a certainty, no one is safe. We have probably had the need or the impression or the assurance of deceiving. Some feel destabilized and prefer to withdraw into themselves. Others, on the other hand, decide to take the adventure to the end although the risk of exposing

themselves to the harshest criticism is always present. Ben Jelloun opts for this second path, in order to escape the grayness and nothingness and to reconnect with his authenticity. This necessarily implies giving a discursive and institutional form to his desire.

B. ACCEPTING YOUR STRANGENESS: WRITING POETRY, HAVING EXHIBITIONS

As demonstrated previously, the feeling of imposture surrounds the painter. Even his status is ambiguous. Spontaneous? Naive? Self-taught? The artist delivers an abstract painting from which emanates a childlike freshness and also a balance and mastery in composition. Ben Jelloun, educates himself and trains himself. He monopolizes his gifts and his entourage to overcome his difficulty in conforming and deserving the successes he doubts. The writer thus tries to find the laws that govern his pictorial works. There is a tendency to neglect the author's resistance and his obstinacy in finding a welcoming space that gives his artistic expression a relatively official status, a support that protects his sensitivity. To impose oneself requires feeling recognized, existing at the center of a world from which he feels excluded. In this situation, attributing a name to the state felt represents a saving step:

A word to name an uncomfortable state is like a promise of recognition, a first step towards appeasement. An assurance of well-being [...] the word legitimizes a sensation by giving substance to the invisible. Thanks to it, you no longer feel guilty about experiencing a feeling of strangeness. Without a word to express it, your desire was shaken [...] if there is a word, it is because the thing also exists for others.

(Megglé, 2023, p. 47)

It is up to each person to find their own way of writing to enter into life. For Ben Jelloun, poetic expression represents a procedure for freeing oneself from bad feelings, for appropriating a creative identity and, in particular, for transfiguring one's life into destiny. Using the word gives meaning to the unspeakable:

We must name things
Objects and feelings
Even if doubt lurks around language
We must choose the words
[...]
To name is to be present.

(Jelloun, 2015, p. 118)

Making the gratuity of art meaningful involves developing an aesthetic view that is incompatible with the utilitarian spirit. This is how our artist-painter ensures that he translates to us the ultimate

concerns of the true artist; freedom of expression and dignity. These three principles (freedom, freedom of expression and dignity) also contradict those of the impostor. Reflecting or taking a retrospective look at one's art represents a privileged opportunity to denounce this feeling. Without using language, Ben Jelloun addresses this dishonorable problem that calls into question both the artist and artistic expression in its broadest sense. The feeling of hatred for this type of person who seizes such opportunities to profit from them is clearly evident in the writer. Ben Jelloun uses several expressive terms to mark his aversion to these "marketing" practices that harm creativity. The passage below illustrates this:

When the orchid blooms
The imposters hide behind the canvas
They stink fat
A nauseating noise
They stink everywhere
[...]
With complete impunity

(Jelloun, 2015, p. 142)

Feeling in tune with oneself, nurturing a conviction for one's passion, believing deeply in one's abilities and talents constitute the foundations for making one's way and succeeding. In parallel with what has just been stated, the act of writing is a more tangible proof confirming the intelligence inherent in success. In order not to succumb to the anguish of the invisible or fall into nothingness, showing oneself to others constitutes a worthy solution. This allows the impostor to become credible. Galleries, studio notebooks, and salons represent as many prestigious places that the artist must frequent both as a spectator and as a free artist worthy of recognition. The exhibition of artistic works symbolizes much more than a simple public presentation. It is an act of revelation, a crucial step in the formation and consolidation of an artistic identity. Sharing one's creations with others involves undertaking an intimate and profound journey towards the recognition of oneself and others.

Over time, the fruit of chance and randomness takes on a more or less institutionalized form. It is therefore a question of expanding his reputation and recognizing his pictorial expression for the place it occupies in his career as an artist and of framing his paintings and publishing catalogs. All that remains is to consider exhibitions. The dream is transformed into reality. His paintings give rise to several interviews, broadcasts and press articles broadcast online. The painter exhibits in several prestigious places in Morocco and mainly outside national borders (France and Italy). These initiatives thus contribute to the promotion and enhancement of his art.

Conclusion

In an act of defense, Ben Jelloun chooses poetry. Through words, he weaves a thread of emotions and imagination to express himself, to explain the abstract arabesques that his brushes cannot completely translate. Poetry becomes his voice, his means of transmitting the inexpressible, of giving meaning to this feeling of imposture. However, voice alone proves insufficient. He feels an urgent need to present his work, to reveal it to the general public. The galleries serve as witnesses to his artistic journey. Each exhibition represents an act of bravery, a reaffirmation of his identity as an artist. These two expressions prove essential to shape his experience as a painter and to confront his uncertainties.

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