



## Looking against the Phenomenology of Being: Analysing Ben Jelloun's

### *This Blinding Absence of Light* as a Tale of Resistance

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**Abstract:** This paper argues how the idea of *being* problematises the essentialist hierarchy of mind and body. It challenges the Cartesian notion of human as a 'thinking being' and discusses existentialist notion of worldly being and existence. By referencing Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *This Blinding Absence of Light*, the paper discusses the impossibility of detaching the *transcendental ego* from its corporeal *body*. It highlights the plasticity of being (of the prisoners) that transforms them into other hybrid beings to resist every kind of inhuman torture. It leads us to the question: what is it that makes us human? Is it possible to constitute a being without a body? If the survivors become 'rare hybrid being[s]' can we call them 'human[s]' in its traditional sense? With these questions in mind, at first, the paper introduces the phenomenology of body with the concepts of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Then it reviews other research papers focusing on the primary text. The latter half of the paper analyses the story with the parallel study of the question of being, and spiritual escapism as an act of resistance. Overall, it challenges the traditional notion of 'human being' and gives a future prospect to address the crisis with the contemporary theory of posthumanism.

**Keywords:** Being, body, existentialism, mind, posthumanism, resistance.

What is it that makes us 'human'? Is it the rational mind or the able body, is it hope or resistance or is it the measurement of time and 'light'? Or what about the experiences and feelings, do that make us 'human'? With all these questions in mind, Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *This Blinding Absence of Light* represents a story of 'surviving' that leads us towards an abyss of confusion that problematises the phenomenology of 'being' and 'existence'. At the very beginning of the *Discourse on the Method*, René Descartes, one of the early torch bearers of modern philosophy, proposes that reason is 'the only thing that makes us men [sic] and distinguishes us from the beasts...' (Descartes 36). His 'I think, therefore I am' simply concludes that it's the rational thought that makes us 'human' and places the human at the centre stage instead of God. According to classical 'humanism', rational thought, reason or the power of judgement became the basic signifier of human and the non-human. Though with Husserl's 'phenomenology', the study of the structures of consciousness, the mind-body problem looks very different. Breaking away from Cartesian mind-body dualism (Descartes distinguishes the *I* from the *body*), Husserl's ontology proposes a many-aspect monism. He believes, each human being- each *I* or *self* - falls under the two essences: Nature and Consciousness. Hence, "my body" and "my mind" or "consciousness" being different aspects of the same individual *I*. Later, Merleau-Ponty agrees, "External perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act" (Merleau-Ponty 205). With the focus on consciousness, Husserl's philosophy talks about intentionality, object-directedness, body kinesthesia, and the influence of temporality as the mark of mental. His theory of self-objectivation is not prior or subsequent to the 'constitution' of the world but simultaneous with it. Thus, the self-unfolding and mundanisation of the transcendental subject, the establishing of a transcendental intersubjectivity and the having-of-the-world are parts in an interconnected process (Zahavi 80).



Later Heidegger, standing in the existential tradition [though in 1966 Heidegger himself confessed, that “it is hardly necessary anymore today to expressly observe that my thought deals neither with existentialism nor with existence-philosophy” (Wrathall and Dreyfus 1-2)], renounced Husserl’s old-fashioned phenomenological method primarily focused on consciousness because Heidegger’s interest was worldly relations rather than mental content. Twentieth-century existential approach does not define human being in terms of universal rational capacities, it rather argues for the essential absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence (Wrathall and Dreyfus 4-5). For Heidegger, the term ‘existence’ means ‘human mode of being’ and for Merleau-Ponty “*I existence*” refers to broader phenomena of being including the engagement with worldly things. In *Being and Time*, to discuss the ontological priority of the question of being, Heidegger says, “Being is always the being of a being” (Heidegger 7), and the totality of beings are surrounded by various domains like- history, nature, space, life, human beings, language and so on, that require a particular scientific investigation. He uses the term *Dasein* to define this being. This being exists within ‘worldly entities’, an organised context constituted by different goals, purposes and activities. Thus, the existential analysis of *Dasein* deals with the understanding of the *being of beings* accessible within the *world*.

Another existential philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty carried forward Heidegger’s idea of *Dasein* or ‘being-in-the-world’ to a study of our embodied experience of the world in perception. Ponty never doubts the existence of mental phenomena or denies Husserl’s observation but he insists that thought and sensation occur only against a background of perceptual activity that we always understand in bodily terms by engaging in it (Carman 206). As for both of them, body becomes the epitome of human engagement with the world. Husserl says, “I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my body, nor it from me” (Husserl 1952: 159). His theory of bodily intentionality or ‘directedness of consciousness’ is grounded upon ‘sensations’, especially “the privilege of the localisation of touch sensations” (Husserl 1952: 150). With an approval of Husserl’s observation, Merleau-Ponty in his text *The Phenomenology of Perception*, alludes that one’s own body cannot be separated as a ‘discrete object’ of perception: “as for my body, I do not observe it itself: to be able to do so, I would need the use of a second body, which would not itself be observable” (Merleau-Ponty 91). Hence, the body remains an ‘incompletely constituted thing’ that is neither an internal subject nor a fully external object of experience. Taylor Carman concludes that in perception we understand ourselves not as *having* but as *being* bodies (Carman 208). Sartre presents a contradictory view. He distinguishes between the body-for-me and the body-for-the-other as entirely separate intentional objectivities. Neither does he deny the dexterity of the ‘felt body’, nor does he simplify the body as experienced from *within*. Thus, without ‘bodily intentionality’ is it possible to constitute a body as an embodied subject? Therefore, if ‘the body is our general means of having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 146), what about the body of the Tazmamart prisoners who had to forget their existence to survive the tortures: “I kept quiet. I thought nothing. I tried to melt away into the void and no longer hear or feel a thing” (Jelloun 10)?

Here, we should look into the phenomenological theory of ‘body schema’ in reference to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Regrettably, Colin Smith’s translation of the phrase *schema corporelas* “body image” is an error. Later Merleau-Ponty’s version of the terminology has been loaned from Henry Head, who explicitly differentiated these two terms ‘body schema’ and ‘the image of body’<sup>1</sup> The concept of schematism can be traced back to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, “it is not images of objects but schemata that ground our pure sensible concepts” (Carman 219). Hence, the ‘schema’ needs to be separated from the ‘image’. Basically, schemata are non-conscious rules and procedures structured by our brain or sensory system that control our body’s spatial actions. Therefore, it is a pragmatic representation of the body’s spatial properties that ensures ‘the construction of sensible images adequate to pure concepts of understanding’. It is an *a priori* condition that structures our *awareness of object*. Ponty’s concept of body schema partly reflects Kantian schematism. Breaking away from Kant’s intellectualist conception of schemata, Merleau-Ponty proposes an



integrated set of skills, which he calls 'habit,' which consists a kind of noncognitive, preconceptual "motor intentionality" (Merleau-Ponty 110). Therefore, as Taylor Carman pointed out, "the body schema is simply the bundle of skills" that are used as reference points for creating "a stable perceptual background against which I perceive or constitute the body's precognitive familiarity with itself and the world it inhabits." If by any chance the 'body schema' is disturbed, it affects our synthesis of the object. Henceforth, Merleau-Ponty says, "It is the *hinge* of the for itself and the for the other". When the prison survivor of Ben Jelloun's narrative confessed that his existence was, "Being there without being there. Shutting down my five senses, directing them elsewhere, giving them another life, as though I had been thrown into that grave without them" (Jelloun 6), it demands a radical reinterpretation of the phenomenology of *being*. Thus, by accessing his alternative life, he is forsaking his sensations as well as 'body schemata' or capacities that establish the body's precognitive familiarity with its changing world. Hence, the latter-half of this paper would discuss and problematise these concepts of *transcendental being* and *bodily-being-in-the-world* through the reference of *This Blinding Absence of Light*.

Shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Tahar Ben Jelloun was a Moroccan writer born on 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1944 and emigrated to France in 1961. Based on Aziz Binebine's prison memoir, this semi-fictional narrative *This Blinding Absence of Light* was published in 2001. Linda Coverdale translated it into English from French in 2002. It secured him the prestigious IMPAC (International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award) award in 2004. With its first-person narrative, Salim's (one of the survivors) voice emerges as a voice of resistance, arising from the abyss of darkness and death. Though the survivors were warned not to talk to the western media, but in the voice of Tahar Ben Jelloun 'the authorities have an enemy more formidable than 1000 foreign journalists.' This memoir catalogues the agonising journey of the living dead buried in the tombs of Tazmamart, their inhuman suffering, their resistance as well as their constant spirit and endurance for survival through the voice of Salim, the narrator. The background of the novel is set in the hellish secret prison of Tazmamart, Morocco, which was especially built for political prisoners who participated in the first failed *coup d'état* against king Hassan II in the palace of Skhirat, in 1971. It was 10 July, 1971 when the King was celebrating his 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday, almost 100 guests lost their lives at the military coup, but the King survived. Those 'traitor soldiers' were arrested and dispatched to Kenitra, a prison known for its harsh conditions, for two years, then to Tezmamart, that was more inhuman than Kenitra: "Once I had experienced Tazmamart, Kenitra seemed like an almost human prison in spite of its reputation. There was sunlight there, and a glimmer of hope" (Jelloun 23). Here 58 of them were thrown into the dark underground cells for eighteen years. Each cell was ten feet long and five feet wide with such a low ceiling that prevented the prisoners from standing up, an air vent, and a hole in the floor that served as the lavatory. With a minimum 'starchy food', with a limited undrinkable water, with no extra clothes to cover their bodies in the deadly winter, with no medical facilities, with an unbreathable air, with the stings of scorpions and cockroaches, and with complete darkness, they were condemned to a very slow, painful, agonising death. As a result of this inhuman suffering and torture, most of them lost their sanity, gave up hope and died but unexpectedly only three prisoners including the narrator survived with their fatigued body and spirit. Years of restless pain and endurance turned them into different beings. After being released, Salim finds his reflection in the dentist's mirror, and shockingly exclaims: "My eyes looked like those of a madman, although I haven't lost my mind. There was also death in my eyes, yet I am alive" (Jelloun 205). It problematises the question of *being* and the phenomenological concept of the transcendental *I*.

In the article "Into the Darkness" (2004) Maureen Freely shared a brief thematic discussion of the novel with a positive review who found 'something Beckettian' in Salim's voice as it echoes the same darkness, hopelessness and a limited environment. Asmaa Alheeh in her paper "Silenced Tongues, Speaking Bodies: The Representation of Postcolonial Bodies in Incarceration in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding*



*Absence of Light* (2022) examines the representation of the prisoners' bodies aligned with postcolonial bodies through the concepts of Julia Kristeva's "abject bodies", and Arthur Frank's "disciplined bodies". It focuses on the prisoners' 'hybrid bodies' when they live in the "in-between" where the meaning of existence and identity collapses. In the underground tomb, amidst the void of nothingness they lived a 'bare live' in-between life and death, between human and monster, and in-between past and future. It further talks about disciplined bodies as the site of amalgamation with the divine through self-control. It is the permeable and porous body that acts like a gate through which one can pass to the realm of the elevated mind and sublime spirit. Undoubtedly, these hybrid bodies provided the detainees with an extraordinary strength, will, and an undefeatable sense of peace that ironically empowered them against the torture of the law. This struggle of resistance and resilience reminds me of Frantz Fanon's seminal text, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), where he voiced, "Come, then, comrades; it would be as well to decide at once to change our ways. We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent and resolute" (311).

Another paper titled "Challenging Silence: Poetics of Representation in Taher Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* and Carlos Liscano's *Truck of Fools*" (2021) by Ibrahim Sayed Fawzy compares the representations of tortured body and voice in the referred texts with the analysis of torture and trauma. It describes various mechanisms of resistance such as 'keeping one's dignity' in the midst of oppression and the prisoners' insistence 'on calling each other by their names instead of numbers'. All these critical works accept the individual detainees' body as detached, alienated, hybrid bodies that turn into a site of resistance against all odds. Therefore, can we define this new kind of body as 'human being' in its traditional sense? If we regard the survivor's attempt to escape his torments by leading the mind to spiritual mysticism, as the preservation of Husserlian *transcendental ego*, then what about Heideggerian *Dasein* or Ponty's *bodily-being-in-the-world*? The following part will discuss that in reference to the text.

The very first line of the novel talks about the narrator's search for the 'black stone that cleanses the soul of death' in the breast of cold humid earth, in the dark tomb "smelling of man stripped of his humanity by shovel blows that flay him alive, snatching away his sight, his voice, and his reason" (Jelloun 4). It clearly depicts their degeneration into something 'other' by losing the very basic human qualities. In this bottomless darkness, the only light of hope is the flickering candle, their 'soul', which Salim identifies here as 'reason'. It echoes Descartes when he says, "To resist, you must think. Without consciousness, without thought, there is no resistance" (Jelloun 66). Their thoughts validate them as 'human being[s]' against all monstrosity. These ageless beings, felt nothing, and experienced nothing, while trapped in forgetfulness but never succeeded to plunge completely within nothingness by their thoughts. Though they escape the idea of having a body, is it possible to resist all cruelties without embodiment? For example, their demand for a decent burial, their claim to see daylight at least at the time of one's funeral, their resolution to call each other by names instead of numbers, Karim's way of surviving by supervising the tempo of time, Salim's strategy of storytelling as a relief and survival for himself and for other fellow prisoners, question Descartes' concepts. Nevertheless, when the narrator says they have to 'forget their existence fast' for "Being there without being there. Shutting down my five senses, directing them elsewhere, giving them another life, as though I had been thrown into that grave without them" (Jelloun 6) what about their *transcendental ego* that *owns* a body as a locus of subjective sensation? As Husserl observes that one's own body can never become a completely detached object of perception: "I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my body, nor it from me," since "The same body that serves me as a means of all perception stands in my way in the perception of itself and is a remarkably incompletely constituted thing" (Husserl 59). Therefore, according to him, it is impossible to detach one's thought by leaving one's body. Our 'heads' cannot survive in void. As Ponty says, "our body is not the object of an 'I think': it is an ensemble of lived meanings that finds its equilibrium"



(Merleau-Ponty 153). Even as Sartre says, "I exist my body" (428). Salim declares how they have practised forgetfulness, devoid of past or future, shaking of their emotion, memory, history, experiences and other *worldly things*. Those beings lost the *totality of beings* and changed the *ontological being* of their beings to resist all tortures in a dungeon.

As discussed earlier, Merleau-Ponty's idea of '*body schema*' plays a significant role to establish a stable perceptual background (precognitive) against which one perceives and responds to changes and movements in its environment. According to him, we are conscious of our world through the medium of our body. So, the '*body schema*' is the *a priori* condition for any kind of a perceptual experience. It builds the *intercorporeity* between the *being* and the *world*; but when they resist torture and death, the detainees learn to renounce body, to live without a face, or sex, only concentrating on thoughts: What kind of skills are they using for their survival? "Our bodies were rotting limb by limb. The only thing I possessed was my mind, my reason...I learned to renounce my body. The body is what is visible. They saw it, they could touch it, cut it with a red-hot blade, they could torture it, starve it, expose it to scorpions, to biting cold, but I strove to keep my mind out of reach" (Jelloun 113). This crisis of 'classical humanism' has been portrayed several times. Driss's corpse has degenerated into an absurd little object by a disease so terrible that nothing left was *human* anymore. One of the prisoners was devoured by cockroaches, Karim turned into a talking clock, Mustapha died from scorpion sting, Majid committed 'naked suicide' - these are some instances of the mutilated, tormented, abjected, distorted, and decentred human bodies. However, after all Ben Jelloun's story becomes an amazing story of human resilience or rather an approach to go *beyond human*. In this vulnerable journey, though the survivors discard their *human essence*, they extend over the boundaries. Within his entire process of surviving (becoming), Salim tries to renounce his body as a skill of resistance, but he cannot completely negotiate his *embodied existence*, and thus cannot detach of it: "So I tried to hang on to it, falling asleep curled up like a cat, clinging to the earth to keep my body from abandoning me entirely. I stopped thinking. I no longer imagined anything. I was empty" (Jelloun 178). Even undoubtedly this process of becoming turns him into a rare kind of a being, which we may be referred to as an alternative human or *posthuman*. Here, the prefix 'post-' marks the re-evaluation of the idea of subjectivity, deconstruction of the anthropocentric worldview and hybridity in the construction of the self. As Salim confesses after his release from the Tazmamart prison, that the man who existed before their imprisonment, was dead and buried and he became a new-born little old man: "I was like a sponge. I filled myself with whatever came within reach, snapping it all up. I understood from this that I was a newborn of a rare kind: I had just come into the world and was already full-grown. Everything astonished me, enchanted me" (Jelloun 212). Here a simple question comes in mind that: Who is that survivor who is speaking about his own death? This 'rare being' is an amalgamation of human- animal- monster- and God.

Apart from the mechanism of body detachment, Salim's craving for spirituality, his spiritual voyages to the holy places of Islam, visualisation of the holy Black Stone endowed the narrator with extraordinary strength, will, and an undefeatable sense of peace that ironically exceeded in power: "For those who have conquered the mind, it is their friend. For those who have failed to do so, the mind works like an enemy." (*Bhagavad Gita* 6.6). There were many who had lost their wits such as Majid, Abdelmalek, but Salim's mind was unharmed. It became his duty of resistance to save his mind. Here, the Black Stone is used in a symbolic way. According to the Islamic tradition, it's a mythical stone that belongs to paradise as it was given to Adam upon his expulsion from Jannah (heaven), and it is said that the stone was originally white, but it turned black by absorbing the sins of those who sought forgiveness by touching or kissing it. His vision of the Black Stone, his imaginary journey to Mecca and Medina with his free soul without the carcass of body metaphorically symbolise his spiritual enlightenment and upliftment from this material world. This notion of spirituality extends our scope of understanding the *posthuman*, allowing us to investigate 'the technology of *existence*'. As Francesca Ferrando says, *existence*, in a spiritual sense, 'contemplates a non-separation



between the inner and outer worlds' (Ferrando 2016: 244). It echoes Husserl's idea of 'transcendental intersubjectivity' and 'having-of-the-world' and Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'bodily-being-in-the-world'. According to them, subjectivation and objectivation is an interconnected continuous process and it is impossible to completely detach oneself from their body. Though Ferrando<sup>2</sup> used it within a broader perspective to highlight the interconnectedness between the self and other, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, gender, religion, nationality or even species. The term 'spirituality' comes from the Latin word 'spiritus', that means 'breath', 'life', 'soul', in relation to the verb 'spirare', 'to breathe'.<sup>i</sup> While 'spirit' refers, to the animating, or the 'vital principle' common both to human and nonhuman entities. It has much similarities with other key concepts found in different world traditions, such as 'pneuma' in ancient Greek philosophy, the yogic definition of 'prana', and the notion of 'qi' in traditional Chinese medicine. Ferrando's discussion of 'spirituality' deals with the *interconnection of existence* and harmony that serves as a tool for the posthuman post-anthropocentric approaches. They saw existence as a constantly evolving process, that is connected, mediated, entangled, harmonious and relational. It even problematises the dualism of dead and alive. She took references from ancient Indian traditions- for example according to *Advaita*, 'the inner essence of an individual' (Ātman) is relational to 'the transcendent existence'(Brahman), Mahayana schools of Buddhism say there is no ultimate difference between the *samsara* (the repeating cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth) and the *nirvana* (the perfect peace of mind, acquired by the one who is liberated) (Ferrando, 2016: 248). Such outlook challenges Cartesian dualism and envisions to recognise the self as the other within. In *The Posthuman* (2013), Rosi Braidotti recommends a re-evaluation of 'the idea of subjectivity', as a 'transversal domain which includes the human, the nonhuman and the earth as a whole'. Thus, our primary questions of this paper: What is it that makes us 'human'?, Is it possible to constitute a being without a body?, If the survivors became 'a rare hybrid being' can we call them 'human' in its traditional sense?-lead us into the view that we cannot define humans in separatism, rather we have to be more fluid or exclusive to recognise the complete *essence of being*. Even Ben Jelloun's answers to these questions would possibly be like, it is the indomitable spirit of resistance and fluidity that makes us 'human', though we cannot completely detach our body, we can re(trans)-form it into another being and that *being* should be recognised as a more strong, resilient and hybrid *being*. Maybe the author could not find any new name for that *being*, but we can help him term it as '*posthuman*'. As Ferrando says, 'humans have always been posthuman' (243).

The paper tries to deal with the ontological question of *being* and *existence*. In its search for what makes us human, it analyses the essentialist theorists Descartes and Husserl. Subsequently, by pointing out the incompleteness in the pragmatic theory of Cartesian rationalism (dualism), it has discussed Husserl's many- aspects monism, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's 'theory of *being*', 'existence' and its engagement with the world from the theoretical ground of research. After a detailed discussion of the novel *This Blinding Absence of Light*, which is also a memoir of a Tazmamart survivor, it addresses some confusions regarding the existence of the survivor. His vulnerability throughout eighteen years changes his very 'essence' of being. His detachment from his body to save his rational mind and his spiritual escapism represents an entangled stage between the conscious and the unconscious, between physical and spiritual, and between human and divine. With the burning fire of resistance, he turns into a new hybrid, extremely resistant being. Traditional phenomenology is inadequate in addressing such crisis. Henceforth, the paper applies posthuman genealogy to find a solution to this problem. As Ihab Hassan says, "We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may come to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism" (834). Thus, by analysing and challenging the traditional phenomenology of being, this paper leaves a future scope to study trauma narratives like Tahar Ben Jelloun's story with posthuman and postanthropocentric approaches. Therefore, in Frantz Fanon's voice one should cry loudly, "Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different" (312).



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Shaun Gallagher, "Body Schema and Intentionality," in *The Body and the Self*, ed. Bermudez, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 2

<sup>2</sup> Francesca Ferrando uses these etymologies in reference to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*.

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