Mahi Binebine: They clean them up

Sabre s.r.o.

This interview was conducted right after the presentation of the movie "Horses of God" at the French Institute of London.

Omar Kholeif: I would like to welcome Mahi Binebine, who is the author of the novel *Horses of God* of which this film was adapted from to join me on stage. And also, the translator as well. I just want to kick off by asking basically about what made you pick this incident to write about. It's based on a true story, this group of suicide bombers in Casablanca in 2003. I wondered what in particular made you pick this incident to write about, but also I was curious if it affected you personally as well, this incident.

Mahi Binebine: In 2003, there was a tragedy in Casablanca. We woke up one day in Morocco. We thought we were immunized against terrorism. But one day we woke up in Morocco and found that there were four young people who had come from a shanty town outside Casablanca called Sidi Moumen who blew themselves up in three different places in the city, the first being a Grand Hotel, the restaurant we saw in the film, Casa de España. Uh, the film took place in renovated Casa de España. And next to a synagogue and that caused about 45 deaths and a hundred injured. So I

wanted to understand what was going on here, and in the first instance, what was Sidi Moumen. There were shanty towns all over Morocco in Marrakesh where Mahi lives. And when I went to Casablanca to visit Sidi Moumen and see what it was like, what I discovered was a town of 50,000 inhabitants, and as you saw in the aerial shots from the film, you've got those corrugated on roofs and of course you've got the satellite dishes. I was very lucky to have a friend who was a journalist who actually came from Sidi Moumen and was able to open doors for me because I wanted to find out what it was like to live in those houses in Sidi Moumen. And the first picture that I have of Sidi Moumen, I arrived and I saw this enormous rubbish dump, and on top of the rubbish dump were kids playing football. And I said to myself, "Okay, these kids are the heroes of my next novel."

OK: It's really interesting that for me as a viewer who watches a lot of films, particularly films that come out of the region and literature that comes out of the region, particularly tied to these very political incidents. And very often there is a real focus on the grand narrative, you know, the big issues that propel terrorism. But what I was stricken by in this was how this narrative was really about coming of age. It was really focused on these young boys, and I would like to know what made you choose these young boys as your focus point, and to focus instead on the coming of age aspect of their story as opposed to this grand narrative. And to question also if they were based on any particular real people as well.

MB: Of course I read everything that was written about the attacks. And when I was beginning to write, I assumed that it took a long time to create a human bomb which is why I chose those children. But the truth is it actually only takes two years to create a human bomb, which shocked me. So my first contact with Sidi Moumen was seeing these children playing. And the next thing I said to myself was, "Okay it's got to be those kids who are reeled in by the mafia that had set itself up in Sidi Moumen. I started writing in 2004, so I started writing a year after the attacks. And in 2006, I stopped writing because it was out of the question to apologize for terrorism. To

justify the unjustifiable, and yet at the same time I said if I was born in that, if I wasn't educated, if I was living in that kind of dirt, I would have been an easy prey for these dream merchants.

OK: I mean, it's interesting you're talking about the brutality of their life because for me, I mean, especially watching the film, despite the brutalism, despite the poverty, there's a real romanticism to this coming of age. And was that intentional? Were you trying—there's even a line in there where one of the characters says that they don't necessarily hate living in this particular kind of context. Was that something that you wanted to tap into, the fact that there is almost a kind of utopianism in living in this kind of environment of some sorts, which perhaps that utopianism becomes so easy to puncture or to overtake as it were?

MB: That's precisely why I didn't write a dark book. It's a very funny book. Even if Nabil Ayouch turned it into a very serious film. The novel itself is not very dark. Because the children I encountered in Sidi Moumen were light, were fun, they laughed. They played with a sardine tin and a string. There was a point in which I said they almost seemed to be happier than the kids who lived in the posh areas. Is that a good enough answer to your question?

OK: (laughs) It's perfect. You've already mentioned that one of the reasons you stopped writing is because you didn't necessarily want to promote or in a sense try to humanize fundamentalism or terrorism. And I'm wondering if at the time when you were writing the novel if you ever felt uneasy about writing about religious fundamentalism in Morocco. Was it something that you felt was urgent to be talked about in a literary form—that no one else was writing about in this way?

MB: Of course. In every Arab country, something awful has happened. All the dictators who have ruled in the last decade have created a kind of void, an emptiness around them. In Egypt as well.

OK: I'm Egyptian so it's commenting on…

MB: They've killed, they've imprisoned, they've corrupted all the alternative voices, all those who could've offered something different—the progressive side. Which means that they've laid down the red carpet for an Islam that actually has nothing to do with Islam. So one day we found ourselves with these kinds of people—these people who've set themselves up, who've implanted themselves, and who are there and have been there for a long time. These Islamists are the children of the dictatorships. They are not the children of the revolution, of the Arab Spring. They have been there for forty, fifty years. Now they've played the game of democracy. Was the only game there was, they won. They're there.

OK: On the flip side to that then, at this particular moment in time, we are living a week in the wake of a so-called Islamic fundamentalist terrorist attack—thinking about what happened in Boston. And for me, one of the things that really worries me or troubles me is the return of this consistent xenophobic narrative. I mean one of the things that really struck me watching TV at the gym, you know, in the wake of the manhunt for these young men who supposedly were responsible for this bombing in Boston. You had these news journalists going online onto these young people's Facebook pages, and they would look and be like, "Look at their religious views. Oh, it says 'Islam.' So this must all be tied to Islam." Then they would start Googling Islamic videos, and bringing up all of these different, I think, very one-dimensional, or creating these very binary positions. And although I know your novel doesn't at all engage with that xenophobic narrative in a didactic way, were you ever afraid or conscious or worried that it might be instrumentalized or misconstrued as something that could be used to promote those kinds of people who are keen to promote Islamic xenophobia perhaps?

MB: There's a risk. All I know is that in Sidi Moumen there are Islamists who have installed themselves there. And we've *let* them set themselves up there. And they've emptied, they've cleared out the other mafia, the normal mafia, the *almost* nice mafia who sold hashish, who did little deals—a

normal mafia. It was a mafia who didn't kill as much as these Islamists. They set themselves up there and they create order. And so when Mahi met people in Sidi Moumen, they were very happy about the Islamists arriving because they said these guys cleared out the hash sellers, the wine sellers, they cleaned the place up.

OK: Sounds like Egypt.

MB: It's exactly the same. They've got money. They help people when there's a circumcision. They're very present in people's lives. And so in the film, in the story, these are guys who take the kids away from the rubbish dump. They clean them up. Already if you're going to be praying five times a day, you've got to clean yourselves five times a day—wash. And they separate them from their families, and the group becomes their family. They find jobs for them, and what they're given is dignity. A kind of dignity they've never had, and little by little, they embark on the work of brainwashing. So they start showing them tapes of Palestinians, Chechens, martyrs. "You're gonna save Islam." "You're the hair of God—sorry the horses of God!" And it's just terrible how little by little you start to create human bombs. "You are already in hell." That what's taught to them: "You are already in hell. What've you got to lose?" Ss what they're being offered is a direct ticket to paradise with seventy virgins. I don't know if that's funny or not. They're offered this and that. And little by little they convince them. The aim of both the book and the film, and that's why Nabil Ayouch who made the film and Mahi have got on so well because they have the same aim and Mahi has been very complimentary about the film.

OK: Okay, so I want to ask what I feel is a difficult question, but maybe it's not so difficult. I'm a critic writer as well, and I'm really interested in the language that's used to frame, especially discourses around the Middle East and life in the Middle East, and I have here (and I'm not going to read them out) are six different synopses of the book and the film. And for me one thing that struck me, which made me slightly uncomfortable was that every

time when the description starts to talk about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it refers to the older brother growing a beard—in the synopsis. And for me I feel like that's a little bit of, although it may be true—the beard growth occurs—it feels like such a common stereotype that I worry that now if anyone sees a dark North African man with a beard and a tube that they'll start to get afraid they're an Islamic fundamentalist. And that's my own personal subjective reading. But I'm curious whether you are aware of that, whether you're happy with that, what you think about that.

MB: But now they shave themselves. (laughs)

OK: But it may be the reality, but it's just interesting that that trope, or that indicator, that characteristic is utilized in a very short synopsis six times over to describe both the book and the film. It's almost like people constantly need to reduce something very complex to something people can understand.

MB: It's a symbol of them coming together collectively as a group and saying, "There are a lot of us thinking the same way." After the attacks in Morocco in 2003, they all shaved their beards because if you had a beard that really wasn't going to work in your favor if they were going to catch you. That's just a small detail. The idea that Nabil and I held onto, both in the film and in the novel, which is fundamental, was to say these children are not as responsible as all that. And that's a very difficult thing to say—to say that a suicide bomber who has killed this person and that person is not as responsible as that. I think that people who've seen the film today don't hate the characters, don't hate the personalities. And the same thing in the novel, the thing was to present these characters more as victims than as executioners. And if there is responsibility, if a finger can be pointed, it's the state that allows shanty towns like Sidi Moumen to exist. The responsibility lies with that religious mafia that installed itself in Sidi Moumen that sucked the blood out of people. And, the other responsibility lies with the Moroccan bourgeois who pays the people who work for them, the smik(?), which is the

minimum wage which is a hundred Euros a month and then they pay less than that. And those kids there are victims. What we were talking about yesterday at an event in Oxford, and we met students there, and I was telling them about a story. Something that happened to me in Casablanca. I was talking about this book a bit. And so this was a book event, and in the front row was a whole row of the families of the victims of the bomb attacks. And so this is a very compromising situation for Mahi because he was saying to these people in the front row, "The guy who killed your brother, your son, your father, he's not as bad as all that." And Mahi was thinking he was going to get lynched (laughs) and is everybody going to show how unhappy they were? And then at the end of this event, a woman stood up from the group. She said to me, "I understand what you're saying, and I'm going to say something even better than that. All my brother's clothes, my brother who died in the Casa de España, which was the restaurant in the film, I gave them to the brother of the suicide bomber. And we've created an organization, and we're doing work on the ground." And at that point I said, "Okay, Morocco is doing something right."