

"IL TERREMOTO DI AGADIR" ("THE AGADIR EARTHQUAKE")

André Kaminski

Analysis by Sofia Mangiaterra

Short Story

André Kaminski’s *Il terremoto di Agadir* (*The Agadir Earthquake*) is a collection of short stories first published in 1983. The story “Il terremoto di Agadir” describes the human and cultural aftermath of the devastating earthquake that struck Agadir (Morocco) on February 29, 1960. The seismic event is presented through two entwined dimensions: one rooted in superstition and symbolic meaning, and the other grounded in raw, lived experience.

Year of Publication	1983
Publication Place	Berlin
Editor	Suhrkamp Verlag
Entity	The earthquake of Agadir
Collection	Il terremoto di Agadir (The Agadir Earthquake)

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake The earthquake of Agadir

REAL EVENT

Time	29 February, 1960 at 11:40 pm (local time- GCT)
Location	Souss-Massa Morocco
Coordinates	30.420700, -9.590282
Impacted Areas	Agadir City and surrounding area (Paradise 168)
Seismic Fault	Southwestern anti-Atlas seismic area/ South Atlas Front (Cherkaoui et al., 1991, 131, 133)
Magnitude	5.7 and 5.9 Richter magnitude (Paradise 168, 170)

Typology

Tectonic Earthquake

(Sébrier, 2006)

Anthropization Level

Cities

“The city shook for 15s and was nearly razed. (...) with an estimated 70% of new buildings, and 20% of industrial buildings destroyed.” (Paradise 170)

Cities

“After the earthquake, most districts of the city were simply bulldozed. The districts nearest the epicenter were 100 percent destroyed; the Talborjt District was ruined that is was turned into a memorial garden, nicely maintained to this day.” (Paradise 170)

Towns

“The 'New Town' where houses, shops, offices and large villa-type dwelling-houses were located (...), appeared at first glance to be in somewhat better shape. A fair number of these buildings were standing in whole or in part, although most of them were in fact badly damaged.” (Fordham 652)

Tourist Places

“(...) the Hotel Saada being a notable example, had completely collapsed and concertinaed in the vertical plane.” (Fordham 652)

Streets

“The main roads were little affected, except on the reclaimed land adjacent to the harbour where there were wide cracks and undulations.” (Fordham 652)

Settlements

“Districts like Yachech, Kasba, Adouar, Founti Talborjt over 90 % of buildings were destroyed or damaged.” (Cherkaoui et al., 2012, 51)

Settlements

“The ancient Kasbah was transformed into a pile of debris within instants, while the buildings of Founti and Talbordj underwent serious and unrepairable structural damages.” (Bernasconi 146)

Social Impacts

Deaths

“When the city of Agadir, Morocco was devastated in 1960 from a pair of moderate earthquakes, it represented one the most dreadful disasters in the latter half of the 20th century.” (Paradise 168)

Depopulation

“Before the disaster, Agadir’s populations was 33,000, but with estimated deaths of 15,000 and an equal number of injured in addition to a mass exodus, the city was left devastated and nearly abandoned.” (Paradise 169)

Injuries

“An estimated 15,000 dead and an estimated 25,000 people were injured, mostly attributed with an estimated 70% of new buildings, and 20% of industrial buildings destroyed.” (Paradise 170)

Deaths

“It was reported that once the shaking began, residents ran into their homes for protection; the dead were found predominantly in collapsed structures rather than outside amongst the street rubble or along the beach areas.” (Paradise 170)

Destruction Of Dwellings

“[...]more than 75% of buildings destroyed.” (Cherkaoui et al., 2012, 51).

Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

"The ancient Kasbah was transformed into a pile of debris within instants, while the buildings of Founti and Talbordj underwent serious and unrepairable structural damages." (Bernasconi 146)

Social Disruption

“Shortly before midnight on February 29, 1960, the resort city of Agadir, Morocco was hit by two moderate earthquakes (Mr: 5.7-5.9) that ruined the city, rocked the countryside and killed 15,000 people, one third of the city’s populations." (Paradise 168, 169)

Deaths

“about one-third of the population were dead or trapped under debris, and the whole of the remainder were homeless.” (Fordham 652)

Earthquake the earthquake of Agadir

LITERARY EVENT

Time	February 29, 1960, 11:47 pm (local time)
Location	Morocco
Impacted Areas	Agadir city
Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes
Social Impacts	DeathsInjuriesDestruction Of Dwellings

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	The Narrator
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Reactions	AwarenessFatalism

Name	Haj Abid
Age	70
Gender	Male
Native Place	Morocco
Nationality	Moroccan

Reactions	Fatalism	Apprehension
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Name	Mademoiselle Mottier
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Nationality	Swiss

Reactions	Fear
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Reactions	
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Name	The Narrator	
Age	Adult	
Gender	Male	
Reactions	Astonishment	Self-Absorption

Name	Mademoiselle Mottier			
Age	Adult			
Gender	Female			
Nationality	Swiss			
Reactions	Intervention	Astonishment	Empathy	Underestimation

Name	Ali		
Age	Young-adult		
Gender	Male		
Nationality	Moroccan		
Reactions	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	Resignation	Fatalism

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Similes	“Come una ballerina che fa la danza del ventre.”/ “Like a dancer performing belly dance” (Kaminski 166; my trans.)
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Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Apocalypse	Superstition	Cruel Nature	Prophecy
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Syntax	Parataxis, Hypotaxis, Simple Sentences, Complex Verbal Phrases, High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	Multiple Commas, Multiple Stops, Hypens, High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

André Kaminski's *Il terremoto di Agadir* (*The Agadir Earthquake*) is a collection of short stories first published in 1983 under the title *Die Gärten des Mulla Abdallah*.

This collection-reportage captures the human and cultural aftermath of the devastating earthquake that struck Agadir on February 29, 1960. This pivotal event forms the backdrop against which Kaminski explores not only the physical devastation but also the emotional and cultural upheavals experienced by individuals and society during a critical moment in Moroccan history. *Il terremoto di Agadir* recalls Algeria and Morocco in the early 1960s, a period marked by the French withdrawal, which triggered profound changes - particularly in Algeria, where the dismantling of the colonial system opened the way for a reconfiguration of the country's internal social and political structures, and for a renewed assertion of its Arab identity. In this context of upheaval and reinvention, irony becomes the most effective tool for unmasking pretenses—starting with the author himself.

The earthquake that struck the Moroccan city of Agadir on the night of February 29, 1960, remains one of the most devastating natural disasters of the 20th century. Occurring at 23:40 local time (GCT), the seismic event had an estimated magnitude between 5.7 and 5.9 on the Richter scale (Paradise 168,170) and originated in the Southwestern Anti-Atlas seismic area, impacting Agadir City and its surroundings (Northrop et al. 4223, 4224). The epicenter was located at approximately 30.421440°N, 9.583511°W in the Souss-Massa region of Morocco (Cherkaoui et al. 2012, 51).

According to geographer Paradise, “Before the disaster, Agadir’s population was 33,000; with an estimated 15,000 deaths, an equal number injured, and a mass exodus, the city was left devastated and nearly abandoned” (Paradise 168, 169). The tremor lasted only 15 seconds, but its consequences were catastrophic: approximately 70% of newly built structures and 20% of industrial buildings were destroyed (Paradise 170). Entire neighborhoods near the epicenter, like Talborjt and the ancient Kasbah, underwent “unrepairable structural damages” (Fordham 652). In the aftermath, these areas were not rebuilt but instead transformed into spaces of remembrance, such as memorial gardens and public parks (Bernasconi 146).

Not only are the seismic events and its devastating magnitude reported in scientific literature, but they are also vividly dramatized in narrative accounts (Zoppellari, 2009). One such testimony comes from Paolo Fuochi, an Italian survivor and ENI employee stationed in Agadri, who remembered staying at the 'Antine' hotel, which had been partially destroyed by the earthquake (*Archivistorico*). ENI itself, through its company magazine “*Gattoselvatico*”, described the rapid mobilization of relief efforts following the disaster: the camp was reached around four in the morning and had been set up in record time to accommodate the Italians who had escaped the disaster. Several tents—normally used by ENL for base camps in the Tarfaya desert—had been pitched in a clearing approximately fifteen kilometers from Agadir (“Agadir” 26).

These factual and institutional accounts of survival and response set the stage for the literary reimagining of the disaster in André Kaminski’s story “Il Terremoto di Agadir”. As narrated by Kaminski: “Il 29 febbraio 1960 ad Agadir il mondo sprofondò.” / “On February 29, 1960 in Agadir, the world sank” (Kaminski 149; my trans.), an image that captures the total destruction that struck the city. The consequences were dire: numerous deaths, injuries, and the destruction of homes, with “La maggior parte degli abitanti sepolti vivi” / “most of the inhabitants buried alive” (Kaminski 149; my trans.).

The immediacy and tragic reality of the disaster are highlighted: the horror permeated every place, so much so that “Già all’areoporto c’era odore di putrefazione” / “there was already a smell of decay at the airport” (Kaminski 150; my trans.), a tangible sign of death and devastation. However, amidst the devastation, a brutal acceptance of suffering emerges: “Anche al tanfo di tremila cadaveri” / “Even to the sight of three thousand corpses” (Kaminski 150; my trans.). This statement underscores how even the most unimaginable horrors can, tragically, become part of everyday life for survivors. Kaminski’s stark and unfiltered account powerfully conveys the true scale and impact of the earthquake, offering

a deeply human perspective that both complements and enhances the scientific understanding of the disaster.

The story unfolds amid the ruins of Agadir, shattered by a devastating earthquake. Following the trail of aftershocks—both physical and emotional—into the oases and into the inner lives of his interlocutors, André Kaminski tells the story of a city and its people grappling with loss, transformation, and the deep tremors shaking their very sense of self.

The impact of this catastrophe extended far beyond the immediate destruction, touching the very core of Morocco's national identity. The tragic natural disaster marked a crucial passage for Moroccan history, especially because it occurred during a delicate transitional phase for the Kingdom, which had barely recovered its political independence from France, but which was still struggling to affirm its cultural autonomy. Hence, in this context, facing the emergency became the symbol of a will for rebound and for the assertion of a people's identity. The criticality of the situation was due not only to the urgency of sheltering the displaced survivors, but also to the need to legitimise the nation's claim to independence.

From a narratological perspective, the story immerses readers in the chaotic aftermath of disaster, the psychological struggles of its witnesses, and the broader historic quest for identity and autonomy, producing a powerful and emotionally charged account of resilience amid collapse. The fragmented, breathless narrative structure reflects the disrupted temporal and psychological state of both characters and society in transition. Frequent shifts in focalization — from the narrator to the testimonies of individuals like Haj Abid, Ali, and Mademoiselle Mottier — create a polyphonic texture that embodies collective trauma and diverse perspectives.

The narration unfolds the event through two intertwined dimensions: one rooted in superstition and symbolic meaning, and the other grounded in raw, lived experience. The first dimension is explored through the perspectives of the narrator, Mademoiselle Mottier, and the fisherman Haj Abid.

The narrator occupies a unique position—somewhat detached yet deeply engaged—shifting between objective observation and intimate reflection. His growing sense of fatalism emerges through a blend of realist narration and mystical undertones. He acknowledges this ambivalence himself: “Dopo ogni catastrofe i sopravvissuti affermano di aver avuto qualche segno premonitore. io, ad esempio, anche se mi vanto di essere un realista.” / “After every catastrophe, survivors claim to have had some premonitory sign. I, for example, even though I pride myself on being a realist.” (Kaminski 151; my trans.). He recounts a vivid episode on the eve of the earthquake, when, despite the oppressive heat and tense atmosphere during dinner with the governor, a sudden visit from a cripple named Aissa ben Shukrun brought an unsettling prophecy—Buddhist monks had predicted the end of the world, set for the following day. Later that evening, the narrator encountered a poisonous green viper at his door, which he interpreted as a warning, despite its seeming absurdity: “Potrà sembrare ridicolo, ma l’avevo preso per un avvertimento.” / “It may seem ridiculous, but I had taken it as a warning.” (Kaminski 153; my trans.). Symbols such as the poisonous green viper and the concept of *maktub* (“it is written”) suggest that the disaster feels preordained and inevitable. This dual awareness captures the tension between attempting to rationalize trauma and surrendering to the enigmatic forces of fate. Through his contemplative tone, the narrator invites readers to see the earthquake not just as a physical event but as a symbol of larger existential forces at work.

Haj Abid's response is steeped in superstition and the cultural logic of seafarers who interpret signs and portents in nature. When the narrator encountered his own viper at Ksar es-Souk, Haj Abid was anxiously waiting at the port of Agadir for the return of his flotilla. Two hundred of his boats were out fishing for sardines near the plankton-rich waters east of the Canary Islands. At seventy years old, Haj Abid was known as the most despised man along Africa's west coast—yet he had never lost a single ship. That night, however, he stood at the port with a troubled expression. He already knew how much each vessel had earned—except for the *Baraka*. Since midnight, he had been trying unsuccessfully to reach it by radio. This moment reflects not only his fear of material loss, but also the creeping sense of doom tied to unexplained absences—an anxiety amplified by his belief in omens and natural signs (Kaminski 154, 155). His worry centered on the *Baraka*—meaning “God's blessing”.

As a superstitious seafarer, Haj Abid understood that the absence of this particular boat was no ordinary misfortune but a dire omen: “Qui non si trattava di una disgrazia, era piuttosto un segno.”/ “This wasn’t a misfortune, it was rather a sign.” (Kaminski 155; my trans.). At dawn, all his boats had returned except the *Baraka*, which was likely lost at sea. This loss deeply troubled Haj Abid, reinforcing his belief in fate and casting a heavy shadow over the harbor.

This anxiety underscores how the earthquake resonates not merely as a material loss but as a spiritual rupture. Haj Abid’s furrowed brow and apprehension reflect a worldview where human agency is limited and natural disasters are perceived as messages from beyond—a fatalistic acceptance that deepens the prevailing atmosphere of dread.

Even Mademoiselle Mottier, the Red Cross nurse from Geneva, experiences a personal premonition—symbolized by the precise moment her Omega watch stopped at 11:47 PM during the earthquake—serving as a powerful metaphor for the disaster’s profound impact on individual lives. As recounted, she felt a deep sense of fear when boarding the plane on March 2, 1960, to fulfill her duty in the devastated city of Agadir. She sensed that this journey would be a pivotal moment in her life, especially given that her Omega watch—a cherished gift from her First Communion—had mysteriously stopped at the exact time the earthquake struck (Kaminski 157, 158).

Unlike fatalism, her response drives her toward action and solidarity, embodying hope and human resilience. Described as an Amazon in a white coat, she stands as a luminous beacon of aid and love amidst the devastation, representing the redemptive power of humanitarian commitment in times of crisis.

In contrast, Ali’s experience reflects a raw and distressing reality. Overcome by panic and fear, he shouted desperately while the narrator tried to calm him. Trembling uncontrollably, Ali even raised his fists in a threatening gesture. Two policemen swiftly intervened, arrested him, and handcuffed him. It was only later, at the police station in Inezgane, that he began to regain his composure (Kaminski 159). His near-death experience—narrated through fragmented, hallucinatory prose rich with religious symbolism—blends visions of judgment and salvation with confusion and despair, capturing the psychological devastation wrought by trauma. Ali describes his experience as a moment of profound guilt and terror. He recalls feeling that even the smallest sin triggered the earth to shake violently around him, as if the Last Judgment had arrived. Overwhelmed, he hid his face in his hands while chaos—dust, stones, and destruction—swirled in the air, which he saw as divine punishment that he deserved. He then heard voices grabbing him roughly by his hair, head, and throat, which he interpreted as angels strangling him. They lifted him up through a dark void into a blinding light filled with the foul smell of decay. Despite the burning in his eyes, he saw clearly a figure approaching him—a woman in a white gandura, Mademoiselle Mottier—whom he identified as the embodiment of his sin (Kaminski 167). He also describes his physical ordeal: as he suddenly felt the ground beneath him sway, causing him to lose his balance. He was lifted up and then violently thrown down, as if struck by an invisible force. After that, everything went completely dark, and Ali exclaimed, “El-hamdulillah!”—feeling as though Allah had taken him and that he had died (Kaminski 161, 162). Lying there with his eyes open, he saw nothing but darkness all around. He sensed the silence of the grave, with no feeling of heat or cold, only pain in his back. He tried to move or reach out but found himself unable to do so, trapped and immobilized.

Ali’s story exemplifies the profound mental and emotional turmoil caused by catastrophe, as well as the complex interplay between faith, guilt, and surrender. His passivity and resignation stand in stark contrast to Mademoiselle Mottier’s active compassion, highlighting divergent responses to trauma.

Together, these two narrative strands—superstition and raw lived experience—offer a multifaceted portrayal of the earthquake’s impact, capturing not only physical destruction but also psychological fragmentation, cultural meaning-making, and existential questioning. This tapestry of human responses reflects the broader historical moment in Morocco: a nation emerging from colonial rule, struggling to rebuild both its infrastructure and its identity. The earthquake’s rupture serves as a powerful metaphor for the social and cultural upheavals of the early 1960s, a period marked by fragile independence and an uncertain future.

Stylistically, the narrative uses fragmented sentences, ellipses, and colloquial speech to reflect characters' spontaneous thoughts of characters trying to make sense of chaos (*SemiEidee*). Frequent conjunctions and adverbs create a breathless flow that mirrors emotional turmoil and a reality in flux. The rhythm of short, interrupted clauses builds tension and conveys fatalism and uncertainty. Dialogues and inner monologues are often elliptical, enhancing realism and emotional immediacy. Within this stylistic framework, the narrator not only evokes a strong, pervasive image of death surrounding him but also figures as Ali, intertwining personal and collective experiences of mortality. This connection resonates deeply with the broader Maghrebi literary tradition, where the representation of death is widespread both as a motif and a metaphorical image. Such a fractured narrative style reflects identifies as a broader aesthetic tendency in Maghrebi literature (Zoppellari, 2009): the use of narrative dislocation and macabre or grotesque imagery to stage trauma alongside political and existential disorientation. Although Kaminski writes outside this group, his narrative similarly embodies hybridity—melding realism with mystical elements and blending factual detail with symbolic depth.

In conclusion, Kaminski's narrative style and the diverse, deeply human responses to the earthquake—especially those rooted in superstition and symbolic interpretation—work together to create a powerful, immersive account of disaster as both a historical event and a cultural metaphor. Culturally, "Il Terremoto di Agadir" represents the earthquake not just as a physical catastrophe but as a symbol of Morocco's fragile postcolonial identity, caught between past colonial legacies and the quest for self-determination. The repeated motifs of apocalypse, superstition, and predestination resonate with local beliefs and the broader human confrontation with uncontrollable forces. The disaster's depiction as both natural and supernatural echoes the cultural hybridity of the moment. The text becomes a space where physical devastation, emotional trauma, and deeply ingrained cultural beliefs converge, revealing how superstition and fate shape the collective understanding of catastrophe. This blend highlights the fragile yet persistent spirit of a people caught between collapse and renewal, navigating both the tangible and the mysterious forces that define their existence.

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