

Language, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial North Africa Autobiographical Novel: Delineating Assia Djébar's and Ahlem Mostaghanemi's Feminist Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the inferences of language and gender construction within North-African states. Enthused by Assia Djébar, francophone novelist, and Ahlem Mostaghanemi, arabophone novelist, it purposes to examine how the notions of freedom and language are profoundly entwined. Centering on their womanist discourse, it scrutinizes how historiography and gender determination impact identity construction. The study also inspects the import of language as a powerful instrument in articulating Algerian female self-determination. In the light of Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), and Mostaghanemi's *Dhakirat al-Jasad* (1993), this study explores Arabic and French languages as sociological instruments for women's freedom. Through the stratagem of comparative study, it scrutinizes how history and autobiography provide the perfect site to discuss political resilience in the midst of a male hegemonic social system. More precisely, it highlights the notions of postcolonialism and identity politics that need querying the North-African familial schemes and the broader social dilemmas.

Résumé

La présente étude explore le rapport consubstantiel qui existe entre la langue et la condition féminine en Afrique du Nord. Inspiré par Assia Djebar, romancière francophone, et Ahlem Mostaghanemi, écrivain arabophone, elle vise à examiner comment les notions de liberté et la langue sont profondément imbriquées. En se concentrant sur leur discours féministe, l'étude examine comment l'historiographie et la détermination du genre ont un impact sur la construction de l'identité. L'étude analyse également l'importance de la langue en tant qu'instrument incontournable pour rendre possible l'autodétermination des femmes algériennes. À la lumière de *L'Amour, la fantasia* de Djebar (1985) et de *Dhakirat al-Jasad* de Mostaghanemi (1993), cette étude explore les langues arabe et française comme dispositifs sociologiques pour la liberté des femmes. Grâce au stratagème de l'étude comparative, elle examine comment l'histoire et l'autobiographie constituent le site idéal pour exprimer la résilience politique au sein d'un système social hégémonique masculin. Plus précisément, elle met en lumière les notions de postcolonialisme et de politique identitaire qui nécessitent une remise en question des schémas familiaux nord-africains et des dilemmes sociaux exogènes.

Keywords: Autobiography, Gender, Identity, language, North-Africa, patriarchy, postcolonialism.

Introduction

It is a tradition within the North-African literary ritual to write fiction and autobiography to measure and redefine personal experience within a global postcolonial context. Thus, North Africa writers expressed their experience in French and Arabic languages amidst a diversity of literary genres. They all yielded to incursions in the past and fell prey to the colonial power of France. This perspective is articulated in the first generation of male writers who paved the road to establishing an Algerian identity outside colonial representations. The first generation of male writers such as Moufdi Zakaria (1908-1977), Mouloud Feraoun (1913-1962), Mohammed Dib (1920-2003), Kateb Yacine (1929-1989 with his outstanding novel *Nedjma* published in 1956), Rachid Mimouni (1945-

1995) and many others claimed a profound attachment to the principles of Islam, linguistic patriotism, and sociological creeds.

However, the debate about the choice of the language to build up this anti-colonial and anti-neocolonial literature triggered a heated debate not only in Algeria but in all the North Africa and sub-Saharan African countries as well. In this regard, Boehmer (2005:206) asserts that “The crux of postcolonial debates about cultural authenticity, hybridity, and resistance is most prominently drawn at the point of language choice”. Indeed, after the independence whether to use the native language or appropriate the colonial languages by postcolonial writers for writing national literature was a controversial issue that resulted in disparate attitudes. Those who were against the continued reliance on colonial languages saw it a colonial legacy and a way of perpetuating neo-colonialism and upholding the dominance of the small Elite and its interests. The colonial language was, thus, a tool of domination and a mark for an elitist identity. Other negative attitudes towards colonial languages are justified by its psychological impacts on the colonial and postcolonial subjects.

This psychoanalytic approach was particularly articulated by Frantz Fanon and Ngugi WaThiong’O. Fanon views language as one of the key factors in the process of alienation that takes place in the colonized subject, asserting that *"to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization"* (Graiouid 2008: 147). On another level, Achebe (1975:62) recognizes the psychological guilt that African writers experience when they use colonial languages in

writing their literature: "*Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling*". However, Achebe argues that the choice of the colonial language is quite legitimate; it is a historical fatality and the by-product of the same process that made the new nation states of Africa (Achebe,1975:62).

Subsequently, for Algerian women writers, both culture and language have always been the site of significant challenges. Female writers such as Taos Amrouche (*Jacinthe Noire* 1947), Myriam Ben (*Sabrina, ils t'ont volé ta vie* 1986), Latifa Ben Mansour (*La prière de la peur*1997), Maïssa Bey (*Cette fille-là* 2001), Nassira Belloula (*Terre des femmes* 2014), and many others relentlessly testify the complex and exclusive female experience in Algeria. However, the present study focuses mainly on the postcolonial autobiographies of Assia Djébar (1936-2015) and Ahlem Mostaghanemi (1953-), North Africa's most influential female writers for their contribution to depicting the predicament of the Muslim-Arab woman in a patriarchal culture. According to Donadey, this Postcolonial Algerian feminist literature marks an important cornerstone of nationalist rhetoric "*based on allegorizing the female body as a national body*". These texts, she adds "*foreground the complexity of decolonization and move away from binary Manichean structures to a more ambivalent position that stresses at the same time opposition to and complicity with various forms of dominance*" (Donadey 2000: 28).

One of the prominent authors of this literature is Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, known by her pen name Assia Djébar. She was a university professor,

translator, and filmmaker, whose work focused on the hindrances women challenged in Algeria. She was sponsored by her father, scholarly in French, the colonizer's language, and expressed the pain and distress of Algerian women, a denunciation that she could not afford while using the Arabic language she considered the language of male-domination. In this peculiar sociological context, Djébar clarifies: "*The mother tongue is the language of silence, the language of low speaking, and it is not a language of writing [...] The language of writing is the language of the father [...]*" [Our translation from *Cahiers d'études maghrébines* 1988: 78].

Mostaghanemi was one of the most distinguished figures of the first generation of female writers to have the right to study in Arabic after more than a century of prohibition by the French colonial authority. She was the first woman to publish a compilation of poetry in Arabic, which put her on a thorny path and paved the way to other publications in Arabic, namely *Ala Marfa al Ayam* (1973), *Al Kitaba fi Lahdat Ouray* (1976), *Akadib Samaka* (1993), *Nessyane.com* (2009), *Fawda el Hawas* (1997), *Aber Sareer* (2003), *El Aswad Yalikou Biki* (2012) and many others. Interestingly, her struggle against fundamentalism and corruption is a recurrent theme in all of her diversified and rich oeuvres. Her literary career reflects an itinerant writer as she herself describes it: "*When we lose a love, one writes a poem, when we lose our homeland, one writes a novel. Algeria is never far from her mind: There are countries that we live in and countries that live in us*" (see <https://www.ahlammosteghanemi.com/about-english>).

The Syrian poet Nizar Kabbani paid tribute to Mostaghanemi: "*It made me dizzy. Rarely does a novel make my head go round*" (Arab World Books, available at: www.arabworldbooks.com/en/authors/ahlam-mosteghanemi).

Through her writings she took positions against bribery, inequality, dictatorial administrations, fundamentalism, neocolonialism and the deprecation of women's rights. Ahlem's thesis (Sorbonne University-Sociology in 1982) explored the misapprehension and uneasiness between men and women in the Algerian society. The doctorate was under the supervision of Jacques Berques, a distinguished orientalist, who also composed the preamble of her thesis (published in 1985 by L'Harmattan as *Algérie, femmes et écriture* (Algeria, Women and Writing)). Her novel *Dhakirat el Jassad*, published by Dar Al Adab, is considered by critics as a turning point in Arabic literature. While interviewed in June 2001, she intoned her apprehension about the deficiency of Arabic literature in Algeria. She definitely considers that the Malek Haddad Literary Prize would embolden more Algerian to write in Arabic.

As far as language politics is concerned, Djébar considers French as «*la langue d'écriture et la langue du père*» [The language of writing and that of the father] whereas Mostaghanemi considers Arabic as «*lughatou kalbi*» [The language of my heart]. The first author often converts some dialectal Arabic words into French, but the second preserves the dialect in her text in order to privilege intimacy with the reader. In relating autobiographical events, Djébar uses the first personal pronoun «I» to speak about herself,

but Mostaghanemi opts for «you» or «she» referring to Hayat, her main character.

In the light of Djébar's French novel *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985) and Mostaghanemi's Arabic one *Dhakirat al-Jasad* (1993), both authors refer to the suitable language (French vs. Arabic). In other words, how can Arabic or French be best used to convey the trials and tribulations of Algerian women? More precisely, can language be an instrument of women's deliverance? Which of these languages can procure women's right to express themselves without being liable to sociological and patriarchal fines? Accordingly, the paper examines the role and place of language and autobiography in the process of Algerian women's emancipation. It also inspects how the Algerian society acknowledged Djébar and Mostaghanemi as two female «voices» displaying the miseries of women in their sociological roles as mothers, sisters, and wives, and mostly as citizens.

Subsequently, the present paper aims at demonstrating how language and culture are interrelated to the historical dynamics of post-colonialism. From this perspective, our study is divided into three sections: the first section interrogates language as a paradigm at the center of literary and feminine enquiries. The section reads autobiography as microhistory as it resides at the heart of the convergence of colonialism and feminism in *L'Amour, la fantasia*. It examines Djébar's assessment of women's lives and contribution in the construction of identity through a negative and hostile environment. The last section refers to women, love and language Politics in *Dhakirat al Jasad* and discusses the author's discourse on

linguistic legacy while it questions patriarchal contingencies and fundamentalism.

Language Determination: at the Nexus of Feminine and Literary Politics

In the Algerian context, the question of the language of writing is determined in the context of anti and postcolonial literatures. Mouloud Mammeri said: "*Je considère que la langue française nous traduit infiniment plus qu'elle nous trahit*" [I consider that the French language translates us infinitely more than it betrays us] (L'Orient-le jour- Beyrouth, 27 May 1966). Albert Memmi and other decolonization theorists wrote in French and considered it as "*a weapon in the struggle for national literature*"(Déjeux,55 quoted in Donadey 2000:27) . In a similar vein, Djébar adds: "*I condone this Bastardy, the only cross-breeding that the ancestral beliefs do not condemn: that of language, not that of blood*". Additionally, for some postcolonial writers, the use of French proved to be a helpful strategy to write openly about Taboo subjects like religion and sexuality instead of using the sacred language of the Quran, which is Arabic. (Donadey 2000: 27).

Departing from this premise, the postcolonial subversive poetics of Algerian Women writers in using the Arabic language and their attempt to appropriate the colonial language is highly informed by a politics of rejection and condemnation of oppressive authorities, be it French colonialism or patriarchal hegemony. Accordingly, as Hamil explains

when describing Khatibi's *Amour bilingue* (1983) "*the fusion of Arabic and French in their writing becomes possible only when the French language is itself estranged from its cultural background through a rather mystic union with the writer's native language*" (Hamil 2002: 82-83). As such, Algerian female writers' patriotism is expressed through what Khatibi describes as "*Amour bilingue*" [Love in two languages] wherein Arabic and French coexist together. (see Hamil 2002:82).

Djebar ponders that being divided between two languages takes on a gendered aspect: standard Arabic is opposed to Colloquial Arabic or feminine Arabic; one might just as well call it underground Arabic (Donadey 2000: 28). In other terms, this implies that by encouraging her to write in French, Djebar's father unconstrained his daughter from the «mother tongue» as a language of many Algerian women who were cloistered within a male-dominated society. Consequently, she assumed a feminist posture as she is "*frequently associated with women's writing movements, her novels are clearly focused on the creation of a genealogy of Algerian women, and her political stance is virulently anti-patriarchal as much as it is anti-colonial*" (Hiddleston 2007: 248).

In 1985, Djebar won the Franco-Arab Friendship Prize, for *L'Amour, la Fantasia*. For the entire body of her work, she was awarded in 1996 the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature for her outstanding contribution to World Literature. In 2005 she was designated to the Académie Française, the first writer from the Maghreb to attain such appreciation. Owing to that international posture, she is considered as the advocate of reform for Islam across the Arab world, especially in the field

of promoting women's rights, along with Nawal El Saadawi who was doing the same thing in Egypt. According to Bonn: "*Assia Djebar is considered by young Algerian women as the "flag-carrier" of their emancipation, she who used to describe from 1956 the situation and the preoccupations of half-liberated young city-dwellers, at least in appearance, of today, the war in addition*" (Bonn, 1974 : 134) [Our translation].

Among Djebar's writings are *La Soif* (1957), *Les impatients* (1958), *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962), *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967), *Poème pour une Algérie Heureuse* (1969), *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), *Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartement* (1999). In all of these writings, she recurrently affirms her fluctuation about language, about her identification as a Western-educated, Algerian, feminist, Muslim intellectual, and about her role as representative of Algerian women as well as of women worldwide.

Another female voice from Algeria, known as Ahlem Mostaghanemi (1953–), is the first Algerian female author whose novels have been translated to English. The Arabic language, stimulated by her French-speaking father, provided her with a sense of liberation since her family had not been literate in the newly reacquired Arabic language. However, the Algerian society was rebuilding its identity and was not prepared to endure a girl expressing herself impudently on subjects such as love and women's rights. When she received her B.A in literature, the Directors Board of Algiers University vetoed her admission for a Master's degree under the pretense that her freedom of expression would negatively

influence female students. Although Mostaghanemi's father was like Djébar's, a teacher of French, he oriented his daughter to learn Arabic instead. Probably, he wanted his daughter to learn «her» language and not the colonizer's language because most Algerian fathers, at that time, considered it as a language of «*deviation from the right path*», which is established by the religion of Islam. By writing in Arabic, Mostaghanemi foresaw the liberation of Algerian women who would then evolve without transgressing the traditional Algerian society.

Reading Autobiography as Microhistory: Colonialism and Female queries in *L'Amour, la fantasia*

Assia Djébar admits that her novel may be read as "a preparation to an autobiography" [Our translation]. It is a collective autobiography in which the narrator seeks to return to the atmosphere of the female communal life of her childhood in order to join her personal narrative to those of other Algerian sisters. The novel starts with the French conquest of Algeria in 1883, which provides a historical background for her youth memories and women's conditions within the Algerian male-dominated society. Moreover, the narrative of Djébar's novel compiles real testimonies of Algerian women who contributed to the Algerian revolution against French colonialism. As a matter of fact, in the articulation of her novel, Djébar combines fiction and autobiography to determine both her present and that of her fellow countrywomen. For this reason, she discards the use of the French first personal pronoun 'je' when she refers to Algerian women's meetings: "*Comment dire 'je' puisque ce serait dédaigner les*

formules couvertures qui maintiennent le trajet individuel dans la résignation collective" (Djebar 1995 cited in Ali 2015: 48).

Given this cultural proscription against women's first-person narrative, Djebar recognizes that in order to facilitate her act of life-writing, she must renew her ties with the female collective and situate her discourse within the circle of Algerian women. The result is a polyphonic text in which Djebar has transcribed the oral narratives of several women from the Chenoua region of her maternal ancestors. The author's quest for a collective sense of the self begins with an investigation of Algerian women's history and the vital role they have played in the historical development of their nation since 1830. The autobiography, therefore, marks a different autobiographical writing style from the previous female Algerian writers such as Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche's *Histoire de ma vie* (1968), Leïla Baalbaki's *Je vis!* (1961), and Zoubeïda Bittari's *Ô Mes Soeurs musulmanes, pleurez!* (1961).

As readers, we can hardly conceive the circumstances that impel a woman to repress the formulation of "I" as an indivisible part of herself. Algerian women were molded in a context that required restraint and entire submission. Even Djebar, who had the opportunity to escape the secluded life of her compatriots, found it challenging to use the personal pronoun "I". She explains: "*a little Arab girl going to school for the first time[...]* *Off the boarding, school; the adolescent girl is cloistered in summer[...]*" (Transl. by Blair 2003: 3). Djebar uses both the first and the third personal pronouns to articulate her own experience. It is as if the audacity of speaking entirely of herself was "shameful", implying the necessity to

conceal from time to time. While she reports an incident, she tells the inconsistent behavior of her father. He sent her to a French school but impudently tears into pieces the first love letter she wrote in French. She writes: "*In these early stages of my sentimental education, our secret correspondence is carried on in French: thus, the language that my father had been at pains for me to learn, serves as a go-between, and from now a double, contradictory sign reigns over my initiation*" (Transl. by Blair 2003: 4).

Women writers in Europe in the 19th century resorted to pen names and pseudonyms. The most famous examples are: the sister Brontëe (Charlotte, Anne, Emily), respectively Currer Bell for Charlotte Brontëe, Ellis Bell for Emily and Acton Bell for Anne; Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin de Francueil known as George Sand, Mary Anne Evans known as George Eliot, etc. Thus, this was a common practice adopted by women across cultures and generations to escape visibility and male exclusionary practices. Male names provide protection from censorship. Unlike the 18th and 19th century women writers in Europe who used male names, Djébar uses a female name. But in both cases, the aim is to escape censorship.

The need to start her writing enterprise away from her father's censorship probably pushed Djébar to use a penname. Concealing her true identity would avoid her father's objection as he would judge it as inappropriate for a Muslim woman. Besides, enthused by an incongruity between language, religion, and culture, Djébar's father endorsed her French instruction but also endorsed her being divergent from the girls of the neighborhood. That unrestricted posture wholly contravened the tenets and

values of the traditional community. Using French as an instrument of emancipation, Djébar assessed that as the language of the "Other" *westernized her*, she asserts in the following passage: " *Me, the first one in the family who used to receive French dolls, Me, who was not compelled to stamp or to kowtow like that or that cousin*" (Our translation from Cahiers d'études maghrébines 1988:87). Consequently, she articulates in French language what cloistered Algerian women experienced during and after the French conquest. She clearly posits:

Writing in a foreign language, out of my two mother tongues –Berber of Dahra mounts and Arabic of my town–, writing has brought me to the cries of women secretly revolted in my childhood, to my unique origin. Writing does not kill the voice but it wakes it up, especially to resuscitate so many disappeared voices. (Our translation from Cahiers d'études maghrébines 1988: 229).

In Djébar's autobiography, not only does the author derive her strength to speak in the first-person from her sense of uniting her own voice with those of the collective, but also from her explicit desire to re-inscribe women into Algerian history through the telling of their personal stories. These life accounts are a real testimony to Algerian women's contribution to the national movements against French colonialism. Interestingly, the third part of her novel provides an important historical sketching of Algerian women's active and effective participation in the Algerian revolution (1954-1962) by means of real testimonies.

The author interlaced a dialectical bond between women and revolution useful to apprehend gender, language and religious inferences in Algeria. She then questions the role and place of Arabic language and

Islam in women's status. In *L'Amour, la fantasia*, she depicts the involvement, dedication, and bravery of female heroines of the Algerian Revolution struggling in the mountains amidst the male counterparts who restrict, detain and silence them in harems.

These specific Algerian feminine war experiences are recalled in the Algerian Arabic language, but Djébar renders them in French, because, as she explains: "*What mattered to me was to convey in the French language these stories I heard in the mother tongue*" (Our translation from *Cahiers d'études maghrébines* 1988: 81). This does not imply that she disregarded her mother tongue or the culture it embodies; on the contrary, "*the mother tongue, as Khatibi explains, because it is not codified 'maintains the memory of the story, and its genealogical primacy'*"(see Hamil 2002: 82). Therefore, writing in French language represents the means that enable Djébar and other francophone writers to come to terms with the impossibility of writing their mother-language. Her appropriation of the French language is doubly shaped by her Algerian Muslim identity and her oral Arabic culture. Talking about female languages, Djébar discusses four levels of language used by Algerian women of her generation: "*French to voice secret matters, Arabic for our stifled aspirations towards God; Lybico-Berber which takes us back to the most ancient of our mother idols. The fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body*". (Donadey 2000: 29)

According to Donadey (2000:29), Djébar writes "*in a fully subversive manner; her imagination is postcolonial, multilingual, and multicultural. She rewrites history from a female/feminist perspective, while making use*

of *radical bilingualism*". The following section scrutinizes Mostaghanemi's writing experience in using a different language politics.

Love and Language as Identity Politics in *Dhakirat al Jasad*

Dhakirat al Jasad is temporally inscribed throughout four decades of Algerian history (from 1945 to 1988). The main character, Khaled, pens a memoir in which he relates several events before and after the Algerian revolution. Like Djébar's introspection into history and love, Mostaghanemi structures the narrative of her novel around a love story between the protagonist Khaled and his friend's daughter Hayat. He knew her years ago in Tunis and met her again after the independence of Algeria in Paris. Mostaghanemi uses autobiographical elements. Moreover, in the dedication section of her novel, she acknowledges Arabic as a language that is apt to compose literature and convey feelings, specifically those referring to Algerian colonial history and its tribulations. She testifies:

To Malek Haddad...The son of Constantine who swore after the Independence of Algeria not to write in any other language, but only in his own [Arabic]...He died due to the power of his silence and became a martyr of the Arabic language...To my father that may find "there" someone who masters Arabic to read for him this book finally, his book. (Mostaghanemi, 1993:5) [Our translation].

Like all the first educated generation within colonial occupation, Mostaghanemi's father had a French education which entitled him to be a French teacher but deprived him of using the Arabic language (classical Arabic). Mostaghanemi seems to tell her readers that she wrote the novel

to honor her father who was not literate in Arabic. Likewise, she salutes the renowned Algerian writer Malek Haddad who used to write in French before the Independence but committed himself to turn to Arabic afterwards. Undeniably, his linguistic strategy was a means to contest the French colonizer and to claim his Algerian identity through Arabic. She chooses writing as a medium through which she can express her gendered memories and as a powerful means of recovering from the trauma of the past. A fact that is clearly and directly reported in the novel by Ahlem/Hayat:

I might be indebted to Algeria for being cultured and educated, but writing is something else. Nobody gave me that. We write to bring back what we have lost and what has been stolen from us by stealth[...]But my father is a public property in Algeria. Only writing is mine alone and no one is going to take it away. (Trans by Cohen 2013: 73-74).

Ahlem/ Hayat's choice of writing is motivated by her refusal of the patriarchal society, which is reflected in her statement "*What we have lost and what has been stolen from us*". Moreover, the use of the plural pronoun "We" is not only inscribed in the collective feminine voice through which Hayat expresses solidarity with her she-writers, but also stands in juxtaposition to and against the singular male voice of khaled, the Narrator of the novel: "*We write novels to kill the people whose existence has become a burden to us. We write to finish them off!*" (Trans by Cohen 2013:88).

Mostaghanemi exploits gender differences to shape memories of the past through the ways her protagonists Ahlem and Khaled seek to heal their

pain. It is quite striking that Mostaghanemi's narrative uses both male and female to discuss gendered issues. On another and deeper level, Mostaghanemi's construction of the novel as a complex relationship between the protagonists and their art and their past memories creates multiple confusions and attitudes, but invites her readers to understand Postcolonial Algeria through past and present and through male and female understanding of art and literature. While in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*, the voices of women are predominant, *Dhakhirat al jasad* is told from the point of view of a male narrator. Talking about Mostaghanemi's male voice, Ghazoul (1998) states:

As she said in an interview, she opted for a male narrator, partly because she did not want to be classified under the label of "womanist writing", and partly because she wanted to cover episodes in the political history of Algeria in which men were instigators.

Khaled addresses his memoir to Hayat, his lover and daughter of his best friend who died during the Algerian revolution. Hayat, unlike Djébar's women, is unbound and uninhibited. She is literate and studies at university. Unlike inaudible, hidden, and submissive women, Hayat's physical appearance is displayed in the newspapers and exposed to male audience: "*Stunned and confused, I was looking at a representation of you as though you were really present. I was surprised by your new hairstyle [...]. I barely recognised [...] your smile or your new lipstick*" (Trans by Cohen 2013:7-8).

Moreover, Mostaghanemi defines in Arabic what her compatriot Djébar could not do in French in order to free women. Such portrayal is definitely disqualified in the Algerian society in which a woman is

commonly defined for her ethical qualities instead of her physical assets. However, in Mostaghanemi's novel, a woman is paralleled to a watercolor sketch: "*Pictures are feminine in that way. They like the bright lights and dress up for them. They like us to spoil them and dust them down, sweep them off the ground and remove their covering [...] They hate to be ignored, that's all*" (Cohen 2013: 26-27).

The common point between the woman and the paintings is mainly in appearance. Khaled described his painting when he entered the museum in the early morning: "*My paintings were waking up like a woman – unadorned, without make-up or restoration in the naked truth of morning*" (Trans by Cohen 2013: 28). Thus, the novel gives prominence to women as human beings entirely equivalent to men. In that sense, Khaled's intention is to inform and convey the feelings he could not express beforehand: "*I have to write this book for your sake, to tell you what I didn't find the years to say*" (Trans by Cohen 2013: 17). Khaled's book is a tribute to love. Arabic language is perfectly appropriate to help testify and magnify such peaceful love. In Mostaghanemi's, a woman can smile and look freely to a man without being embarrassed. In Contrast to Djébar's wherein man's language of power and control is predominant; Mostaghanemi's displays the female language stronger than the male one: "*But I confess I hadn't expected it to be like this. Everything I had prepared vanished when you arrived. I became tongue-tied at your language and I was at a loss as to how you'd acquired it.*" (Trans by Cohen 2013: 32)

Khaled describes the grandmother of Hayat, whom he knew before his departure to France, and felt sorry that she passed away four years before he met Hayat in Paris. Revealing her affection and love, he confesses: "*She had that reflexive warmth that our mothers exude, those words that in one sentence give you enough tenderness for a lifetime*" (Trans by Cohen 2013: 32). By "*One sentence*", the author refers to Arabic dialect, which is the only language for the great majority of Algerian women at that time. Moreover, it is commendable to indicate that some French sentences and words infuse the Arabic text. This is a common feature in *L'Amour, la fantasia* in which French and Arabic are used interchangeability in order to report Algeria's history. Mostaghanemi identifies the prominence and the command of the Arabic language in Algeria. As such, Algerians attending French schools are considered a defector of their own native language. In this perspective, the author states: "*It was a matter of honour for them when some ventured to call them traitors simply for choosing French secondary schools and culture in a city where it was impossible to ignore the authority of Arabic and its esteemed place in people's hearts and memories*" (Trans by Cohen, 2013: 12).

Writing in Arabic becomes then a healing process. For instance, after his arm's amputation, Khaled used to see a psychologist. The latter told him to write about something intimate without any form of restriction. The most important device is writing about oneself as a way of discharging negative emotions and memories as a way to internal restoration. Writing is also the result of reading: "*It was certainly closest to me, seeing as I had done nothing all my life except read, which naturally leads to writing*"

(Trans by Cohen 2013: 22). Moreover, Hayat's linguistic choice is very meaningful. She knows Arabic but favors French in her conversation. In doing so, she keeps a certain distance from Khaled whom she encounters. Unlike Djébar, Mostaghanemi creates *Arab* characters that have conversation in French, probably fascinated by the language of the "Other". However, it is worth noting that Hayat adores and speaks French with Khaled, but favors writing in Arabic. The following conversation is eloquent regarding Khaled's linguistic choice:

Moving from one shock to another, I asked you, 'What language do you write in?'

- 'Arabic.'

- 'In Arabic?!'

My scepticism annoyed you. Perhaps you had misunderstood when you said, 'I could have written in French, but Arabic is the language of my heart. I can write in nothing else. We write in the language we feel with.'

- 'But you only speak French.'

- 'That's habit.' You resumed looking at the pictures before adding, 'What matters is the language we speak to ourselves, not the one we use with others!'" (Trans by Cohen 2013: 33)

The passage above is a symbol of Arabic and French language competition. Each language provides its own assets in terms of writing. Eventually, Arabic «wins» and Hayat is convinced to write in Arabic since

it allows her to express her innermost feelings. Afterwards, the protagonists opt solemnly to express themselves only in Arabic:

Before giving an answer, I said, 'Listen! We're only going to speak Arabic. I'll change your habits as of today.'

In Arabic you asked me, 'Will you be able to?'

'I can,' I replied, 'because I'll also change my habits with you.'

You answered [...] 'I'll obey you because I love that language[...]

'I won't remind you, because you won't forget,' I said. (Trans by Cohen 2013: 33)

Furthermore, for Mostaghanemi, the prominence of Arabic is epitomized by Hayat's father who valued Arabic. Finally, from what has been argued so far, one can assume that both Djébar and Mostaghanemi consider language, be it French or Arabic as an instrument of denunciation and deliverance for Algerian women. However, whereas Djébar is wavering displaying women's voices and actions, Mostaghanemi resolutely presents women unrestricted in discourse and conducts. Djébar relates women's secluded life in the realm of Algerian traditions whereas Mostaghanemi portrays women in a more modern perspective.

Conclusion

At a time, Algeria experienced an intense identity crisis. Writers such as Djébar and Mostaghanemi composed autobiographies, whether in Arabic

or French, to gauge their own position in relation to France colonial presence and its bequest. Through their narratives, they strived to merge colonial education and loyalty to local culture and history. To defy the silence and camouflage imposed on women in her society, Djébar ventures to write her personal experience, but she conceals it amidst the polyphonic voices of women. By transliterating their stories into her written text merged with oral tradition, Djébar compensates for her sense of exile and restores the connections with her past obliterated by French colonization. Likewise, Mostaghanemi resists the hierarchy imposed by her sociological context and France, as she is branded for her work celebrating Algerian women and fiercely being anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial.

More importantly, both female authors addressed the difficult issue as women to pen in a patriarchal community. Essentially, the ontological unease lies in writing oneself in a society that tributes silence. This peculiar context led both authors to opt for «auto-fiction» and "collective autobiography" to condense the limits between the real and the imagined. For Mortimer, "[...] *the polyphonic discourse (is designed) to blur the boundaries between fiction and experience*" (Mortimer 1988: 103). By writing the self from within a communal framework, they merge the issue of feminism and relegated identity into a broader historical perspective.

Both Djébar and Mostaghanemi support the language they are writing in, as the impeccable language to express the emancipation of women. Like Djébar, Mostaghanemi assumes that writing is more significant than oral expression: "*Only writing is mine alone and no one is going to take it away*" (Trans by Cohen 2013: 38). While Djébar's women are reduced to

silence, and any woman's voice is considered as a dishonor, Mostaghanemi's woman's voice is largely praised: "*And your voice, oh, I had always loved your voice [...] from where did you get it? Which language was yours?*" [Our translation]. In a nutshell, both Djebbar and Mostaghanemi personify the mirror that reflects Algerian women through the prism of Islam and society. As such, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, and *Dhakirat al-Jasad* are outstanding testimonies of Algerian sociological and political inferences.

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