

The Journey of a 'literature' in Algeria; One of 'Art' or that of 'Pain'

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Abstract

Much ink has been spilled trying to surround the Algerian literature and the issue of identity in the context of colonization. The dilemma of identity in Africa is perhaps the most complex issue which still concerns the African community in general. African writers, being members of their society, resort to the expressively human medium of literature to share social concerns for the sake of change, yet surprisingly, get blamed for being 'non-African' for the language they use. Readers of critical content written about the Algerian literature can realize that our 'literature' requires a lot of objective analysis to identify its real nature, understand its subject matter and reception. Much of this noise, in fact, inspired me to present this paper which does not simply talk about a written art in Algeria, but covers the entire journey of that art from its dawn up to its present state.

Keywords: Africa, Colonization, Algerian Literature, Identity, Language.

Introduction

Literature, as an art, managed not only to ensure its long-term presence as an art, but also contributed to enriching the human and social sciences through its utility. Though in the past, attention was mostly given to the most obvious function of literature which is 'entertainment', that is, arousing delightful feelings, the last few decades witnessed great changes in terms of literary studies, and literature has transcended its beauty. The expression 'And beauty is its own excuse for being' is no longer true because literature is now, especially with the emergence of Interdisciplinarity, powerfully addressing worldwide topics and contributes to the development of the educational curricula.

Africa, our black continent, had faced a lot of bloody violence due to the dehumanization of its peoples and the horrendous rape of its land during and after colonization; the fabric of the African life had lost shape and tranquility, thus Africans took it upon themselves to restore peace, but most importantly, their lost 'selves'. Literature, this human medium of self-expression, lent itself to the creativity of the African writers to project the voice of the voiceless, make history and catch up with the train of globalization. The journey of African literature underwent a lot of difficulties but it finally managed to spread all over the continent and Algeria was there to receive its mission.

The Algerian literature succeeded in booking itself a place along with the literatures of the neighboring countries, so it was a chance for the literate to express themselves and raise their concerns up to the public. This article is a personal contribution which tries to surround the journey of this literature from its early seeds up to today's presence. Certain critical questions demand answers mainly: what was literature in Algeria really about? Is its content

really Algerian? Why was French its main language all this long? What changes did Arabic bring when writers lately started using it? ... I hope this article provides answers that will quench readers' thirst.

١. Historical Background; Early Emergence of a “Literary” Tradition in Algeria

Historically speaking, the earliest seeds of a literary tradition in Algeria can hardly be traced before the second half of nineteenth century; unlike other literatures of the world, the Algerian literature does not have a very long past because research shows no real productions or old manuscripts proving the opposite. Literature in Algeria, of course in the narrative sense of writing, first appeared in the form of poems around the year ١٨٦٧ thanks to the French military. Fazia Aitel, a Kabyle writer, provides more details about this and says “local poets were forced to compose poems about French domination and glory. Even the transcription and publication of the first Kabyle poems, in ١٨٦٧, were the work of a French military officer, General Hanoteau” (٢٠١٧: ٥٩). A number of novels were written a while after, exactly before the year ١٩٠٨, but were soon rejected by many authors believing that their authors were a group of ‘assimilated Algerians’ who voluntarily betrayed the country and greedily stood on the side of the French colonizer. This historical fact proves that there were no works written before, especially knowing that the earliest productions we know about coincided with the French intrusion in Algeria. (١٩٩١: ٩)

Early French conquerors seized the chance, being on the Algerian soil, to write their own personal diaries which portrayed life and events then; this French contribution paved the way for the idea of literature to see the light. Jean Déjeux, a French writer, stresses this aspect in his book *La Littérature algérienne contemporaine: des récits militaires, des journaux de route marqués par les images romantiques, les poncifs de l'époque ... correspondances, mémoires des officiers résonnent d'épopées et de faits d'armes toujours à la gloire de celui qui les raconte.* (١٩٧٩: ١٨)

From an artistic perspective, the early emergence of literature in Algeria surprisingly coincided with the Romantic Movement; this latter, paid no attention to reason and showered its followers with fantasy, excess and exaggeration. Therefore, many tourists from different parts of the world chose to land on Algeria “seeking inspiration for their art” (Ibid) escaping sophistication of life to find themselves face to face with the picturesque dunes of the Sahara. This journey and exchange of cultures created linkages between natives and the French and, as a result, Algerian teachers and scholars who received good education in French, especially from ١٩٣٠ on, started imparting their knowledge and the Algerian society started moving towards literacy and written production. Therefore, a number of literary productions, especially *Le Jeune Algérie, De la colonie vers la province* by Ferhat Abbas, started receiving the attention of the Algerian society. Now that the tree of literature bore its first fruits; a group of Berber novelists exactly between ١٩٤٠ and ١٩٦٠, decided it was time to rise and ensure their culture and inherent traditions will continue to exist. This led Assia Djebbar, Djamilia Debèche, Abdelkader Oualhaci, Malak Haddad and many others of Berber origin to pen a number of really interesting works which breathed life into the Kabylie community.

Literature in Algeria, as recorded historical facts show, did not emerge out of pure artistic intentions nor was it first produced by Algerian individuals. It is due to the French military invasion that local poems were said and ‘Francophone-Algerian’ novels followed as a result of the French policy of education. This leads us to the conclusion that ‘identity’ in this literature is a very critical aspect which has to be discussed and given enough share of investigation.

٢. Colonized Identity in African Literature

٢.١. Doubted 'Identity' means Doubted 'Literature'

In her magister dissertation, Cheriat Amel devotes its first part to investigating the dilemma of identity in the African society. As a matter of fact, the question of identity is one of grave importance because everything else is but a reflection. She emphasizes that the imperialism which had been harshly practiced by the oppressor within the African soil left Africans in an imaginable state of self-loss; I quote Frank A. Ninkovich's words to support her view and to show the internal suffering, he says: "an identity crisis is a period of disorientation in which values and relationships once taken for granted are thrown into question. Questions of self-adjustment that bedevil individuals caught up in an identity crisis like "who am I?" and "where do I belong?" (Ninkovich ٢٠٠١: ١٦). Moreover, this intended process of identity destruction meant for firmly taking control of the African masses; the colonizer knew it was only through solid identity that African resistance would survive and even gain victory. (Cheriat Amel ٢٠١٥: ٥٠). Reasonably speaking, how do we expect to listen to wise words or even read a piece of literature coming out of an African whose identity is but a mess! This is the idea Amel tries to convey in her paper.

Abigail K. Guthrie, from a different perspective, tackles the problem of foreign languages used by African writers in producing local literature; the idea she shares is that there is a multiplicity in terms of African spoken languages which separate African states. African people, living in the middle of all this linguistic mess, are faced with a lot of challenges which set them wider apart and sweep sense of belonging and nationalhood (Abigail K. Guthrie ٢٠١١: ١٥). Furthermore, this shattered identity forces African writers to melt in their enemies' languages in order to reach international publication and receive recognition as 'writers of literature', and this in fact, throws a lot of mud on their indigenous culture as Abigail says "to risk the heart and soul of his literature." (Ibid)

Algeria is no exception when it comes to the notion of identity; from the moment the French colonizer placed feet on our soil it launched a poisonous policy of eliminating Islamic education system and force children to embrace French instead. Islam was the pole star from which Algerians received the essence of their Arabic identity and its collapse would cost Algerians a lot of irrecoverable value. Standard Arabic, as well, almost disappeared and a distorted Algerian vernacular came into society mixed with some French words which Algerians conventionally mispronounce. (Cheryl Le Roux ٢٠١٧: ١١٦).

Leadership, this prestigious term, caused a lot of noise within the African society; Karin Paasche in her article "Leadership as Identity: the Focus in African Literature" ٢٠١٧, attributes the messy identity in Africa to poor exercise of power by leaders. She denounces the colonizer 'former leaders' as the ones who planted inferiority and shook the culture of indigenous peoples, and the African 'new leaders' who blindly followed their footsteps. This affected literary production and forced writers to give in to the agendas of leaders driven by materialistic urges. African children, who were supposed to carry hope for a pure identity, were themselves victims of unjust leadership in Africa; Karin discloses the fact that most of the children during and after wars of freedom were brutally traumatized and found of no origin, she adds "A consequence of Africa's many wars and Crises in Leadership is the emergence of several generations of war-traumatized children. Many are members of the generation following a "missing" generation." (Karin Paasche ٢٠١٧: ١٦).

Struggle to revive a lost identity led many writers to questioning even the existence of a 'literature' in Africa; Taisy Selaci is one of those who felt tired reading about African writers hopelessly defending their identity. He based his daring claim upon three seemingly strong arguments which no African can hide behind closed doors; the first of which was the complexities of the African cultures which negatively affect literary works and deprive them of credibility and public acceptance. The second problem, Taisy adds, was colonization itself since it was the crisis of all other crises, and that Africa has to work on sweeping colonial values and cleansing its identity in order to leave space for creativity and indigenous literature to faithfully project African identity. As far as commercial value is concerned, works of literature produced in Africa using African languages are sold at very low prices compared to works written in French or English. Cecilia Amaoge Eme, in her article entitled "African Languages and African Literature" ٢٠١١, states that literary works in indigenous languages face a great deal of rejection because there is a lot of frustration both outside and inside the continent, and that the only way to produce 'sound literature' is through 'sound identity' (Cecilia ٢٠١١: ١٢٢).

As far as content is content, we may notice that African literature has been much criticized due to the gruesome images it relies on to portray reality; monsters and supernatural beings have been always there especially in novels and this, according to the European academic institutions, is but a hopeless attempt from African writers to tell the world Africa is still in much pain (Akoété Amouzou ٢٠٠٧: ٣٣١). If literature was meant to entertain people so that they escape reality for some while, African literature in this context was doing the opposite which is keeping its readers attached to the reality they want to escape. To solve this problem, Akoété suggests that "Traditional African thought must serve as a foundation and a guideline to the authentic African literature we are calling for." (٢٠٠٧: ٣٣٣).

Known Algerian novelists, mainly Rachid Boudjedra, moved from one language to another in writing their works, and this is according to Mabrouk Kada, the owner of many articles, is because Arabic could not seize the Algerian audience. What is even more surprising is that Rachid Boudjedra testified that writing in French helped him express himself, especially when he deviated to sex and obscenity language (Mabrouk ١٩٩٩: pp. ١٢-١٣).

In one sentence, I see that avoiding Arabic in writing literature, valuing French spirit over one's own and keeping literary content limited to the bloody past of the ancestors is indeed our "catastrophe", and literature in Algeria has to be reshaped in order for national identity to find its way.

٢,٢. Nightmare of Language; 'French' in 'Algerian Literature'

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his mind. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart"

_ Nelson Mandela _

This section is dedicated to the idea of local literature in the presence of foreign language; it is indeed a universally shared truth that any given community's culture is heavily shaped by the language its individuals conventionally use. From this introducing point, we can realize the fact that new foreign cultural aspects that either get introduced or imposed often face problems accepting them.

It is not strange to say that The Maghreb, as a whole, still suffers from the problem of language when it comes to art, in general, and works of literature in particular. Karima Laachir, the Moroccan author of many papers, discusses this linguistic mess brought about by colonization and openly testifies that "The arrival of French and Spanish languages further complicated the picture, particularly as the French pursued a colonial policy of imposing French as the sole language of education and administration." (Karima ٢٠٠٧: ٢٥). She claims that Moroccan policy of "Arabisation", which started right after independence in ١٩٥٦, could not eradicate heavy reliance on French language because it has become a must especially in education. This is a big problem according to Jacqueline Kaye and Albdelhamid Zoubir, in their book *The Ambiguous Compromise: Language, Literature and National Identity in Algeria and Morocco*, see that there is no escape from perpetuating French values when using French in perpetuating national ones. In their exact words, they used the expression "languages encode national value", which means that language left as a colonial legacy unavoidably carries the colonizer's values, and there is no other option for independent nations to restore national identity but to strictly limit the use of foreign languages. Always with the problem of linguistic intrusion in local society, Ferial Jabouri Ghazoul appears to agree to a great extent with everything we discussed above; in a section Entitled "The Debate over Literary Writing in a Foreign Language: An Overview of *Francophonie* in the Maghreb", she pays attention to the fact that francophone writers have to take serious attempts to address the issue of "Francophonie" which brought uncertainty to their literary productions. In this sense, 'French language' within an 'Arabic-majority' community constitutes a mixture of unknown identity and this is what keeps the atmosphere gloomy. Ferial enlarges the scope of doubt created by 'language' when she questions the identity of those francophone writers who writer using French as their first language saying "However, as a legacy of French acculturation, a significant number of Maghrebi writers use French as their first language to express their identity. But this is the big question: Who are they?" (Ferial ٢٠٠٠: ٤٠).

Some Algerian writers, mainly Mohammed Dib's *Algérie* and Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*, viewed the presence of the French language in Algerian literature from the angle of "reconciliation"; they tried in a way to glorify the past of the 'oppressed Algerian' and, at the same time, long for what Ferial calls "a need for reconciliation with the oppressor." (Ferial ٢٠٠٠: ٥١). This façade of approaching the issue of language led many foreign writers to pejoratively judge Algerian literature. The Jewish writer Albert Memmi, who is of Tunisian origin, criticized the linguistic drama of "French" and "Arabic" especially in literature claiming that Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians had no choice but to use it because "In the playing out of this drama, one's mother-tongue regrettably became debased and rejected." (Ibid.)

Coinciding with the Algerian Independence, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O commented on the notion of language when he was invited to a big conference in an African university whose title "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression". The title did not please him at all; Ngugi realized how marginalized African languages and local voices are in front of English and French. Chinua Achebe, on the other hand, did not have a choice but to give up to the imposed language of the colonizer on his literary productions justifying this surrender by means of mere reality, he declared that it is not right that an African should give up his own mother-tongue due to colonization because it is a horrible betrayal which produces guilt, but for me there is no other choice, I have been given this language and I intend to use it. Chinua Achebe, thus, asserts the fact nothing can be done to exclude 'English language' from the African life and that it has become 'inherent'.

M. Kamel Lgougil wrote an article entitled "Postcolonial Algerian Writers in French: Language as Representation and Resistance", in which he stresses the idea that French in Algerian literature is not the only problem the Algerian literature has to deal with; rather, French has imposed itself even on Algerians' vernacular language and he further explains:

The Algerian vernacular undermines the authority of the French language, and the Algerian form of storytelling disrupts the authority of the western narrative. Therefore, the use of any language in a multicultural text is not only a linguistic or textual manifestation but also serves often as a vehicle of a specific culture and tradition. (Kamel, ٢٠١٦:٤)

Kamel, building on the same idea, reminds us of the fact that Algerian writers in French very often insert vernacular Algerian words in their novels just to feel sense of belonging to their mother-tongue and give their works some -I like to call- 'Algerianness'. Instances of French words adopted as vernacular language are: "Msan'gra" (French: sans degré), "Zan'fa" (French: sans fin), "Sachiy'a" (French: saché) and a lot more.

To wrap up this heated controversy, my opinion is that despite the fact that French language belongs to those who colonized and forced millions of Algerian martyrs to bravely bestow their pure blood in defending Algeria, it remains a 'tongue' which we can use for our benefit without re-shaping our identity, faith or traditions. Therefore, the psychological complex of 'French usage' has to fade away.

٣. Contemporary Algerian Literature

And 'Pain' goes on...

It was only until ١٩٧٠ that contemporary Algeria literature started taking shape after its colonial version; this type of literature did not exclude issues related to identity because a decade after independence is not a long span of time that would put colonial fire completely off. Arab World English Journal published Hamza Boudersa's article entitled "The Algerian Literature (Elite Novel / Folk Poetry) and the Post-Colonial Discourse: Witnessing to an Intellectual Liberation ٢٠١٤, in which he claims that Abdelhamid Benhadouga's novel *Winds from the South* was the first to be published in Arabic language in ١٩٧٠. Hamid Sakkut, in his *Arabic Novel: Bibliography and critical introduction*, supports this claim saying "...considered to be the first maturely conceived and strikingly well composed an Algerian novel in Arabic" (Sakkut, ٢٠٠٠: ١٢٢). This is quite late for a 'literature' written in an Arab country, and it proves that it had taken Algerian writers very long before they decided to write in (أ.ب.ت). This Arabic wave in literature was meant, though not explicitly then, to revive the Arabic identity through inserting Algerian vernacular language (as in *Winds from the South*), and encourage the artistic community; however, heroic presence of their ancestors' brave achievements and theme of 'pain' never left the literary scene.

Not very long after, and precisely during the ١٩٩٠'s, Algeria underwent the bloody experience of "the black decade" whose shocking consequences still haunt the Algerian society even today. Literature, too, took an urgent move towards depicting the conditions of that experience when a number of writers rushed towards their pens. This caused a huge break between the old generation of writers and the ١٩٩٠'s ones; Mohammed Sari the Algerian novelist and critic commented on such literary works in a disapproving way and called them 'crisis texts'. In his context, the writers who showed up during the black decade were but narrating those gruesome events and picturing that bloodshed, and this was the exclusive job of journalists not writers. Therefore, those critics who were not in favor of this literature chose to call it "الأدب الاستعجالي" because of its 'opportunistic nature'.

Azzeddine Djelaoudji wrote in the Arabic newspaper 'Al-ittihad' that the ١٩٩٠'s literature mixed French with Arabic even more and led many authors who once loved Arabic to quickly turn to French for many reasons. It is worth knowing that some authors merely wrote for commercial ends especially that literature then was very rich in terms of real depiction of events, and fiction was left unnoticed. In the middle of this literary mess, old generation writers of the ١٩٧٠'s-١٩٨٠'s stood against this, I like to call 'bloody literature', especially Tahar Wattar, Amin Zaoui, Wasini Laaradj and Rachid Boudjedra who denounced this literature of lacking sense and credibility. What I personally find logical in the arguments of the former writers is that they defended the essence of the Algeria literature, and tried to protect its value away from self-interests; Yasmina Khadra, for example, seized the events of the black decade to write about violence in Algeria then moved to write about Palestine in his novel "الإعتداء" to keep lights on him. On the other hand, the young writers responded saying that the old generation opposed such literature out of jealousy and fear of losing their famous pen-names.

The Algerian woman raised her pen along with her likes and had a hand in shaping contemporary literature; of those whose novels are most read and demanded is par excellence Ahlam Mostghanemi. Starting her beautiful journey in ١٩٧٠'s, though she once claimed to have forgotten the exact year of her first successful work, Kennan Linda and Brahmi Linda in their master dissertation stated that she was the first to address taboos of sex, religion and politics (pp. ٦١-٦٢).

Such taboos had long been held unspoken until Ahlam decided to break the chains and write her novel “Dhakhirat Al’djasad” in which she wonders –I translate- “Is paper really the fire extinguisher of my memory?” (٦). These words tell us about the conflicts which Algerian women had to face in the presence of male domination and cruel treatment; thus they resorted to writing to soothe their ‘pain’. Boudhiaf Ghania, from the Mohammed Khider University –Biskra- also devotes an article of hers to feminist literature in Algeria; according to her, the novels of Ahlam Mostghanemi disclose a lot of hidden love in the Algerian life. ‘Love’, this uniquely human emotion, is the spell that she casts in her words so that readers would enjoy and indirectly receive her message of ‘pain’. Plenty of astonishing passages arrest any reader; Ghania could not avoid the chance to refer to –I translate- “hungry I am for you ... an age of thirst and wait ... an age of complexes, hurdles and paradoxes ... an age of desire and shyness” (Ghania ٢٠١١:٩). These words are very telling in the sense that they address the internal conflicts the Algeria woman had to suffer from colonization up until today; we move a page later to find that Ahlam describes herself as “أنا مجنونة”! These expressions are very recurrent in her novels and are, according to Ghania, but expressions of a shattered reality and ‘pain’.

Habiba Hadjaj and Malika Okssal, in their master dissertation “Reality of Algerian Feminist Poetry”, bring up the ghost of ‘terrorism’ which shook Algeria for more than a decade; they discuss the effect of this ghost on Ahlam Mostghanemi’s novels. They testify that Ahlam only wrote about love and peace as a sugar-coated style to avoid narrating bloody events. Therefore, ‘pain’ found no other place but Algerian writers’ works and the beauty of language, Ahlam and her likes relied on, did not succeed in hiding their ‘pains’ so ‘pain’ goes on...

Conclusion

Having discussed the above-mentioned, I conclude by asserting the following:

- The Algerian literature, from what has been investigated, is a typically African literature because of the painful background of colonization. Violence exercised by the French colonizer led to the emergence and continuity of this literary tradition in Algeria.
- Identity is the most controversial aspect in the Algerian literature; it has been questioned even by those writers who wrote defending it. Language, as a cultural aspect, caused a lot of noise within the Algerian community since it almost left no room for mother-tongue to exist. 'French literature' or 'Algerian literature' have become nearly synonymous especially when writers insisted on using French both in exile and indoors.
- Literature, long after independence, was greedily used as a means to portray the black decade in Algeria, and this according to the majority of Algerian critics, was seen as a negative turn which affected the reception of reputation of literature.
- 'Beauty', 'love' and 'feminism' were given a big share of attention but, in fact; it was just a façade hiding 'pain'.
- It is a message, I hereby share as an Algerian, that Algerian writers have to give more room for their mother-tongue in their works, especially for those who do not understand French or simply do not find pleasure reading in it. As to those writers to prefer French, I think they should contribute to sharing Algerian values and it is not a bad thing as long as they keep faithful to the teachings of their Islamic faith and the Algerian tradition.

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