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Beyond Borders: Exploring Memory and Algerian Exile Narratives in Houari Kassa, Leila Sebbar, and Waciny Laredj

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ABSTRACT: *Stories are vital in trying times as they are testimonies of lived experiences. Among these tales, the Algerian exilic practices, with all their complexities during and after the French colonisation, offer an intriguing setting to explore the historical ties between different cultures. To illustrate, we first look into Kassa Houari's Confessions d'un Immigré, which delves into the emotional depth of Algerian immigrant workers' experiences in France while recounting their challenges of assimilation. In the second narrative of mobility, Leïla Sebbar's La Seine Était Rouge, we analyse the quest for belonging among Algerians in France during a period of historical pain and political turmoil. Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord, by Wassiny Laredj, is the third story that accentuates the emotional upheaval in a foreign distant land. These three exilic discourses showcase different facets of memory displacement, converging on the emotional difficulties faced by Algerian immigrants at different times, especially during the Algerian War of Independence. This paper reveals three complex perspectives on memory and exile within the Algerian diaspora under the shade of the Algerian War of Independence.*

KEYWORDS: Algerian War of Independence; Exile; Memory; Narrative of Mobility; Political and Emotional turmoil.

RÉSUMÉ : *Les histoires sont vitales dans les moments difficiles car elles témoignent des expériences vécues. Les récits dévoilant les pratiques de l'exil algérien, dans toute leur complexité pendant et après la colonisation française, offrent un cadre captivant pour analyser les liens historiques entre différentes cultures. Pour illustrer cela, nous examinons d'abord les Confessions d'un Immigré de Kassa Houari, qui plonge dans la profondeur émotionnelle des*

expériences des travailleurs immigrés algériens en France tout en racontant leurs défis d'assimilation. Dans le deuxième récit de la mobilité, La Seine Était Rouge de Leïla Sebbar, nous analysons la quête d'appartenance des Algériens en France pendant une période historique difficile et pleine de troubles politiques. Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord, de Wassiny Laredj, est le troisième récit qui accentue le bouleversement émotionnel dans un pays lointain et étranger. Ces trois discours d'exil présentent différentes facettes de la mémoire du déplacement, convergeant vers des difficultés émotionnelles rencontrées par les immigrés algériens à des époques distinctes, notamment pendant la guerre d'indépendance. Cet article révèle trois perspectives complexes sur la mémoire et l'exil au sein de la diaspora algérienne et l'ombre de la guerre d'indépendance algérienne.

MOTS-CLÉS: Guerre d'indépendance algérienne ; Exil ; Mémoire ; Récit de mobilité ; Troubles politiques et émotionnels.

Introduction

The Algerian migration is not a singular narrative, but a complex tapestry of identities constantly being built and rebuilt in the diaspora. This study encompasses the many exiles that formed the Algerian displacement since the French colonisation, each group undergoing unique struggles. Recognising and differentiating between these various Algerian groups living in exile is crucial. In the essay "Reflections on Exile", Said encapsulates the contradictive emotions of exile. He writes: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (Said 2002, 159).

It is an unremitting theme in Algerian literature that has taken many shapes accordingly. It somehow strengthens the bonds with the home country and, at the same time, opens new perspectives. It looks at the differences in experiences of those who were forced or who left for economic and political reasons. We will present a selection of Algerian exiles in chronological order. We will argue that exile is challenging; it shapes the Algerian character, as the one who goes will never remain static. We will also show the presence of the Algerian War of Independence, even though the three books treat different junctures where exile took place. The weight of this war is pivotal and helps the sense of community and solidarity that emerged within the diaspora despite all the lived experiences of racism and discrimination that make integration difficult for immigrants.

This literature is important because it represents an openness to the world. The history of colonisation, the War of Independence, and political changes undoubtedly shape it. The difficulty of choosing such a topic raises the problem of authors' faithfulness and authenticity as many are between two countries and face highly ethnocentric ideas that are so influential in French academic spheres. Tristan Leperlier [1] wrote about authors' oscillation in his article « Écrivains exilés, écrivains exotiques? Les Algériens en France ». He talks about this constant negotiation between the exiled writer and the editor. This oscillation is due to the lived contradictions. Leila Sebbar, an Algerian writer, also speaks of this oscillation and states in an interview:

> *If I speak of exile, it is because it is the only place where I can speak of the contradictions, the divisions [. . .] It is so complex that I always resent myself for having simplified it. If I speak of exile, I also speak of cultural crossings; it is at the points of meeting or splintering that I live and that I write, so how can I state a simple identity?* (Sebbar & Huston 1986, 126-27)

The selection of writers was challenging as the Algerian exile has been a recurrent theme in Algerian literature since the 1800s. To resist the French colonisation, intellectuals and militants fled to European countries or the Ottoman Empire, struggling for independence. For instance, Emir Abd-el-Kader, the father of modern Algeria, experienced many exiles, and his first exile was in France from 1847 to 1852. The "indigénat" code was instituted some decades later among Algerians in 1881, as it was a kind of apartheid that separated the French from the natives. Among the many types of Algerian exiles, there were forced migration events, including the expulsion of thousands of Algerians from their land to New Caledonia during the French conquest. A well-known song, "Yal Menfi", meaning

[1] Tristan Leperlier, « Écrivains exilés, écrivains exotiques ? Les Algériens en France. », in: Elsa Gomis, Perin Emel Yavuz et Francesco Zucconi (dir.), Dossier « Les images migrent aussi », De facto [En ligne], 24 | Janvier 2021, mis en ligne le 29 Janvier, URL : https://www.icmigrations.cnrs.fr/2021/01/06/defacto-024–01/.

'the deported', was composed immediately after this tragedy and evoked the endured suffering of the Algerian immigrants.[2]

In the kaleidoscope of Algerian fictional books, the theme of exile interlaces a deep tapestry that echoes captivating human experiences. In this article, the many narratives of those displaced experiences finally revolve around the touching works of three distinguished Algerian writers: Houari Kassa, Leila Sebbar, and Waciny Laredj.

Unraveling Apartheid: Workers' Experience in *Confessions d'un Immigré* by Houari Kassa

Economic opportunity has been one of the most significant drivers of mobility and migration throughout history. People have often moved to new places for better professions, higher incomes, and improved living conditions. This type of migration is usually referred to as "push-pull" migration, where people are "pushed" out of their home country by economic hardship and "pulled" to a new country by the promise of better opportunities. During the 1920s, the first wave of Algerian immigration was established in France; they were mainly young single Berbers looking for work. They responded to the demand for a labor force in France but remained very attached to their home country while their money was sent to their families. Houari Kassa, in *Confessions d'un Immigré*, recounts this form of exile linked to the Algerian-Berber exile of workers to describe the Kabylian community of Taourirt.

This exile started earlier than independence. Since the First World War, many Algerians have been forced to work in the French industry. Houari Kassa is per se a young immigrant who went to France seeking a job to make enough money to help his family. He does not intend to remain in France as it is difficult. He lived on the margins, in a ghetto. He compares the place where he lived to a sanctuary, a no man's land where the French never penetrate except for selling coal (Kassa 1988, 105).

Bentahar Mekki explores this theme and declares: "The North African immigrant in France is forced to live in a world parallel to the one

[2] Paradoxically, Akli Yahiaten, a Kabylian singer who sang this song again, emigrated to France in 1950 and worked in the Citroen factory. He was imprisoned many times after being accused of raising funds for the Algerian National Liberation Front, the FLN.

around him" (Bentahar 1979,141). Kassa describes his work in a factory where white workers are separated from the others. It is an apartheid arrangement. He said:

> *We did not mix; the white people were on one side, and the darker-skinned people were on the other. There was no contact between the two groups, and we ignored each other. Each group viewed the other as being beneath them.* (Our translation) (Kassa 1988, 157)

Kassa reflects on the French as an inaccessible image. He explains: "The French remain like an impenetrable image, a photo" (Our translation) (Kassa 1988, 104). The whole book recounts the difficulties of Algerian workers' integration and how the French colonisation led to the exilic situation and suffering. Kassa knows that he must temporarily adapt to his new life; he cannot stand being locked up, especially when he experiences the pace and hell of the factory. The industrial system alienates Kassa, and he probably accepts this job with a salary lower than that of a Frenchman, because the latter did not want it. In Marxist terms, he is a simple commodity who accomplishes physically arduous work to earn a living.

Nevertheless, this immigration was necessary to save France's economy, for the reason that immigrants like Kassa went alone without families and children, so there was no need for a school for the latter. Therefore, the gains for the French economy were enormous, since Algerians accepted jobs that required much physical effort and a terrible workshop atmosphere. In addition, they were not very demanding of union labour compared to the French, and they accepted unequal salaries for equal work to the French. This could be read as an indirect upshot of the circumstances during colonisation and the war of liberation.

Due to all these circumstances, Kassa lives in a permanent state of crisis. He believes that life is a succession of dramas and disasters. He is an uprooted man, brutally separated from his family and his physical and social environment. He enunciates:

> *It is true that no matter how hard I tried to adapt and put down roots, my efforts remained unsuccessful [...] I could not bury my childhood or stop my thoughts from wandering in the fig orchards. France is*

> *too complex, and I could never fully understand its subtleties.* (Our translation) (Kassa 1988, 62)

Kassa could not adapt quickly. He kept thinking of his Kabyle fig; he could not bury his childhood to start a new life. His narrative is related to issues of race and discrimination in the host country, which has undermined his full integration and acceptance in his new community. France remains too complex for him and for the immigrant groups, which, despite all the difficulties, developed a liminal identity (l'entre deux) after a long-time confrontation between two languages and cultures. This diaspora strengthened the bonds with Algeria as it grew and workers' numbers increased. Meanwhile, many workers died in factories, and others were given French citizenship.

Kassa was aware that no one could escape sociological mutations and modernity, especially in times of war and political turmoil that engender huge social, cultural, and economic shifts. Sooner or later, the children would reject their parents if they refused to take a few steps toward the foreign society, which they hated for its disrespect for religion (Kassa 1988, 70). Upon reading the book, it proves challenging to come to a clear conclusion regarding the reasons behind Kassa's exile: is it due to economic desperation or the Algerian war? We believe the answer lies within this passage in the book:

> *As I grew up, I discovered the horrors caused by the Algerian war, the bloody sweeps by the French soldiers. I can still see them gathering the men in the village square, getting their hands on the stock of canes and pickaxe handles of old Mohand, the club merchant, known for his well-turned merchandise. I still see them, these soldiers, administering blows to the peasants after having taken care to remove their chechias and turbans, revealing their bald or shaved heads. Their work finished, they left the place strewn with men with bloody faces. I clearly remember the day when they gathered the women and young girls in a house at the edge of the village before unleashing a horde of soldiers on them, just as they unleashed dogs on the fellahs. In Taourirt, we are trying to erase this humiliating day from our memories. Our village has never experienced such horror.* (Our translation) (Kassa 1988, 20).

The passage suggests that Kassa's forced departure was a result of the significant psychological distress and financial upheaval brought about by the Algerian War. The described acts of violence are indicative of the broader effects of the conflict on civilians, encompassing not only direct physical harm but also enduring social and economic consequences. The financial turmoil triggered by the war probably disrupted individuals' means of subsistence and worsened circumstances that ultimately led to exile. Kassa's account highlights the role of wartime brutality and subsequent economic breakdown in shaping his displacement. However, Kassa shows the resilience and determination of immigrants to improve their lives and contribute to their communities. He preserved his identity despite economic mistreatment, discrimination, and prejudices. Kassa's underpinning experience constitutes an embryonic dynamic potential between the future of Algeria and France as they are tied with past wars and conflicts.

In the Shades of War: Exile's Chronicles in *La Seine Était Rouge* by Leila Sebbar

The young immigrants, a well-to-do francophone class of students, are immediately implanted mainly in France for professional reasons. One example is the writer Sebbar, who spent almost all her life in Paris. Although she lives in exile in France and writes about immigrants from many parts of the world, she says in *Lettres Parisiennes*: *Autopsie de l'Exil*:

> *I am not an immigrant, nor a child of immigration [...] I am not a North African writer of French expression [...] From now on, I know I must be able to say, declare, affirm without ambiguity, without guilt -while simultaneously reserving time to develop the subtleties of the particular position that is mine- I am French, a French writer born of a French mother and an Algerian father [...], and the subjects of my books are not my identity.* (Sebbar & Huston 1986, 125-126)

Her example could be seen as the highest version of acculturation and assimilation. She rejects simplistic classification and obliterates fixed ideas about her identity; therefore, her exile narrative appeals to many readers. In her introduction to this book, *The Seine Was Red*, Mildred

Mortimer, the translator of the novel to English, declares an important theme in post-colonial writings:

> *Since colonial administrations would, at times, misrepresent colonial history to justify an imperial project, it is not surprising that postcolonial writers, following the path taken by historians, have assumed the task of rewriting their nation's colonial history. Hence, the theme of the hidden history—the colonial cover-up—has become increasingly important in postcolonial literature."* (2008)

She starts the manuscript by dedicating *La Seine Était Rouge* to the Algerian victims in 1961 in Paris. From the very beginning, the narrative seems to be closely linked with the Algerian War of Independence. She immediately opens the first chapter with Amel's interactions with her mother and Lalla, her grandmother, knowing that there is a skeleton in the cupboard, as both the mother and the grandmother are using Arabic to keep the secret from Amel, who is so frustrated with this situation that hides a hurtful experience related to the Algerian War of Liberation. Amel says: "The Seine smelled bad" (Our translation) (Sebbar 2003, 48)[3]. She continues her investigation and learns about the tragic event. She declares:

> *The statue was the meeting point for the Algerians on October 17, 1961. Who defended them when the cops charged at the Neuilly Bridge? You heard the stories, the panic, the trampled bodies, the injured, the dead […]* (Our translation) (Sebbar 2003, 43)[4]

A peaceful demonstration of Algerians for their freedom and rights ended in their massacre by the French police. The passage above designates violence and the chaos of that night. One more time, the Algerian War manifests itself in the fate and life of the immigrants who wanted to defend their land and people by manifesting in the colonizer's country. The book grabs the tension between openness and concealment, revealing the complexity of the characters' relationships and their shared history of exile. Amel, for example, is a second-generation immigrant who seeks to unveil

[3] Our translation : « elle sentait mauvais la Seine ».
[4] Our translation : « La statue a été le point de rendez-vous des Algériens le 17 Octobre 1961. Qui les a défendus quand les flics ont chargé au pont de Neuilly ? Tu les as entendus les récits, la panique, les corps piétinés, les blessés, les morts […] ».

the truth about her family's past, which the older generation has well concealed.

The narrative delves into themes such as memory, historical interpretation, the enduring repercussions of the Algerian War on individuals, and the examination of exile and resistance. The Seine River is at the core of this exploration, symbolically representing a physical and emotional divide between the exiled protagonists and their homeland. This symbolism is further accentuated by the tragic events of October 17, 1961, which unfolded along the Seine, shedding light on the harshness and brutality experienced by those living in exile. The novel, *The Seine Was Red*, thus illustrates how the War of Independence significantly shapes the storyline and acts as a pivotal force in the emergence of such literary works. Through the interconnected exploration of these themes and symbols, the narrative vividly captures the enduring impact of the Algerian War on individual and collective recollection.

Lost Voices: Intellectual Exile Amidst the Algerian Black Decade in *Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord* by Waciny Laredj

The Black Decade has been another tumultuous historical period of Algerian exile. After the 1992 elections were cancelled, a terrifying civil war broke out, and many intellectuals felt the threat and chose exile as an escape. The beginning of this civil war was a series of protests against the government for the prevalent poverty known as the "bread riots". All people suffered from the unprecedented violence of what was thought to be "the Islamists". Both rural and urban areas were disturbed. Algeria confronted the killing of families and the murder of numerous intellectuals, journalists, and artists. Exile to Europe started at this point, mainly to France. Algeria has never witnessed such a catastrophic displacement of Algerian scholars. Intelligence was targeted by, presumably, FIS (Islamic Salvation Front). Yacine, in *Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord*[5], is an

[5] Laredj wrote this book in Arabic. He writes in both languages Arabic and French. He does not repress any of them, as repression is often a source of frustration and violence. His work is an anthology of cultures. The Arabisation Law has never succeeded in deleting a century of French presence. The number of writers who write in this language proves that it is mainly for a francophone audience. It is impossible to remove a language by enacting a law. Laredj dwells on two distinguished cultural traditions, but in this book, he has chosen Arabic as the only viable alternative to protest. The black decade was a horrible time for intellectuals and public figures.

intellectual who left a hostile war to Amsterdam, not France, in this story. He is in a kind of madness, confusion, and unstable identity. He confesses: "Now the situation has changed. Murderers have become prophets, and people like me, national remnants" (Our translation) (Laredj 2010, 131)[6].

Waciny Laredj's book, *Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord*, represents this wave of Algerian immigration to Amsterdam during the Algerian Civil War from 1988 to 1991. Meanwhile, Laredj describes Amsterdam beautifully. He says:

> *The city is small, as you know, and its port is basic but full of life. Sometimes, I wonder if it was not Brel's song that led me to choose this accommodation. I was first asked to see the old port when I arrived in this city. I was not disappointed, even if it did not match the image I had of it. Vastness and smallness are within us and not always in things outside us. What seems immense to you today, exile, as the days go by, will make it narrower to you than the eye of a needle. You never get used to exile, it is true, but time and regret reduce the childish wonder of the beginning, and things lose their glow, becoming banal.* (Our translation) (Laredj 2010, 171)

Yacine, the protagonist, drops on the sensitive aspect of exile, admitting that one never gets used to it. He says: "Nothing can make exile acceptable to us" (Our translation) (Laredj 2010, 209). However, the power of time passing gradually reduces the initial sense of wonder and turns things into more routine or mundane aspects of life. Perceptions and expectations change in reality; the vastness and smallness of the city are subjective and so much extending on the experience of exile, highlighting that what may seem vast and overwhelming at the beginning can progressively diminish with time.

The author metaphorically describes the power of exile in shaping people through Yacine. He says: "As for us, we have little by little become a flexible and malleable matter in the palm of exile, a modelling clay

Some authors used pseudonyms, such as Feriel Assima. Many writers preferred publishing in France to give a voice to the marginalised people through political events.

[6] Our translation : « Maintenant la situation a changé. Les assassins sont devenus des prophètes, et les gens comme moi, des excédentaires nationaux ».

without any form" (Laredj 2010, 152)[7]. The phrase "little by little" evokes a slow process, indicating changes undergone by the displaced. Becoming "flexible and malleable matter" in the palm of exile bears a sense of weakness and compliance. Exile is a shaping force for Yacine, who is paradoxically a sculptor of moulding clay and knows so well how "modelling clay without any form" can be stressful, metaphorically highlighting a lack of solid identity and complete uncertainty when one is being displaced from one's native land. It is a whole process of reshaping and rebuilding.

Indeed, Yacine is now between the ghosts of the past and the ghosts of Van Gogh. He preferred another country as a haven, but a haven that leads to a special kind of suicide (Laredj 2010, 87). He makes so many times the link between his exile and death. He says: "I remember the words of Mimoun: We are like this. We only leave our homeland to marry a grave in exile" (Our translation) (Laredj 2010, 110). This idea is emphasised again and again in the story, such as in the moment when Hanin reminds him of his birthday; he immediately thinks of that day when he committed suicide in his way and compares himself to the national samurai who was missed by terrorism and instead of the knife that cut his stomach, he took a pistol aimed at his temple and fired the first and last shot of his life. He did not have the courage but took advantage of having his grave outside the country where he was born (Laredj 2010, 79).

We understand the densities of exile through these poignant internal conflicts. The protagonist is wrestling with the torments of his survival on the day of his birthday. This day is ironically manifested through the burdens of exile and by laying his tomb outside the native country. The physical shift is psychologically and emotionally intense, with an everchanging identity, belonging, and the perception of 'home'. The story discursively weaves the complications of exile and memory through a particular journey marked, like Kassa, by resilience, anguish, and the evocative echoes of the birthplace. Yacine says: "Accepting exile means accepting a difficult apprenticeship that is so long that it continues when age surprises us" (Laredj 2010, 173). He is pointing out that exile kills

[7] Our translation : « Quant à nous, nous sommes peu à peu devenus une matière souple et malléable dans la paume de l'exil, une pâte à modeler sans forme aucune ».

people. He says: "he who does not die mad, it is exile or illness that kills him" (Our translation) (Laredj 2010, 154). Like Kassa, he also insisted on this unbearable life of alienation. He writes: "This land where we arrived poor, it seems that we are going to leave it as strangers" (Our translation) (Laredj 2010, 207). Exile is always difficult and painful; to endure it, Yacine chooses to develop courage and forgetfulness (Laredj 2010, 174) to the point that he forgets his birth date and only remembers the dates of death of his friends, the dates of their suicide, or their assassination (Laredj 2010, 78).

In this poignant book, Laredj's protagonist shows the enduring impact of exile on people. The emphasis on sad dates, such as death, suicide, or murder of families and friends, denotes profound, sensitive scars endured by forced exiled people. The bulk of heart-breaking losses inhabit their memories. In *Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord*, Laredj presents a grim portrayal of the suffering and sacrifice endured by a displaced community due to war and political upheaval. In a chapter entitled *"Le Cantique de l'Evangile Ouvert"*, Waciny Laredj provides a fitting title that translates to *"The Song of the Open Gospel"*, creating a nuanced and intricate relationship between various themes. By intertwining historical recollection, spirituality, and divine revelation, Laredj prompts readers to acknowledge and honour past struggles. Through this title, the author sheds light on the brutal events of 1957, condemns the hypocritical rationalisations for violence, and urges individuals to engage in introspection and take ethical action. This account is also traced back to the Algerian War of Independence, where political events intertwined and impacted the socio-economic conditions, compelling individuals to abandon their homeland and seek refuge elsewhere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the confrontation between the works of Kassa Houari, Leïla Sebbar, and Wassiny Laredj, provides a multi-layered investigation of the difficulties faced by the Algerian immigrants in France and Amsterdam. In *Confessions d'un Immigré*, Kassa displays the struggles of Algerian immigrant employees, stressing the challenges of integration in a foreign society. Leïla Sebbar's *La Seine Était Rouge* adds another layer to the discourse, seizing the kernel of a historical tragic event through second

generation immigrants seeking the truth about a massive murder of Algerians in 1961. Lastly, Wassiny Laredj, in *Les Balcons de la Mer du Nord*, investigates the forced displacement in an unfamiliar country like Amsterdam during the Black Decennium.

Despite the unique perspectives presented by each author, a recurring theme emerges: the intricate challenges experienced by Algerian immigrants as they navigate the processes of assimilation and acceptance in a foreign land. Additionally, a common motif is the impact of war, whether it be the War of Liberation or the Civil War, on individuals' lives, prompting them to seek refuge in other countries. The difficulties of displacement and the preservation of memories are often deeply intertwined with individuals' struggles stemming from war, colonisation, and various socio-political and economic disruptions. In summary, these literary works, characterised by their moving narratives, serve to cultivate empathy, facilitate dialogue, promote inclusivity, and preserve memory.

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