دراسات فنية
مخبر الفنون والدراسات الثقافية
جامعة أبو بكر بلقايد تلمسان
Algerian Scientific Journal Platform

Volume11/ N°: 01 (2024) p 223-231

Linguistic Exile, Shattered Identity and Fragmented Memory in Leila Sebbar's Autobiographical Narratives Lettres Parisiènnes and Je Ne Parle Pas La Langue De Mon Père

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Received: 05 /06/ 2023 Accepted: 01/05/2024

Abstract

The present paper aims to explore the issue of identity in Franco-Algerian postcolonial literature where most of its writers faced the inability to use Arabic and they chose the French language as the main tongue of their literary writings. Among these writers, Leila Sebbar appeared as a Franco-Algerian novelist, of a French mother and an Algerian father who was the main reason for her inability to speak Arabic and thus, her non-belonging to her paternal world. In this context, this study relies on an interdisciplinary approach which combines both the historical and the cultural approaches to highlight how did the author's historical and cultural backgrounds affected her writings. She, hence, published many novels including two masterpieces Lettres Parisiènnes and Je Ne Parle Pas La Langue De Mon Père where she depicted her broken identity derived from two different worlds, an Oriental parental one and an Occidental maternal one.

Article info

Received
05/06/2023
Accepted
01/05/2024
Publishing
19/12/2024

Keyword:
- *Arabic Language*
- *Cultural Assimilation*
- *Exile*
- *Identity*
- *Memory*

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1. *Introduction*

Leila Sebbar is a Franco-Algerian novelist who was born in Aflou, Algeria in 1941; to an Algerian father and a French mother, both of them were French teachers. At eighteen years old, Sebbar left Algeria for Paris to pursue her studies. Then, she started teaching at high school and collaborating in different journals from 1973 to 1976. She published, later, many essays, novels and narratives. Most of her writings were conceived as a link to her paternal world. She, ergo, used fiction to express her painful feelings for her original land, and the Arabic language, which her father had banned her from learning. Hence, her fictional world makes her feel closer to her paternal world. Besides, being a fruit of a mixed marriage, Leila Sebbar became a victim who owns a complex personality that has been developed from two different cultures, languages, and religions. (Jagne and Parekh, 1998)

Two autobiographical narratives have been selected for this study: *Lettres Parisiènnes: Histoires d'Exil (1999)* and *Je Ne Parle Pas La Langue De Mon Père* (2003) for the sake of exploring the issue of a shattered and a broken identity that had been suffered by the novelist Leila Sebbar regarding her paternal world and her critical condition of being exiled from it. Accordingly, this research paper relies on an interdisciplinary approach that combines both the historical and cultural approaches, to highlight how the author's historical and cultural backgrounds affect her writings as well as to examine all the significant themes that have been tackled by Leila Sebbar including the problems of the Arabic language, identity, community belonging, exile, memory, and the French cultural assimilation.

Lettres Parisiènnes represents all the letters that have been recorded by Leila Sebbar and the Franco-Canadian writer Nancy Huston which include all their childhood memories in their native lands and how they feel like strangers when they visit them. Both of them have been in exile and this was the main vector that led to evoke their agonizing feelings of nostalgia and homesickness. Moreover, after being exiled from her ancestral land, Leila Sebbar was stuck in a maze status, confused and mystified between two distinct cultures. In this context, Mildred Mortimer once acknowledged in the English translation of Sebbar's *Le Silence des Rives*, that "most of great literature of Western culture comes from exiles, refugees or immigrants whose profound sense of loss marks their achievements". (Mortimer, 2000, p.06) Hence, all kinds of expatriating from the original land make her feel lost and broken.

Sebbar found herself torn between two different languages, the French language as the language of her mother, and the one chosen by her father and the Arabic language, as the one occulted by her father though it was his mother tongue. She attempted to reveal this missing point throughout all her writings and mainly throughout her masterpiece *Je Ne Parle Pas La Langue De Mon Père* which echoes all her tormenting feelings of being exiled from her original land and language as well.

2. *The Arabic Language : A Forbidden Tongue in Sebbar's Je Ne Parle Pas La Langue De Mon Père*

Leila Sebbar claims her monolingualism by underlying the problem of the Arabic language as a major theme of her narrative. From this perspective, she has been raised exclusively in French by her parents who used to be French teachers, and an Algerian father who spoke French fluently with his French wife. He, thus, considered the French language as the language of love and the main tongue of communication at home, "I was born in a house where the French language prevails. The Arabic language has neither a place at home nor at school. My father preserves his mother's language in an obscure land, forbidden". [1] (translated by the author) Hence, Sebbar feels a sense of loss because she was unable to learn this foreign language.

Accordingly, Leila Sebbar felt an imposed absence of the Algerian Arabic language even in her original paternal land mainly during the colonial era when the used and taught language at schools was only the French one and Arabic was only learned in Coranic mosques or used outside. At the same time, she acknowledged: "Nevertheless, all around the school, it was Arabic. The walls were not so thick". [2] (translated by the author) For Sebbar, the Arabic language was not accessible though it was close to her.

In addition, the Arabic language was only heard when her father used to address the two maids Aicha and Fatima who used to work at their house. So, Sebbar referred to this Arabic language as only the maids' language. Further, within her novel, she reveals her fervent longing to the Arabic language: "I want to hear it, in the randomness of my wanderings, hear the voice of the beloved stranger, the voice of the land and of my father's body that I write in my mother's language".[3] (Translated by the author) Hence, Sebbar considers the Arabic language as the beloved foreigner that she wants to hear its sound, she, then, refers to this tongue as the voice of her paternal land and body which had been highlighted throughout her mother tongue.

According to her, if the French language represents her spoken language and the language of her writings, the Arabic one remains the language of her thoughts, of her feelings, and of the Algerian land from which she has been exiled. This is why she considered the Arabic language as a forbidden one, she once announced: "we can lose something that we never had, but that was existing". [4] (Translated by the author) Hence, Sebbar was aware and felt sorrowful about her lack of knowledge about the Arabic language and the silence of her father which was the main reason that pushes her to exile from

[1] "Je suis née dans une maison où la langue de France est la langue. La langue Arabe n'a pas droit de maison ni d'école. Mon père garde la langue de sa mère dans une terre obscure, interdite". (Sebbar, 2005, p. 135)

[2] "Pourtant tout autour de l'école c'était l'arabe. Les murs n'étaient pas si épais". (Sebbar, 2003, p. 42)

[3] "Je veux l'entendre, au hasard de mes pérégrinations. Entendre la voix de l'étranger bien aimé, la voix de la terre et du corps de mon père que j'écris dans la langue de ma mère." (Sebbar, 2003, p. 125)

[4] "On peut perdre quelque chose que l'on n'a jamais eu, mais qui était là." (Sebbar, 2003, p. 42)

his mother tongue and makes it as an absent, abandoned or even a prohibited one as well as it alienated her from her paternal people.

3. *The Crises of Identity and Cultural Assimilation in Sebbar's Autobiographical Narratives*

The absence of the Arabic language has never prevented Leila Sebbar to get back to her original land and past where the parental figure carries a heavy weight. In this respect, she employs fiction as a starting departure from which she can unveil all the painful feelings that she was experiencing in her motherland and the fervent longing that was haunting all her thoughts. She used her French mother tongue as a powerful tool of expression to reveal all the intricacies that she was living away from her paternal world. According to Farid Laroussi, "the use of the French language does not mark a historical movement, but a direct representation of Algerian society." (Laroussi, 1999, p. 55) Hence, the French language can be conceived, for Sebbar, as a resistance and a representation of postcolonial Algeria with multicultural realities.

The use of the French language throughout her writings reveals, too, a sign of identity. She explained this:

> I am French, a French writer of a French mother and an Algerian father, and the subjects of my books are not my identity; they are the sign, the symbols of my history of crossing, of a mixed-race person obsessed by the surrealist encounter of the other and of the same, by the unnatural and lyrical crossing of the land and the city, of rational science and of emotional inspiration, of tradition and of modernity, of the Orient and of the Occident.[5] (Translated by the author)

These words reveal that the subjects of Sebbar's books do not represent her identity but rather a sign of her identity as a "métisse", obsessed with the crossing of two distinct worlds. Hence, this crossing, too, depicts hybridity as a major aspect of postcolonial literature. Ashkroft et al, affirmed this point: "Hybridity […] is the primary characteristic of all postcolonial texts whatever their source". (Ashkroft et al, 2002, p. 182) Therefore, being a "métisse" one who belongs to two different worlds, Sebbar was owning, too, a complex identity derived from hybrid cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

This complex identity has been derived, too, from her French monolingualism due to her inability to speak Arabic. In this context, this linguistic exile from which Sebbar suffers favors the loss of identity which remains a difficult quest to achieve. In this respect, she tries within her novel to dig into her past that her father kept silent, to search for her identity, her origins, for her Arab world, for her native land Algeria in which she feels herself stranger, for her silenced Arabic language, as well as for her country's history and traditions as a whole.

[5] Je suis Française, écrivain Français de mère Française et Père Algérien […] Et les sujets de mes livres ne sont pas mon identité, ils sont le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée, de métisse obsédée par la rencontre surréaliste de l'Autre et du Même, par le croisement contre nature et lyrique de la terre et de la ville, de la science et de la chair, de la tradition et de la modernité, de l'Orient et de l'Occident. (Huston and Sebbar, 1999, p. 134)

After the death of Sebbar's father in 1997, Sebbar wrote this novel as a letter to her father who left all her questions unanswered. Throughout this autobiographical novel, she creates a dialogue between the daughter and her father who did not answer her calls and questions. For the lack of real answers and for the lack of plausible explanations, Sebbar used imagination to complete the story of a man whom she loves and usually used to respect. Thus, she invents a parallel life to avoid all feelings of loneliness and loss.

Further, language is conceived as an aspect innately connected to an individual's identity and it is often used as a medium to portray this individual's culture. According to this point, being a daughter of a French mother, Sebbar described her mother's world as a fully assimilated one:

> We must eat sitting on cushions around a low table. We must eat everything that is served, show respect, the old aunts talk to us with unknown dishes, meticulously prepared, homemade bread, honey and almond cookies prepared for us, the children of the favorite brother, [...] We eat, and the old sisters watch us without eating, amazed by our too short skirts, Scottish ribbons in our hair, of our white canvas sandals so white, of our chatter in the unknown language, [...] They pronounce distorting French names of my brother and sisters except the father's eldest favorite daughter bears the beautiful Arabic name of Leïla.[6] (Translated by the author)

This quotation depicts Sebbar's assimilation into the French culture through different aspects such as the foreign language used by her sisters and mother, and the French names given to her sisters and brother except Leila whose father named her. This quotation portrays, too, the mother's different way of dressing her daughters and her particular way of combing their hair. Besides, this quotation unveils the nostalgia that Sebbar missed throughout her identification of "the old aunts" as "the sisters of my father" who used to cherish them with traditional homemade cookies. Therefore, Sebbar could not find happiness except through her fictional world which echoed her missed memories about her native land Algeria.

4. *The Themes of Exile and Memory in Sebbar's Two Autobiographical Narratives*

Exile is considered a fundamental aspect in Sebbar's both narratives since it reveals the imposed separation that Sebbar experienced from her paternal world to the maternal one. In this respect, this remoteness from her native country makes Sebbar uncomfortable to live through two different languages and cultures which are obviously conceived as symbols of struggle. In addition, her inability to speak Arabic makes her live in a linguistic exile. In this context, the notion of exile reveals a

[6] Il faut manger assis sur des coussins autour d'une table basse, il faut manger tout ce qui est servi, faire honneur, les vieilles tantes nous parlent avec des plats inconnus longuement cuisinés, du pain cuit à la maison, des gâteaux au miel et aux amandes pour nous, les enfants du frère préféré, (…) nous mangeons, et les vieilles sœurs nous regardent sans manger, attendries, étonnées de nos jupes trop courtes, des rubans écossais dans nos cheveux, de nos sandales de toile blanche, si blanche, de nos bavardages dans la langue inconnue, (…) Elles prononcent en les déformant les prénoms français de mon frère et de mes sœurs seule l'aînée du père, parce qu'il l'aimait tant, porte ce beau prénom Arabe de Leïla. (Sebbar, 2007, p. 36)

conviction strongly developed by the novelist who had been mystified in a chaotic world between her quest for identity and her original paternal language. As a result, the Arabic language has been transformed into a symbol of exile and of a lost memory.

Sebbar was the fruit of two exiles, one geographical exile of the mother who is a French one, and one exile of the father which had been imposed by himself whether about land, language, or culture. In this vein, for Sebbar, Algeria remains a strange land and the Arabic language a forbidden tongue, both of them remain absent since her father retains them obscure by ceding a place to another language that had conquered all the space; the French language which seduced him and pushed him to live in exile from his mother tongue and native land.

Sebbar thought that exile provokes her misunderstanding, aggression and deception. She acknowledged: "exile is the misunderstanding". [7] (Translated by the author) She regards herself as unassimilated, neither to the French culture nor to the Algerian one. In this vein, she claimed:

> Daughter of a father in exile within the culture of the other, of the colonizer, far from his family away from religion and customs, daughter of a mother in geographical and cultural exile, [...] I believe, I inherited, from this dual parental exile, a disposition in exile". [8] (Translated by the author)

Hence, when writing about exile, Sebbar evokes a defunct and a blurred identity. She affirmed: "my blurred identity is often thrown back in my face, not clear, not distinct".[9] (Translated by the author)

She, then, added: "If I speak of exile, I also speak about cultural cross: It is at this point of junction and disjunction where I am, where I live, where I write". [10] (Translated by the author) She thus, demonstrated her identity as a complex one which had been shaken by a cultural clash that was derived from two different worlds, a French one and an Algerian one. Hence, throughout the crossing of two cultures, Sebbar became able to define herself and to reach inspiration and creation which led her to overcome all her haunted thoughts. This cultural conflict led to a linguistic conflict too. Both of these conflicts have been raised within Sebbar's creative universe throughout the intersection of the Franco-Algerian origins that have been shaped by the upheavals of the war. In this regard, this later influenced Sebbar's thoughts and pushed her to write for a unique purpose "to sew, through words, the tear between France and Algeria. To suture what has been separated by history and politics". [11] (Translated by the author) She, thus, refers figuratively to exile by using the word "déchirure" to mean tear. Hence, Sebbar opted for the fictional world which opens her, doors to freedom as a way to feel herself closer

[7] "l'exil, c'est le mal entendu". (Huston and Sebbar, 1999, p. 125)

[8] "Fille d'un père en exil dans la culture de l'autre, du colonisateur, loin de sa famille, en rupture de religion et de coutumes, fille d'une mère en exil géographique et culturel […] J'ai hérité, Je crois, de ce double exile parental, une disposition à l'exil." (Huston and Sebbar, 1999, p. 51)

[9] "souvent m'est renvoyée au visage mon identité floue, pas claire, pas nette, …". (Huston and Sebbar, 1999, p. 124)

[10] "si je parle d'exil, Je parle aussi de croisement culturel : c'est à ce point de jonction et disjonction où je suis que je vis, que j'écris." (Huston and Sebbar, 1999, p. 134)

[11] "recoudre, par les mots, la déchirure entre la France et l'Algérie pour suturer ce qui a été séparé par l'histoire et la politique". (Huston and Sebbar, 1999, p. 137)

to her Algerian land and to avoid exile that was alienating her from her original land. She stressed this idea by declaring: "and for me, fiction reveals the suture that hides the wound".[12] (Translated by the author) She, ergo, echoed throughout her fiction the muffled voices of love and violence between the north and the south of the Mediterranean, between the Occident and the Orient, Between France and Algeria.

The novel shadows a meditation on the roots of the past that Sebbar's father never wanted to stir; he kept some secrets about the violence which occurred during a troubled period when Algeria was a French colony. In this vein, among the main reasons which led Sebbar's family to leave Algeria for France was the father who was an instructor of the French language. During the colonial era, a French organization of the secret army; put all elites on the blacklist and Sebbar's father belonged to this list. In order to avoid this nightmarish reality, he left Algeria with his family to France. Leila was not aware of this secret, many years later, she discovered it. Henceforth, this secret was considered as a barrier which refers to her father's unanswered questions about the past since he did not want to break his daughter's heart. Furthermore, the theme of memory is expanded throughout both narratives, mainly through Sebbar's childhood and adolescence memories, authentic scenes of daily life experienced by her neighbors in Algeria during the colonial era before her departure to France. In this vein, she used fiction as a medium that empowers her to travel across the spaces of her childhood scenes at Henaya, Tlemcen, overwhelmed by the oral traditions shared between neighbors as the narrated anecdotes. Hence, her fictional world drove her to reconstruct a fragmented memory. She even used real names for her main characters mainly Aicha and Fatima since she was unable to write her stories by designating for them other names.

Moreover, by throwing a glance at these childish landscapes that Sebbar highlighted within her narrative, she is aware of being in exile from her Algerian land but there is another exile that is deeply enfeebling her, the Arabic language that she had never spoken and could never speak. She, thus, considers it as "the beloved stranger".[13] (Translated by the author) For her, the Arabic language was only the sounds, music, and melody. But at the same time, she portrays it as confrontational, mainly through the Arabic insults hurled by the boys in her childhood neighborhood. She described it: "my father's language has been transformed into a language of aggression, the language of cruelty from those boys in front of three defenseless little girls. They were like little savages". [14] (Translated by the author) Sebbar, thus, considered the Arabic language as aggressive too. Throughout her fictional world, Sebbar found all what she was questioning her father about, mainly with the women behind him, her aunts, and the two maid sisters Aicha and Fatima who used to live in the ancestral land and who tried to share their Algerian traditions. She, thus, portrayed all Algerian female characters as

[12] "Et pour moi, la fiction, c'est la suture qui masque la blessure." (Huston and Sebbar, 1999, p. 138)
[13] "l'étranger bien aimé" (Sebbar, 2003, p. 121)
[14] "la langue de mon père devient une langue de l'aggression. La langue de la cruauté de ces garçons en face de trois petites filles désarmées. C'était de petits sauvages." (Sebbar, 2003, p. 42)

representatives of Algerian indigenous culture while male characters were depicted to mirror the Franco-Algerian historical context.

5. *CONCLUSION*

Leila Sebbar could not cease through all her writings to express her painful suffering in relation to her father's muted tongue. For her, the absence of the Arabic language represents the main reason for a broken identity, an uprooted identity, and an identity assimilated totally by European culture. Therefore, Sebbar portrayed within her two narratives the issue of this hybrid identity that had been once caught between two worlds, Occidental and an Oriental one, a present and an abandoned one, or even a forbidden one where the voice was somehow reduced to silence. Besides, her permanent questioning led her to use fiction as a bridge that links her innate sorrowful feelings to her childish authentic scenes that she was missing at her paternal land. She, thus, employs her rebellious potential of the French language in order to express intensely her retained emotions and deeply her meditation on her nostalgic memories and to reveal the strong excruciating feelings that she holds for the Arabic language whose father forbade its learning.

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