

The Mother Tongue of Leïla Sebbar

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Ce qui m'a toujours impressionnée chez toi, c'est que tu parviennes à parler et à écrire le français *comme* une langue étrangère.

What has always impressed me about you, is that you succeed in speaking and writing in French *as though* it were a foreign language. (Nancy Huston, *Lettres parisiennes*)¹

In introducing Maghrebian literature written in French, it is customary to assert that Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian writers, whose mother tongue is Arabic or Berber, have estranged themselves from their homeland and their people by writing in French.² Leïla Sebbar (b. 1941), who grew up in rural Algeria near Tlemcen, continually writes about being alienated because she uses the language of the French colonizer. But unlike other Maghrebian authors who write in French (e.g. Driss Chraïbi, Mohammed Dib, Assia Djebar, Abdelkébir Khatibi, Kateb Yacine), that language is Sebbar's mother tongue. She is the daughter of a French mother and an Algerian (Arab) father: a *croisée*, *métisse*, or *coupée*, as Sebbar likes to refer to herself.³

For Sebbar, the French language—or mother tongue—has always connoted exile. It is above all the language that conveys the torturous relationship between France and Algeria personified by Sebbar's parents. French is the language that her mother and father used with each other; it is the language that they taught or inculcated on Algerian schoolchildren growing up in French Algeria. Her mother, originally from the Dordogne region of France, was in exile in colonial Algeria. Her father, who had met his wife in France, was exiled in his own country, where he was a teacher in the French colonial system. By agreeing to disseminate the language and culture of the colonizer, he further cut himself off from his own origins. Separated from the mainstream of Algerian, indigenous life, his friends were, for the most part, *évolués* like himself. In her *Lettres parisiennes* to Nancy Huston, Sebbar writes:

[J]'ai hérité, je crois, de ce double exil parental une disposition à l'exil, j'entends là, par *exil*, à la fois solitude et excentricité. Mes parents dans leur école de garçons indigènes, vivaient en privé, coupés de toutes les communautés.

I inherited, I think, from this double parental exile a disposition to exile; by *exile*, I mean at once solitude and eccentricity. My parents, in their school of indigenous boys, lived in private, cut off from all communities. (50)

Exiled from their respective communities, Sebbar's parents were able to co-exist within the protective space provided by the village school. Like Daru in Camus' "The Guest," they sought refuge from their common exile. From his exile within the colonial language in the enclosure of the village school, Sebbar's father protected her foreign mother. In cultivating the small plot of land that surrounded the school and house that did not belong to them, Sebbar's father strove to give his family a sense of roots. He succeeded in temporarily fostering the illusion that the "doors that closed upon [them] every evening did not imprison [them]" (LP 78). But the fantasy of freedom and serenity experienced behind the colonial barrier by Sebbar as a child was brutally dispelled by the reality of war. During the Algerian War for Independence, Sebbar's father was imprisoned by France in his native land. He experienced the ultimate exile, for which the exile in the French language and school, with a French wife and children born French in colonial Algeria, had merely paved the way (LP 78).

Sebbar recalls that when war broke out, her father and other Algerian schoolteachers began to speak more and more in Arabic in the colonial schoolhouse. As the repressed tongue surfaces in the colonial space, Sebbar must come to terms with an identity that she too has denied: "Mon père parle une autre langue, mon père est un autre. Est-ce que ma mère le sait?" "My father speaks another language, my father is an other. Does my mother know it?" ("Paroles" 39). Sebbar begins to realize that she can no longer hide behind "l'enceinte coloniale où le grillage sépare la langue de la France des langues indigènes" 'the colonial fence whose wire mesh separates the French language from the indigenous ones' (38). She must come to terms with her colonized identity.

Sebbar's relation to the mother tongue is double-edged: on the one hand, it protected her; on the other, it violated her. For Sebbar, everything was reassuring so long as she was her mother's daughter: the daughter, that is, of a metropolitan French woman. Her origins were where her mother had been born and had lived. Sebbar was thus "authenticated in her Frenchness" ("Si je parle" 1183). From early childhood, Sebbar was partial to metropolitan French, the language of her mother and the one that she and her father, as good colonial

subjects, had learned. Sebbar distinguishes between metropolitan French and the bastardized French of the Algerian colony, contaminated by Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Corsican, and Maltese. Like her father, who spoke French better than the *pieds-noirs* whose French was dialectal, Sebbar learned *the good language*, the one taught to the indigenous children who were forbidden to speak their native Arabic or Berber in the classroom ("La langue" 8).

But wartime compelled Sebbar to acknowledge the other identity: "Je savais que mon père était arabe. Je savais que moi aussi, j'étais arabe par mon père" 'I knew that my father was Arab. I knew that I too was Arab because of my father' ("Si je parle" 1185). Yet in setting off for France at the age of seventeen, it was as though Sebbar sought to repress her Algerian origins. For it was at the height of the war (1958) that she left her homeland to pursue her university studies in France. She would only return to Algeria for a brief visit in 1982. For a long time, Sebbar no longer heard the father tongue, which she had already avoided in colonial Algeria. She seemed perfectly at home in metropolitan France until the day her memory was revived. In writing her first fictional piece in French, Sebbar suddenly found herself in exile ("Paroles" 38-39).

For some time, Sebbar's university studies separated her from her homeland and her memory of it: "Je ne suis pas en exil. L'école me protège comme elle a protégé ma mère, autrefois" 'I'm not in exile. School protects me, the way it once did for my mother' ("Paroles" 39). From the Algerian schoolyard to the French university, Sebbar remained hostage to the French language. Like her parents, Sebbar found refuge in the language of books, diplomas, and instruction. Following in the footsteps of her parents, she became a French teacher. She teaches in a Paris *lycée*: "Moi, je m'appelle Leïla et j'enseigne la langue de ma mère à ceux qui la parlent parce qu'ils parlent la langue de leur mère. Et j'écris dans la langue de ma mère. Pour revenir à moi" 'My name is Leïla and I teach my mother tongue to those who speak it because they speak their mother's tongue. And I write in my mother tongue. To come back to myself' ("Si je parle" 1186-87). Sebbar contends that Leïla is the only word that escaped the mother tongue: "Le seul qui témoigne aujourd'hui que la langue de ma mère m'a fait violence, comme à mon père" 'The only one that bears witness today to the fact that my mother's language violated me, as it did my father' (1186). By continuing the family teaching mission in France, Sebbar, in effect, confronts her colonial past: "J'étais un bon colonisé. Comme mon père" 'I was a good colonial subject. Like my father' (1187). Sebbar must come to terms with an adulterated

identity: by teaching and writing in French, she makes it possible for repressed memory to leave its imprint on the mother tongue. She confronts the amnesia of French history (the past) and culture (the present).

Sebbar contends that her Algerian name led her to look for Adonis, the *bon nègre* in the old, forgotten books and card catalogues of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris:

Je ne savais pas qui je retrouvais dans l'esclave nègre Adonis. Dans tous les esclaves africains des anecdotes coloniales du XVIIIe siècle. Ils avaient appris à parler la langue du maître français et le maître leur a dit qu'ils étaient de bons nègres. Certains sont devenus des maîtres d'école, des maîtres de français.

I didn't know whom I was meeting up with again in the Negro slave Adonis, and in all the African slaves of the colonial literature of the eighteenth century. They had learned to speak the language of the French master and the master told them that they were good Negroes. Some even became schoolteachers, French teachers. ("Si je parle" 1186)

Sebbar was obviously encountering her own colonized identity. She finally had to acknowledge that the colonial school in which she had sought refuge as a child was merely "the extreme rationalization of colonization" ("Le mythe" 2352).

In 1974, Sebbar published "Le mythe du bon nègre ou l'idéologie coloniale dans la production romanesque du XVIIIe siècle" ("The Myth of the Good Negro or Colonial Ideology in the Novelistic Production of the Eighteenth Century") in *Les Temps modernes*. In tracing the image of the "Good Negro" in eighteenth-century French literature, Sebbar demonstrates how bourgeois liberalism merely served to justify slavery:

Le *bon nègre* sera donc celui qui, parce qu'il a un bon maître, saura mettre à profit l'enfermement culturel où le maître l'a contraint, pour intégrer les valeurs de l'Occident, sans jamais mettre en question les rapports de domination. L'esclavage aura été bénéfique, puisqu'il aura permis l'apprentissage de la culture de l'Europe.

The *good* Negro is thus the one who, because he has a good master, can profit from the cultural confinement, where the master has forced him to integrate the values of the West, without

ever questioning the relations of domination. Slavery is beneficial in that it allowed for the acquisition of European culture. (2351)

If the "good" master was able to impose the European cultural patrimony upon Africans, it was to the degree that slavery had annihilated the African heritage (2367). Sebbar's ideological analysis of eighteenth-century French fiction demonstrates how European culture attempted to make servitude acceptable. Culture thus became an underhanded form of violence.

In her ideological analysis of French literature, Sebbar is searching for her identity and for those cultural values she will subsequently transmit in her own writing: "Où me trouver? . . . Du côté des colonisés, de la force? Petite fille modèle, rebelle?" 'Where would I find myself? . . . On the side of the colonized or of force? Was I a model or rebellious little girl?' ("Si je parle" 1181). In describing her relationship to the father tongue, Sebbar speaks of regaining consciousness after fainting. Sebbar recovers not only her Algerian roots, but also her identity as a woman: "Je suis revenue à moi. De loin. Après un temps très long. Et j'ai différé longtemps ce moment-là. Tous ces détours. Pour savoir que je suis une femme? La petite fille, je l'avais oubliée, abandonnée à un coin de mon histoire" 'I regained consciousness. From far away. After a very long time. All these detours. To know that I am a woman? The little girl, I had forgotten her, abandoned in a corner of my (his)story' (1181). Sebbar acknowledges the importance of the feminist collectives associated with the literary journals *Sorcières* and *Cahiers du Griffon* in her evolution as a writer. In writing for these journals, she discovers not only her Algerian past, but also her colonized identity as a woman.

For Sebbar, childhood represents the threshold of the history of women. The subjects of her first two full-length works are young girls who have been forgotten, neglected, sequestered, battered, and sexually abused. *On tue les petites filles* (1978) and *Le Pédophile et la maman* (1980) are sociological, documentary texts. Sebbar x-rays the news item (*fait divers*) to incorporate it into history: "Tu sais mon attention maniaque au *fait divers*, et en particulier à tout ce qui touche à la violence du côté des enfants, des femmes et des Arabes . . ." 'You know the fanatical attention I pay to the news item, and, particularly, to anything concerning violence against children, women, Arabs . . .' (LP 32). What she comes upon in *On tue les petites filles* is "Une préhistoire: l'enfance des femmes, l'histoire de la petite fille comme Histoire des femmes" 'A prehistory: the childhood of women, the history of the little girl as the History of Women' (12). Sebbar maintains that the

incestuous father initiates his daughter in the sexual violence that women and children have historically endured. In both incest and prostitution, profit is derived from a body that no longer belongs to the young girl or the woman: "Son corps à elle, elle en a été détournée depuis si longtemps. . . . Sa sexualité . . . elle n'a jamais su qu'elle aurait pu avoir une sexualité qui ne soit pas tout entière orientée vers celle d'un homme . . ." 'Her body was abducted a long time ago. . . . Her sexuality . . . she never knew that she was entitled to a sexuality that was not entirely oriented toward a man's sexuality . . .' (13). The violence against young girls, who are never given the chance to discover their sexuality freely, is part of daily, family life. Sebbar argues that little girls should be entitled to domestic, civil, and political disobedience until they are no longer a body to be violated. Perhaps then women will no longer be violent to themselves and their daughters (15).

Sebbar's first full-length fictional text, *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square* (1981) draws on her first two sociological works. Sebbar casts a retrospective look at the childhood of second-generation North African runaways, particularly young girls. Only two of Sebbar's novels deal in depth with the relationships between first- and second-generation Algerian immigrants in France: *Fatima* and *Parle mon fils parle à ta mère* (1984). Her other five novels are devoted to second-generation immigrant youth. Sebbar's sociological works on the abuse of young girls and her two novels depicting the torturous relationships between immigrants and their children growing up in the ghettos of French cities are crucial for an understanding of her obsession with youth on the run in her later novels.

Fatima focuses on immigrant children, especially girls, who are beaten, tortured, and almost put to death for disobeying their parents—for daring to affirm, even if unconsciously, their sexuality. Their fathers, mothers, and older brothers vigilantly keep guard over bodies abducted for the sake of family and clan honor. As in the sociological texts, we are given detailed and graphic accounts of the beatings and torture endured by young girls who have carelessly shown their thighs while playing outdoors and by teenagers who have come home late in the evening. Sebbar provides us with a grim and painful account of the suffering that immigrant children endure day after day.

It is not only the reality depicted by this work that is disturbing, but also the form that it takes. In the sociological works, Sebbar transcribes the accounts of abuse narrated by the abusers themselves. In *Fatima*, the mothers are the narrators. Many physically abuse their

children (“ma fille, même si je me dispute avec elle, si je la frappe, c’est ma fille” ‘my daughter, even if I quarrel with her, beat her, she’s my daughter’ [73]); others, like Fatima, helplessly watch as their husbands beat their daughters, only to then put herbal ointments on their wounds. They ease the pain without seeking to eliminate it; they thus endorse these acts of violence. The horror of the conversations exchanged day after day by Fatima and the other Algerian women is only amplified by the semblance of normality and felicity that mothers chatting while daughters play habitually evokes.

The protagonist of Sebbar’s first fictional work is not Fatima, but her teenage daughter, Dalila, who is beaten by her father for coming home late. It is she who filters the mothers’ stories that she heard as a child. It is she who recounts her beatings to her younger siblings as she hides for a week in their room. During this period of confinement she listens for the last time to the voices in her home and recalls the stories she had listened to as a child in the square. Instead of playing with the other children in the park, Dalila would rest her head on Fatima’s lap and listen to the tales of the Algerian women. Why didn’t she want to run off and play like the other children, her mother and the other women ask? What was she looking for in these rambling conversations? These stories of abused children point the way to Dalila’s own beatings by her father as a teenager.

As she listens to her father hum Arab tunes every morning as he gets ready for work, Dalila wonders what compelled this man to beat her the night before: “Il m’a frappée et il chante” ‘He beat me and he’s singing’(14). The analogy between the pleasure he appears to take from inflicting pain is not unwarranted: “[E]lle savait aussi à quel point l’air de son père, dans le secret et le silence de la toilette, c’était sa violence contre elle, qui ne lui obéissait pas lorsqu’elle rentrait tard dans la nuit” ‘She also knew to what degree the air of her father, in the secrecy and silence of his toilette, was his violence against her, who didn’t obey him when she came home late at night’ (19). The father’s violence is a response to a disobedience with sexual overtones: Dalila defies her father’s hold on her sexuality, for she comes home late accompanied by boys. How different is the father’s behavior from a pedophile’s? In safeguarding his daughter’s virginity, he is sanctioning his own claims to her sexuality. Her defloration must result from a night of sanctioned rape, her body having been auctioned off to the highest bidder by her very own father.⁴ Dalila’s father reinforces his sexual claims over his daughter’s body through repeated physical abuse from which he appears to draw pleasure: he is not so remorseful that he cannot sing.

After eight days of hiding, Dalila decides to run away from home, just three days before the family holiday in Algeria: "Pendant huit jours, Dalila n'a pas quitté la chambre des petits. . . . Un matin, elle est partie pour ne plus revenir" 'For eight days, Dalila didn't leave the room of the little ones. . . . One morning, she left never to return again' (10). Dalila had always felt that her father's beatings would one day lead to suicide or flight. If suicide is rare in Muslim culture, running away from home is even more difficult for a woman, brought up in a traditional, Algerian family. Flight, as uprooting and exile, is a form of suicide for Dalila and other Algerian women. And yet during her eight days of confinement, Dalila comes to realize that she has no other form of recourse. Her understanding ultimately comes from the memory of the Algerian women's tales, that show her that both mothers and daughters are victims of an archaic and perverse patriarchal order further exasperated by exile in France. If the mothers can only sit around and talk, it is up to the children to break from this oppression, which inevitably implies running away from home. If Dalila stays home, she will only continue to relate her beatings to her siblings, and thus re-enact what she witnessed as a child. This is the cultural heritage she will transmit if she does not leave.

Although Sebbar clearly shows the desperation of immigrants and the consequences for their children, she does not attribute all the blame to life in France. Uprooted, living in squalor, rejected by the host culture, North African immigrants view the return to the homeland—dead or alive—as their ultimate goal. For immigrant children, the situation is not any easier. Although they appear to be closer to the host culture in that education in France inevitably results in a certain degree of assimilation, they are, nevertheless, victims of racism. And while a return to Algeria may seem like a solution, the great majority readily abandon this option, particularly the girls.

Dalila, in fact, runs away from home three days before her family sets off for Algeria, and the timing is not coincidental:

Elle n'irait pas en Algérie. Elle ne resterait pas chez son oncle pour connaître mieux son pays et la langue de son pays puisqu'elle était algérienne. Son père le lui répétait assez. Même si elle ne voulait pas être française, aller vivre là-bas, elle le refusait aussi. Elle irait plus tard.

She would not go to Algeria. She would not stay at her uncle's to better know her country and its language because she was Algerian. Her father repeated it enough. Even if she did not want to be

French, she also refused to go live over there. She would go later.
(109)

Algeria represents a reformatory for young girls who have tried to break away from the patriarchal order: "[S]i elle [Dalila] continuait, il [le père] ferait tout pour l'envoyer en Algérie. L'Algérie était donc un pays de rééducation?" 'If she [Dalila] continued, he [her father] would do everything to send her to Algeria. Algeria was thus a country of rehabilitation?' (108).

A *Beur* writer, Sakinna Boukhedenna, wrote a diary describing her exile as an Algerian immigrant woman in France and Algeria entitled *Journal "Nationalité: immigré(e)"* (1987).⁵ She notes that "Si la culture arabe, c'est de réduire la femme à l'état où elle est, je ne veux pas de cette arabité" 'If Arab culture means reducing woman to the state where she is, I don't want this Arabness' (100). Insofar as Algeria refuses to recognize her as an Algerian *and* a woman, Boukhedenna feels she will always be an immigrant, no matter where she goes: "Femme arabe, on m'a condamnée à perpétuité, car j'ai franchi le chemin de la liberté, on m'a répudiée, maintenant me voilà immigrée sur le chemin de l'exil, identité de femme non reconnue je cours le monde pour savoir d'où je viens" 'As an Arab woman, I have been sentenced for life, for I have crossed the path of freedom. I have been repudiated. I am now an immigrant on the path of exile, with the identity of a woman that is not recognized, I travel the world to know where I come from' (126).

These concluding words from Boukhedenna's diary recapitulate the plight of Sebbar's female protagonists. Dalila paves the way for all of Sebbar's subsequent fictional characters, who are for the most part runaways. The prototype for women on the run will be Shérazade, the protagonist of Sebbar's first true novel, *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982) and of two successive novels, *Les Carnets de Shérazade* (1985) and *Le Fou de Shérazade* (1991), which together form a trilogy. If the numerous stories of *Fatima* conclude in Dalila's flight from home, in Sebbar's subsequent fictional text Shérazade is already on the run. She lives with other squatters, other *croisés* youth, a number of whom are outlaws and terrorists, prostitutes and drug addicts. As squatters, they symbolize the takeover of France by its formerly colonized immigrants: "Do you think it's normal that they're colonizing us?" asks one of the racist French vigilanti in *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique* (236).

In his work, *L'Identité de la France*, historian Fernand Braudel states: "En tout cas, pour la première fois, je crois, sur un plan

national, l'immigration pose à la France une sorte de problème 'colonial,' cette fois planté à l'intérieur d'elle-même" "In any case, for the first time, I believe, on a *national* level, immigration is posing for France a sort of "colonial" problem, this time implanted from within" (II, 187). It is especially in the *Shérazade* trilogy and in *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique* (1984) that Sebbar explores the colonial legacy and its impact on the second generation implanted in France. What is *Beur* writing and culture if not the aftermath of colonialism? In *Lettres parisiennes*, Sebbar writes:

Les enfants de l'immigration feront violence à la France comme elle a fait violence à leurs pères ici et là-bas. Ils sont sans mémoire mais ils n'oublient pas, je crois. Ils auront, avec la France, une histoire d'amour mêlée de haine, perverse et souvent meurtrière. Ils ne sont pas vraiment de leur pays natal, la France, ni du pays natal de leur mère et de leur père. Ils sont dans des banlieues, ils ont un pays: les blocs et les tours de l'immigration, la pauvre jungle des villes. . . .

The children of immigration will violate France the way France violated their parents here and over there. Although they are without memory, they have not forgotten. They will have with regards to France a love story mixed with perverse and sometimes murderous hatred. They aren't really from their native land, France, nor from the one of their father and mother. They are in the periphery, they have a country: the concrete blocks and towers of immigration, the poor jungle of cities. . . . (59-60)

Although the socio-cultural reality Sebbar depicts is a harsh one, the tone of the *Shérazade* trilogy and of other novels such as *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique*, *Parle mon fils parle à ta mère*, and *J.H. cherche âme soeur* (1987) is very different from the one of her first three texts. Sebbar's tone is one of compassion, tenderness, and humor. She is sympathetic to the lot of these youth even when they're holding-up "Babylon" "Rappelez-vous. Ceci est une auto-réduction; ce n'est pas un hold-up" 'Remember. This is auto-reduction, not a holdup,' they exclaim as they rob a restaurant (S 67). As immigrant children at the periphery of French culture and society, whose parents were colonized by France, they are merely demanding what France stole from them. The colonial past of their parents has become their immigrant present. The illusion of a possible return to the homeland and the colonialist legacy reigning in French schools have stripped these

young men and women of any nationality: they are "condemned to be immigrants" (Boukhedenna 5). Shérazade asserts "Je ne suis pas d'ici [France], ni du pays de mon père, je suis du monde" 'I'm not from here [France], nor from my father's country, I belong to the world' (S 113).

Does this generation without a nationality have any future? (Boukhedenna 5). Can a community be formed from those who have no nationality or community to call their own? This appears to be the underlying wager of Sebbar's "immigrant" fiction. Fiction plays a special role for Sebbar:

[P]our moi, la fiction c'est la suture qui masque la blessure, l'écart, entre les deux rives. Je suis là, à la croisée, enfin sereine, à ma place, en somme, puisque je suis une croisée qui cherche une filiation et qui écrit dans une lignée, toujours la même, reliée à l'histoire, à la mémoire, à l'identité, à la tradition et à la transmission, je veux dire à la recherche d'une ascendance et d'une descendance, d'une place dans l'histoire d'une famille, d'une communauté, d'un peuple, au regard de l'Histoire et de l'univers. C'est dans la fiction que je me sens sujet libre (de père, de mère, de clan, de dogmes . . .) et forte de la charge de l'exil. C'est là et seulement là que je me rassemble corps et âme et que je fais le pont entre les deux rives, en amont et en aval. . . .

For me, fiction is the suture that conceals the wound, the distance between the two shores. I'm there, at the crossing, serene finally, in my place, in sum, since I'm a *croisée* looking for a filiation and writing in a line which is always the same, bound to history, memory, identity, tradition and transmission; I mean, in search of ancestry and lineage, a place in the history of a family, a community, a people, in the eyes of History and the universe. It's in fiction that I feel like a free subject (freed from the father, the mother, the clan, dogmas . . .) and strengthened by the load of exile. It's there and only there that I pull myself together body and soul and bridge the two shores, upstream and downstream. . . . (LP 138)

Given the strategic importance of fiction for Sebbar, what better protagonist for her novels than Shérazade? In giving us a minor on the run, who fends off lovers and potential rapists with her cunning and storytelling, who takes herself for a "Metropolitan Indian" with her P38 always close at hand, whose "Oriental" beauty is deliberately soiled by the author (the men who desire her because she is exotic are just as repulsed by her dirty appearance and her apparently aggressive na-

ture), Sebbar pokes fun at the hold that Orientalism has on both the West and the Arab world: "Je ne suis pas une odalisque" 'I'm not an Odalisque' (S 206), Shérázade retorts to her supposedly liberal-minded *pieds-noir* boyfriend, Julien Desrosiers, who is as obsessed by the Algerian War as he is by Orientalist art. Sebbar deliberately deforms or bastardizes the Scheherazade legend:

-Schéhérazade?

-Oui, dit Shérázade.

-Mais pourquoi le prononcez-vous à la française? Vous perdez la syllabe la plus suave, la plus orientale. . . .

-Scheherazade?

-Yes, said Shérázade.

-But why do you pronounce it the French way? You lose the most gracious and Oriental syllable. . . . (Fou 164)

The Beur protagonist can only pronounce it "the French way": not only because she is a child of immigration—caught between two cultures—but also because she is the offspring of colonialism. The Beur identity crisis is the colonial legacy.

In *Parle mon fils parle à ta mère*, *The Arabian Nights* have a special place in the childhood memories of the estranged son. His mother recited these Arabic tales to him as a child. One day, he came home excitedly from school; he had learned to read and could now recite *The Arabian Nights* in French to his mother: "Imma, Imma, regarde. . . Je vais te lire. . . C'est pour toi. . . Tu t'es assis comme un homme, tu as ouvert le livre à la première page du premier conte, de la première nuit. . . J'écoutais mais je ne comprenais rien" 'Ma, ma, look. . . I'll read to you. . . It's for you. . . You sat down like a man, you opened to page one of the first story, of the first night. . . I listened but I didn't understand anything' (35). In the journey from home to school and back, a radical conversion has taken place. Something vital ("the most gracious and Oriental syllable") got lost in the translation: the mother as the symbol of "the memory of the household and the children" (74). Henceforth, like Shérázade, the son can only identify with this loss and forge his identity somewhere in the no-man's land defined by the journey from home to school, from Algeria to France: that is, at neither pole, but in between—in the silence impressed on his mother's poignant monologue.

The son's understanding and appreciation of his Arab heritage must necessarily pass through the French (colonial) version, from which

the vital syllable (the mother as the guarantor of a people's memory) has been amputated. For both the colonial subject and the immigrant child, the French school represents the break with the home culture, the colonial enclosure that protected and yet separated the young Sebbar from the indigenous and revolutionary reality she subsequently put into motion in her writing. For the immigrant son as for the colonial subject, the dual (bastardized) identity is put into play by the journey between home and school. For Sebbar, home and school are one: the separation or loss is there from the onset and marks all her writing, "Rien, je le sais, ne préviendra jamais, n'abolira la rupture première, essentielle: mon père arabe, ma mère française . . ." 'Nothing, I know, will ever guard against or abolish the initial, essential break: my Arab father, my French mother . . .' (LP 185).

If as a Beur and thus an ex-colonial subject, Shérázade's understanding of herself can only come from a French translation of her Arab identity, she must scrutinize the translation for possible errors. Shérázade clearly symbolizes the distance between the first-and second-generation immigrants, and between the Arab world and the West. Sebbar deliberately deforms the Scheherazade myth in order to deconstruct Orientalism and the hold that it has not only on the European perception of the Arab Other, but also on the Beurs, who seek to define a new identity—one that necessarily implies re-writing the past and the hold of colonialism on them. In the France of tomorrow envisioned through her fictional representation, Sebbar emphasizes the importance of coming to terms with history and myth, heretofore governed by a Same/Other dialectic based on domination and oppression, if the new generation is to forge ethical values based on the respect of and mutual enrichment of differences.

At the end of *Shérázade*, the protagonist is supposedly on her way to Algeria in search of her lost heritage and repressed identity. At the beginning of the sequel, *Les Carnets de Shérázade*, we learn that Shérázade decided to get off the boat that was to take her from Marseille to Algiers and is instead hitchhiking her way around France. In *Lettres parisiennes*, Sebbar herself confesses that she is not a traveller and is only able to travel thanks to her fictional characters. She even admits that if she finally succeeded in returning to Algeria in 1982, it was thanks to her fictional creation, Shérázade (79), who, ironically, never did quite make the trip. Instead of going back to Algeria in search of her lost identity, a journey sparked and symbolized by Shérázade's discovery of Matisse's *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* (reproduced on the cover of the *Carnets* sequel), Shérázade travels throughout France, retracing, to a large degree, the "Beur March" against racism of

1983. As a voice for Sebbar, Shérázade acknowledges that her identity must be forged in France: among those on the run, even among the French rural poor of the hinterland, who are also the protagonists of the *Carnets* and *J.H. cherche âme soeur*.⁶

The critic Mildred Mortimer rightly emphasizes the female bonding reenacted by the symbolic *hammam* that takes place between Shérázade and the French farm girl, Francette, as they wash one another in the country stream. Mortimer emphasizes how the positive interaction of marginal, dislocated individuals and communities provides a very different vision of French society (200). When Shérázade gains entrance to a museum room closed to the art public and sees *Les Cribleuses de blé* next to *L'Esclave blanche*, the symbolic relationship between the Odalisque and the peasant girls assumes far-reaching implications (*Carnets* 128). The importance of this juxtaposition becomes even more charged in another *hammam* scene between Shérázade and Marie, a farm girl of Alsatian background. As eastern and rural France in general assume more and more importance in Sebbar's later novels, so does the intricate history of France and Algeria, Europe and the Arab world. As she traces a complex geographic itinerary, Sebbar reconstructs the history of France from both its *pièdes noirs* and Arab descendants, from that initial encounter bequeathed by her very own mother and father. At the same time, she views French literature and art as the coming together of different civilizations, inevitably marked by conquest and war.

In *Shérázade*, the protagonist flees from Julien, who nostalgically searches for his past in what he believes to be an emancipatory manner. He falls in love with Shérázade because she embodies what he is looking for: his own colonialist past from which he is attempting to free himself. Shérázade decides not to return to Algeria accompanied by Julien, who despite all good intentions is still a prisoner of the colonial legacy. Matisse's *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* prompts her to return to Algeria alone. She knows that she must emancipate herself from the colonial vision of Algerian women. After having left Julien, whom she loves, she spends the night alone at Beaubourg, clandestinely looking at Matisse's *Odalisque*, which deeply moves her. In fact, it motivates her to go to Algeria. She buys ten postcards of the painting, one of which is sent to her "exotic" friends, Zouzou and France, to whom she writes "C'est à cause d'elle que je m'en vais" "It's because of her that I'm off" (S 252). Unable to decipher the meaning of Shérázade's remark, Zouzou and France nonetheless pin the card next to other postcards they respectively received from Tunisia and Martinique: "[E]ntre palmiers et cocotiers, l'odalisque côtoyait les mers Caraïbes et les mers du Sud"

'Between palm and coconut trees, the Odalisque bordered on the Caribbean and southern seas'(252).

Pinned between other exotic visions, the Odalisque represents both Shérazade's need to break from the hold of Orientalism—the Western, colonial vision—and to come together with others who, like her, stand for the *métisse* generation—the France of tomorrow: "Ce que je crois, c'est que la France se métisse. . . . Les Français de souche seront dans quelques décennies, les nouvelles minorités . . ." 'I think France is crossbreeding itself. . . . In a few decades, those of "French stock" will be the new minorities . . .' (191). Such is the vision that Shérazade confers on Julien. It is the direct result of French colonialism and its wars, as the coming together of their children ardently reminds us, particularly in what is perhaps Sebbar's most finished *croisé* novel, *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique*, which she fittingly dedicates to her French-born sons, Sébastien and Ferdinand.

After pursuing the elusive Shérazade, Julien eventually meets up with her again:

- Et l'Algérie? dit Julien à Shérazade.
- Je suis à Lure dans l'est de la France, dit Shérazade, tu vois, c'est pas l'Algérie . . .
- Et qu'est-ce que tu fous là?
- Si tu arrives pour me fliquer . . .

- And Algeria? said Julien to Shérazade.
- I'm in Lure, in eastern France, replied Shérazade, as you can see, it's not Algeria . . .
- And what the hell are you doing there?
- If you've come to play the cop . . . (*Carnets* 175)

Like her inspirational character, Shérazade, Sebbar decided to remain in France, where she continues to be surrounded by "cops." Everytime she faces a new audience, she has to explain that she is not an immigrant, nor the daughter of immigrants, nor a Maghrebien writer of French expression, nor a real French descendant ("Française de souche"). If her mother tongue isn't Arabic, what gives her the right to write about Arabs? One day, in Lyon, a Moroccan student even urged her to change her name! She is as suspicious to Maghrebians as she is to the French (LP 125-26).

The French, however, cannot understand how someone with an Arab name can be a French (versus Francophone) writer: "[J]e suis Française, écrivain français de mère française et de père algérien . . ."

'I'm French, a French writer whose mother is French and whose father is Algerian ...' (126), she replies. After all, why is she any less "French" than Samuel Beckett, Julien Green, or Eugène Ionesco? Sebbar's identity is a function of exile, that is, of cultural intersections: "[C]'est à ces points de jonction ou de disjonction où je suis que je vis, que j'écris, alors comment décliner une identité simple?" 'It's at those points of junction or disjunction where I am that I live and write, therefore how can I state a simple identity?' (126).

A work such as *Génération métisse* (1988), which Sebbar co-edited, enables us to understand why she wishes to be considered a French writer. This mosaic work, prefaced by Yannick Noah, highlights the artistic richness that results from the coming together of different nationalities and cultures in France. The "identity of France" will certainly be different, other, as the texts, photographs, and testimonies of this work clearly declare. Nevertheless, according to its authors, it will still be French!

Notes

1. All translations from the French are my own.
2. Maghreb (adjectives: Maghrebian, Maghrebine, Maghribi) designates the geographic and cultural entity comprised of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia (and sometimes Libya and Mauritania). From the Arabic, meaning the Occident.
3. In *Shérazade*, one of the characters asks what "coupée" means. Another responds: "Que tu es coupée en deux: moitié Arabe, moitié Française, c'est clair!" 'That you're cut in half; half Arab, half French, it's clear!' (80). See also *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique* 111.
4. Sebbar joins numerous other Maghrebian Francophone writers (e.g. Assia Djebar, Rachid Boudjedra) in depicting the traditional wedding night as a sanctioned rape. In *Shérazade*, a young Moroccan bride, who refuses to acquiesce physically in a forced marriage, is finally beaten unconscious by the groom so that he can affirm his virility by forcefully penetrating her and displaying the freshly stained handkerchief to the blood-thirsty "jackals" (women!) engaged in music outside their door. The honor of the patriarchal family has been preserved!
5. Beur is *verlan* (backslang) for *Arabe* and designates a second-generation immigrant of North African background, born or having grown up in France. Two excellent introductions to the Beurs and their impact on French culture and society appeared in *The French Review*. See Laronde and Hargreaves. Also see Hargreaves's book.
6. Dedicated to Kateb Yacine, *J.H. cherche âme soeur* reads, in many respects, like a Beur version of *Nedjma*.

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