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# “Le silence de l’écriture”. Arabic and its Absence in the Works of Assia Djebbar and Leïla Sebbar

Jane Hiddleston

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- 1 The politics of language in Algeria since decolonisation, but most particularly from the late 1980s when the writing of Assia Djebbar and Leïla Sebbar gained both momentum and popularity, has been nothing less than murderous. Even before independence, an assertive Arabisation policy was conceived as a crucial part of the movement of resistance against the French colonial presence, and the Algerian nation has seen repeated efforts on the part of successive governments to install Arabic as the new national language. By the 1980s, this push towards the universal use of the Arabic language started to generate new tensions, however, as the drive to impose a Modern Standard Arabic on a society made up of speakers of various dialectal forms, of Berber languages, and, of course, of French, became increasingly forceful. Riots in Kabylia triggered the creation of a “Mouvement Culturel Berbère” in defence of Berber languages and against total Arabisation, and francophone intellectuals sought to defend their use of French as a symbol of resistance to the “Islamism” that was rapidly gaining ground. Relations between speakers of these various languages became increasingly hostile and divisive, as, through the 1990s, the FIS launched attacks against those who actively criticised the goal of total Arabisation. Mohammed Harbi’s analysis of the linguistic situation in Algeria, published in 1995, evokes this destructive rupture:

Il est une autre tragédie qui déborde la scène politique et qui est comme un clivage interne, une fissure dans l’identité. C’est la distance qui sépare et oppose berbérophones, francophones et arabophones. Et ce clivage autodestructeur aboutit à la mort de ceux qui rêvent de la suture, à savoir les intellectuels.<sup>1</sup>

- 2 Harbi’s comment, may, as Anne-Emmanuelle Berger points out in her Introduction to the volume *Algeria in Others’ Languages*, itself risk hypostatizing distinct linguistic groups, when most Algerians would in reality have spoken more than one of the three languages cited, and dialectal Arabic in any case comes in many forms. Nevertheless,

multilingual Algerian society during this period remains a site of intense linguistic conflict.

- 3 This article will explore the uneasy representation of the Arabic language in francophone works by Assia Djebbar and Leïla Sebbar in the light of this contemporary conflict. Despite repeated comments in Djebbar's texts about the multilingual inflections of her writing, and despite evocations of cultural hybridity and *métissage* in many of Sebbar's fictional works, both writers nonetheless continue to evoke divisions between languages, untranslatability, and the silence of Arabic in a form of writing constituted still by linguistic rupture. In the case of Djebbar, dialectal Arabic was her mother tongue, yet she is unable to write confidently in Arabic having been schooled in French, and, moreover, her references to Arabic indicate her ambivalence towards that language. Sebbar, on the other hand, as the daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother, is only able to speak and write in French, and alludes repeatedly, indeed obsessively, to her sense of separation from her father's memory and culture as a result of this ignorance, even though the recapturing of her Algerian heritage is a recurring focus of all her writing. This investigation of the division between French and Arabic and the alienation of these francophone writers in relation to the languages of their native land serves to expose the prematurely celebratory rhetoric of recent theories of transculturation, hybridisation and *littérature-monde*, which, though admirably striving to transgress cultural and linguistic frontiers in salutary ways, perhaps gloss over the persistence of linguistic conflict and the exile it continues to engender. In his introduction to the collection, *Pour une littérature monde*, for example, Michel Le Bris denounces the monolingualism of *francophonie* in order to uphold a form of writing that is "multiple, diverse, colorée, multipolaire et non pas uniforme comme le craignaient les esprits chagrins"<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, he continues, "tout romancier écrivant aujourd'hui dans une langue donnée le fait dans le bruissement autour de lui de toutes les langues du monde"<sup>3</sup>. Francophone writing must, from this perspective, explore its contacts with other languages and transcend national and cultural divisions. Although this multipolarity is on one level at the heart of both Djebbar's and Sebbar's projects, this rhetoric risks denying the antagonism between languages in difficult contexts such as that of colonial and postcolonial Algeria.
- 4 Djebbar's relationships with both French and Arabic are the subject of manifold and extended self-commentary throughout her writing, but the present article will just briefly allude to a certain paradox before embarking on a more extended discussion of Sebbar's frequent references to biculturalism and to silence. It is well known that Djebbar expresses her ambivalence towards the colonial language by seeking to allow traces of other languages to interrupt and reshape her written French. If French is, alternately, a "langue marâtre" reluctantly adopted by the colonised offspring, a "Tunique de Nessus" that poisons what it covers, or even the language of the "autopsie à vif", which describes the narrator's autobiographical project, the potentially violent associations of such images are offset by her efforts to open up the French language to the echoes of the other languages of her compatriots<sup>4</sup>. The much quoted preface to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* alludes to the presence of "son arabe, iranien, afghan, berbère ou bengali, pourquoi pas, mais toujours avec timbre féminin et lèvres proférant sous le masque"; and the essays of *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent* explore the multiple voices of her francophone text, including "les voix non francophones – les gutturales, les ensauvagées, les insoumises"<sup>5</sup>. This plurality can be conceived as an

innovative and refreshing transgression of national borders and of colonial divisions, and performs on some level Khatibi's revolutionary vision of a "pensée en langues" or a "pensée autre", where languages jostle against one another in order to trigger new modes of thought<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, a text such as Khatibi's *Amour bilingue* dramatises the encounter between French and Arabic, and twists or deforms the French language through that exposition. In Réda Bensmaïa's terms, the movement of Khatibi's writing "consists of making French *see double*, *loucher* in the active sense of peering at, eyeing, by subjecting French to a *system* that puts it in a position to *translate the untranslatable*, to express the inexpressible"<sup>7</sup>. Djebbar or Khatibi's translinguistic writing could be seen, then, actively to perform a new relational form of thinking that offers a challenge to the binary oppositions of colonial discourse and practice.

- 5 Yet Djebbar's efforts to incorporate into her written French the traces of other languages and dialectal forms often does not lead to a celebration of cultural harmony and dialogue. Khatibi's narrator in *Amour bilingue* repeatedly expresses the sense of exile and division brought about by writing in French, despite the ambitious drive to "translate the untranslatable", and Djebbar's references to Arabic words also do not necessarily connote smooth cultural interaction. Two key passages, taken from *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Vaste est la prison*, demonstrate how the encounter between French and Arabic in the end serves to reinforce the sense of linguistic division and rupture. In *L'Amour, la fantasia*, for example, Djebbar's narrator famously describes how she and her brother remember their aunts and cousins calling the children "hannouni", a term of affection used specifically in their community (AF 116-118). She comments on the difficulty of translating the term into French, and yet its memory seems to conjure a sense of nostalgia, "cela fait chaud au cœur" (AF 117). At first glance the episode seems to provide the narrator with a sense of rootedness, with a renewed connection with her origins; however, on closer inspection it reveals further levels of alienation that some of her commentary seeks to dispel. Not only does she note that the term is untranslatable, but also, the episode reveals tensions between the narrator and her brother, suggesting both division between the sexes and a further sense of rupture from any family community. Despite the "romantisme égotiste" of the relationship she imagines she retains with her brother in his absence, she notes that he "ne fut ni mon ami ni mon complice quand il le fallait", and her recollection of the tender tones of her female ancestors is addressed "au frère qui ne me fut jamais complice, à l'ami qui ne fut pas présent dans mon labyrinthe" (AF 117). The warmth she mentions on first recapturing the term "hannouni", then, is in reality coupled with a sense of distance from her brother, which only serves to exacerbate the loss of any originary community that might be restored through their memory of a shared language. While she wants the echo of "hannouni" to provide "un éclair où j'entrevois, par-dessus l'épaule fraternelle, des profils de femmes penchées, des lèvres qui murmurent, une autre voix ou ma voix qui appelle", in reality it reminds her of her rupture from that maternal language as well as from her roots (AF 118). The whispering of her foremothers, then, emerges from what remains "l'obscurité des halliers de la mémoire", and is evoked in the presence of a brother from whom she is also estranged.
- 6 This reference to dialectal Arabic in this way raises questions not only of translatability, but also of relations between the sexes and between the narrator and the community of her origins. If this episode is often quoted as an instance of Djebbar's attempt to convey the nuances of Arabic in her written French, in reality it reveals further divisions. This sense of division between men and women, and between the

narrator and her roots, becomes more explicit in a further passage, this time in *Vaste est la prison*, in which the recollection of an Arabic term seems actively to paralyse the writing process. The opening section "Le Silence de l'écriture" describes a scene in the hammam, in which the narrator hears, to her surprise and horror, one of the women refer to her husband as "l'e'dou" or "the enemy", and the word cuts through the peaceful atmosphere of the bath: "ce mot, dans sa sonorité arabe, l'e'dou, avait écorché l'atmosphère environnante"<sup>8</sup>. While the scene might initially have appeared to establish a sense of a traditional feminine community, the interruption of the Arabic term produces a shock that abruptly alienates the narrator from the other women and the community they represent. This use of an Arabic term, far from displaying the permeability of Djebbar's French, forces the narrator to confront her distance from the lifestyle of the women of the hammam and the rigid gender roles that the term suggests they occupy. The Arabic term *l'e'dou* also connotes a society in which women and men are segregated, or worse, pitted against one another as enemies, and again, this is a world which in no way provides the narrator with any sense of originary belonging. Indeed, this moment is then figured as the trigger for her silence, as she struggles both to create "une écriture sans ombre", and, presumably, to make sense of her relations with both French and Arabic, as well as their cultural associations. She notes that it is through the voice of the woman in the hammam that, "la langue maternelle m'exhibait ses crocs, inscrivait en moi une fatale amertume", and she concludes by raising again the question of the obscure undergrowth of her Arabic memory: "dès lors, où trouver mes halliers, comment frayer un étroit corridor dans la tendresse noire et chaude, dont les secrets luisent, et les mots rutilants s'amoncellent?"<sup>9</sup>. The reference to Arabic, then, does not conjure up a vision of successful cross-cultural interaction; rather, it connotes a culture of segregation and functions as a force for the narrator's silencing.

- 7 These two instances of an Arabic incursion in Djebbar's work serve as a revealing preface to an exploration of Sebbar's repeated figuring of Arabic as the silence that underpins her writing. Unlike Djebbar, for whom dialectal Arabic was her mother tongue, Sebbar never learned Arabic, and her writing does not even contain insertions as Djebbar's does. Rather, all her work is structured by its very absence, by the impossibility of any desired linguistic transfer. When Sebbar does refer to the Arabic language, moreover, it is by turns as the signifier of the lost but longed for community of her father's ancestors, and, again, as the conveyor of violence (in the form of insults hurled at the young Leïla and her sisters by Arab boys as they walk to school). Sebbar's fictionalised autobiographical narrative *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* exhibits a tension, reminiscent of that of Djebbar's works yet perhaps more intractable, between the (now always unfulfilled) impulse to recapture what she might conceive as the language of her origins, and the discovery that this language connotes for the narrator cultural (and sexual) division. What is also perhaps surprising about Sebbar's representation of Arabic and its absence is that her writing turns out to *require* this absence, it is the very trigger for her creativity. Far from achieving a hybridised poetics of cultural métissage, Sebbar actively refuses to learn Arabic and to meld it with her French writing. Her work is structured by the separation between French and Arabic, and any putative overcoming of that separation would deny the context of her upbringing. Cultural and linguistic fusion remains a utopia, the realisation of which will necessarily always be deferred. The divisions of colonial and postcolonial Algeria remain imprinted in the writer's psyche, and Sebbar's Arabic origins are known to her only as a lack.

- 8 This analysis of the silence of Arabic in Sebbar's writing is by no means meant as a direct contestation of salutary theories of a more forward-looking, innovative form of cultural and linguistic métissage. Rather, Sebbar's work precisely reveals the difficulty of achieving cultural communion and exhibits the tensions at work in the construction of any alternative "pensée en langues". Critics of Sebbar's novels, focusing in particular on the *Shérazade* trilogy, have tended to champion the refreshing forms of hybrid identity that her characters, namely Shérazade, can be seen to enact. Anne Donadey, for example, reads Shérazade's engagement with, and subversion of, Orientalist imagery as a sign of métissage, and Winifred Woodhull and Valerie Orlando both explore the potentially liberating "nomadism" of Sebbar's characters<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, my own chapter on "Leïla Sebbar between Exile and Polyphony" stresses how Shérazade's engagement with multiple cultural references, and her discovery of selfhood through travel, might, despite the ongoing sense of exile, be seen to propose a refreshing vision of transculturation<sup>11</sup>. Equally, Françoise Lionnet has proposed the notion of a "logique métisse", taken from Jean-Loup Amselle, to describe a "dynamic model of relationality", and reads Sebbar's *Les Carnets de Shérazade* as an example of new forms of dialogue between cultures that resist entrenched stereotypes and patterns<sup>12</sup>. Certainly, Lionnet's thinking here on one level helps to imagine a more pluralised, interactive and intercultural mode of identity construction, and, like Khatibi's "pensée en langues", usefully works against the destructive binaries of colonial thinking. Close reading of Sebbar's partially fictionalised autobiographical narratives, however, does not necessarily disable such a mode of thinking but reveals the tensions that will continue to trouble this process of hybridisation. Languages exist alongside one another in Sebbar's work, and her entire imaginary is the product of the encounter between French and Arabic. Yet this meeting is necessarily also defined by rupture, and this is a form of conflict that theories of métissage, at least based on the postcolonial Maghreb, cannot yet claim to eradicate.
- 9 Sebbar's evocations of her upbringing in Algeria in her multiple autobiographical essays, short stories, and in the narrative of *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, repeatedly allude to a sense of enclosure within the closely guarded, francophone, republican space of her family home. Multiple images of barriers and sequestration underline the separation between this environment and the outside space of the local Arabic-speaking community. In the essay "Le Silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe", she describes the house they occupied in her father's school as "une petite France, édiflée au nom de la République française, à l'intérieur des murs et de la clôture qui cernent l'école et la séparent des pauvres maisons arabes"<sup>13</sup> ; it is a secular space fenced off from the rest of the village. In the short story "La Moustiquaire", the image of the mosquito net is symbolic of the barrier between the young girl and the world she observes, as she huddles behind it protected from the gaze of onlookers but staring, alone, at the local children as they play. As the narrator mulls over her detachment from the girls playing hopscotch and the boys who call out insults, she punctuates her musings with multiple references to the mosquito net that marks her separation<sup>14</sup>. In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, the physical barriers of the walls, the garden fence and the mosquito net are imposed on the French language itself, as the enclosed space of the domestic home is inextricably tied up with linguistic sequestration:
- Nous portions, mes sœurs et moi, en carapace, la citadelle de la langue de ma mère, la langue unique, la belle langue de la France, avec ses hauts murs, opaques qu'aucune meurtrière ne fendait, l'école était entourée d'un muret bas sur lequel

était planté un grillage vert, était-il vert? [...]

Citadelle close, enfermée dans sa langue et ses rites, étrangère, distante, au cœur même de la terre dont nous savions rien et qui avait donné naissance à mon père, aux garçons de sa langue, à nous, les petites Françaises, à mon frère séparé de nous, les filles, hors de la maison. Citadelle invincible, qui la protégeait? La République? La Colonie? La France?<sup>15</sup>

- 10 French and Arabic languages are closed off from one another by the imposing walls that literally surround the family residence and the secular republican school.
- 11 This physical demarcation is reinforced by repeated references to Sebbar's narrator's ineluctable ignorance of her father's language in numerous essays and narratives. Starting with "Si je parle la langue de ma mère", published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1978, Sebbar almost obsessively returns to the silence of Arabic through a sequence of texts with titles that refer to that silence in various ways, including "Si je ne parle pas la langue de mon père", "La Moustiquaire", "Les Jeunes filles de la colonie", "Le Silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe", and of course, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*<sup>16</sup>. The content of these texts is largely overlapping, as she returns compulsively to her ignorance of her father's heritage and sense of exile within French culture, as if in an attempt to make sense of it while remaining unsatisfied with each such endeavour. Moreover, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* also repeats in various forms the statement that she does not speak Arabic, as she opens each section with curt allusions that echo the title, such as, "mon père ne m'a pas appris la langue de sa mère", or, "mon père ne m'a pas appris la langue des femmes de son peuple" (*JPL* 33, 59). One of the distinguishing features of this latest, and most prolonged, reflection on her father's language, however, is the now close association between her ignorance of Arabic and her father's unwillingness to talk about the War of Independence. Her father's refusal to teach his daughters Arabic is bound up with an ability to recount the details of his experiences during the war (he was imprisoned by the French military for a few months in 1957). The opening sections of the narrative record telephone conversations with her father, in which he entreats her to forget, and these are juxtaposed with the narrator's recollections of conversations between her father and his Arab friends during that time, that she was unable to understand. This silence in turn marks the division between French and Algerians during that conflict, and the alienated position of the young Sebbar in relation to both sides.
- 12 In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, the most distressing silence is that which surrounds the memory of how local Arab boys shouted insults at her and her sisters as they walked to school in their short dresses. In these passages, Arabic is not only presented as other, as the bearer of a culture and tradition that is necessarily sealed off from the narrator, but even more, it is a signifier of violence. And if Djébar's narrator in both *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Vaste est la prison* alludes to the sense of division between the sexes in her references to the Arabic idioms of "hannouni" and "l'e'dou", Sebbar's recollections of the Arabic language are also marked by this imprint of sexual violence. For both writers, the walk to school is associated with a sense of alienation from the local community, and Djébar also refers to the "regard matois" of the villagers who foresee danger in the education of a young girl (*AF* 11). Yet for Sebbar, the daily exposure to verbal abuse in her father's language becomes an inaugural trauma that consistently reinforces her exclusion from the local Arabic-speaking community, and to which many of her texts compulsively return in the form of a repeated flashback. The Arabic words themselves are described as weapons, which, though her father is

unaware of this daily scene of violence, the narrator perceives as "meurtriers, lancés comme à la fronde" (JPL 37). The boys hurl the words at the girls as they throw pebbles to the birds:

Ils taillaient la fourche en bois d'olivier, ajustaient le caoutchouc noir prélevé à un vieux pneu de la décharge, fouillaient leurs poches pleines des cailloux de la route en terre, et ils tiraient, le plus haut, le plus loin. Les mots des garçons nous visaient et ils visaient juste, ils nous touchaient. Le bonnet de laine tricoté, les jours d'hiver, n'arrêtaient pas les rebonds injurieux. (JPL 38)

- 13 Defenceless, disoriented by the onslaught of words they do not understand, the girls merely lower their heads and say nothing of the attacks either at the time, or in the years that follow.
- 14 That Sebbar produces multiple versions of the incident is in itself significant, since it suggests that, as a trauma, the moment, in accordance with Caruth's definition, "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time" and therefore insistently returns<sup>17</sup>. This resistance to assimilation is inevitably exacerbated because the language of the insults is beyond the narrator's comprehension. If she grasps fragments of the Arabic words, and certainly feels the aggression in their tenor, the injury they inflict is perhaps experienced as more traumatic precisely because it is not fully understood. As a result, Sebbar's narrator repeatedly evokes the event across multiple narratives and in different forms, as if to perform what Caruth conceives as a "delay and incompleteness in knowing"<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the differences between Sebbar's narratives of the moment are themselves revealing. In "Si je parle la langue de ma mère", published in 1978, Sebbar underlines that she did understand at least some of the words, and even more, shouted them back:

J'ai appris les injures pour les crier par-dessus le portail et sur le chemin de l'école, quand les garçons couraient derrière nous avec des gestes obscènes dont je percevais confusément le sens. J'entendais – NIQUER – c'était le mot qui revenait, toujours accompagné d'un basculement du bassin vers l'avant. Je les haïssais.<sup>19</sup>

- 15 The sexual violence of the scene is at its clearest in this version, though the narrator is on some level empowered by her ability to shout back. In "La Moustiquaire", the narrator quotes the accusation that she and her sisters are "les filles de la «Roumia»", and again, she repeats, "ils crient – Nique... Nique... Nique... – combien de temps, l'un après l'autre ou tous à la fois", though the ellipses indicate only a fragmented understanding<sup>20</sup>. In "Le Silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe", moreover, she cites the words that she understands, "Roumia et Roumies, Française, la Chrétienne, l'Étrangère", as well as the "mot répété cent fois, agressif, sexuel [...] c'est l'arme qui frappe et qui tue, le couteau qui égorge et le sang coule, le mot persécuteur, assassin"<sup>21</sup>. In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, however, there is no reference to the content of the insults, little sense of comprehension, and no possibility of riposte. The emphasis in this latest version is on the family's silence around the incident, suggesting that the repeated narrative has brought not further understanding but only renewed alienation – both from the language of violence, and, once again, from the father and the rest of the family community.
- 16 The redoubling of the trauma through this further sense of incomprehension, and through further silencing, is particularly pernicious precisely because of its disempowering effect. In her analysis of hate speech in *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler shows how injurious speech acts disorient the addressee by dislocating him or her from the community, by placing him or her out of context and displacing the reference



points by which he or she recognises the self. According to Butler, "what is *unanticipated* about the speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control"<sup>22</sup>. Butler goes on to note how Shoshana Felman explores the inevitability, with any speech act, that there remains a certain excess; the speaker is on some level always partly unknowing about the implications of what he or she is saying. So there may always be effects that the speaker did not intend. As a result, Butler argues that any utterance of hate speech always has the potential to be uncoupled from the intended meaning, it might "become disjoined from the power to injure and recontextualised in more affirmative modes", so this potential uncoupling is what leaves open the possibility of contestation<sup>23</sup>. She suggests that "the terms by which we are hailed are rarely the ones we choose [...]; but these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open"<sup>24</sup>. In the case of Sebbar's most recent narrative of the local Arab boys' insults, however, the narrator's incomprehension of the Arabic words, and the subsequent silence that shrouds the event, disable this possibility of redeployment. Butler asserts that the injurious effects of speech might be subverted if the addressee were able to reinterpret and redeploy the terms used in his or her attack, yet, for Sebbar, those terms remain alien, and, even more, forgotten or denied by the rest of the family.

- 17 The repetition of the scene of the Arab boys' insults, far from bringing any improved understanding, leads only to a stronger sense of alienation, of separation and violence between languages and communities. If in earlier versions the narrator is able to offer some response, by the time of *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, the insults wound without allowing any possibility of retort because their language is yet more impenetrable. However, I want to suggest that it is the text itself which, alongside its repeated assertions of linguistic rupture and alienation, perhaps signifies for Sebbar an imagined response or at least her desired lifting of the silence. The narrative of the insults is in this work much more bound up with the problem of her family's subsequent silence about the event than with the original moment, explored in more detail in particular in "La Moustiquaire". Yet the narrator emphasises the importance of her account, since, though her father continues to say nothing about it, "parce que j'ai écrit, le récit est imprimé, lisible par qui veut le lire, je sais que mon père l'a lu, je me tais" (*JPL* 39). If, for Sebbar's narrator, silence "simule l'oubli avec quelle constance", her bold, repeated report of the scene of trauma is a first attempt to combat her father's silence, and concomitantly, the division between his language and her language that is intensified in such violent form by the words of the Arab boys (*JPL* 42). Moreover, it is the recounting of the scene that opens the moment up for interpretation, that sets the insults into a new context, and perhaps offers a glimpse of the alternative future to which Butler refers.
- 18 The rest of the narrative of *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* can also be read as an imagined attempt to bridge the linguistic divide and to access the memory of her father's heritage. As I noted earlier, her father's reticence in speaking not only in Arabic, but also about the War of Independence, is one of the text's preoccupations, and Sebbar's narrator deliberately provides a fictionalised version of his experience that for her achieves some form of revelation. One of the further preoccupations of Sebbar's narrative here is a sense of separation from the maids Aïsha and Fatima, and the fiction she weaves into the memoir establishes again the connection between her father and the family of Fatima. She recounts how Fatima's son had intended to kill her father,

since, working for the maquis, the son perceived the school teacher as too closely affiliated with France. A fantasised reconciliation takes place when her father meets Fatima's son in prison, however, and teaches him French. She goes on to narrate more of the son's story, his travels in France, his life at La Courneuve, and, ultimately, his return, much later, to find the schoolteacher in his village. The final scene is one of reconciliation, and the entire narrative serves both to fill the gaps of her father's missing tale and to create a renewed connection with Fatima's family, and indeed, with Algerians fighting for independence from the French. The fantasy ends with an image of continued dialogue: "ils ont parlé longtemps, le maître et le fils de Fatima, dans la langue de la petite cour et l'odeur du jasmin" (JPL 124).

- 19 Despite the emphasis on the silence of Arabic, and on linguistic rupture, then, Sebbar's narrative does retain something of a utopian vision of a reunion with an Arabic-speaking heritage. The fantasised reunion is abruptly curtailed when, at the end of the text, the narrator explicitly states that none of what she recounted actually happened. Yet her interest in Fatima's son is part of her dream of an (impossible) fusion with the originary local Algerian community, and the text ends with an evocation of the murmurs of the voices of her father and his family reminiscent of the whispers of the "aïeules" that, far more audibly, interrupt Djebbar's works. *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* caps the repeated statements of the narrator's ignorance with the steadfast "je n'apprendrai pas la langue de mon père", yet in answer to this, the narrator nevertheless confesses: "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" (JPL 125). Furthermore, as Carine Bourget affirms, Sebbar across her works seems particularly troubled by her alienation from the women of Algeria, and she dreams of accessing their voices as much as she does her father's<sup>25</sup>. The volume *Mes Algéries en France* performs something of this imagined reunion, as Sebbar collects memories and stories from Algeria and combines them with passages of her own fiction, in an effort to combat in particular, "la séparation irrémédiable d'avec la mère, les sœurs, les femmes du peuple de mon père, les Algériennes que j'appelle «mes sœurs étrangères», je les voudrais sœurs de sang, de terre et de langue mais je reste étrangère"<sup>26</sup>. Just as Djebbar at times seeks to overcome her sense of separation from her Arabic-speaking heritage, and the culture of Algerian women, by inserting fictionalised excerpts of women's memories and experiences into her novels, so too does Sebbar return to Algerian women's stories not only in *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, or *Mes Algéries en France*, but across the corpus of her fiction<sup>27</sup>.
- 20 If on some level this imagined community and dialogue are a source of inspiration for both Sebbar and Djebbar, these take the form of a necessary fiction. Both writers return to memories of the period leading up to independence, and to the conflict between French and Arabic at that difficult time, but their ongoing references to "le silence de l'écriture", to the simultaneous intimation and occlusion of Arabic in their writing, evoke also a more current context in which languages continue to mark cultural divisions – overlaid in turn by divisions between the sexes. This silence, moreover, and this confrontation with the separation between languages is both an inevitable testimony to the tense linguistic politics that continues to provide the backdrop for Djebbar and Sebbar's writing, and the cause of an alienation that their writing seems actively to require. Djebbar overtly conjoins writing and silence when she affirms "j'écris à force de me taire": she confronts, in her writing, both her own mutism and the silence of her female ancestors, and rather than overcoming that silence, continues to conceive

her writing as impregnated with it<sup>28</sup>. This "silence porteur de contradictions" is the condition of her francophone writing, which continually works through without resolving those contradictions<sup>29</sup>. Sebbar's *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, as the narrative of what her father did not tell her, is also the result of a silence and would not have existed without that silence. And in *Lettres parisiennes*, she affirms quite clearly that she needs that silence in order to create, and that trying to learn Arabic would be would be a sign that she was unable to write: "il me semble que le jour où je déciderai d'apprendre à lire, à écrire et parler l'arabe, j'irai mal... Je veux dire que ce sera le signe que je suis sèche, que je n'ai plus d'inspiration"<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, learning Arabic takes the place of therapy for Sebbar, and this suggests that, in not learning her father's language, she uses her francophone writing as a form of working through. This is not a catharsis that is ever in any way completed, and as we have seen, the repeated narrative of the trauma of the boys' insults takes the form of an obsessional return that precisely resists resolution. Yet francophone writing continually acts out the silencing of Arabic that so structures Sebbar's consciousness, and inscribes that lack as an originary, defining principle in her exploration of culture and selfhood. For both Djebbar and Sebbar, in different ways, "le silence de l'écriture" is less what can be overcome than what drives the analysis that their works continue to undertake.

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## NOTES

### 1.

Mohammed Harbi, "Violence, nationalisme, Islamisme", *Les Temps modernes* 580 (1995). Special Issue "Algérie: La guerre des frères": 24-33 (p. 33). Quoted in Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, "Introduction", in Berger (ed.), *Algeria in Others' Languages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002): 1-16 (p. 8). See also Sami Naïr, "Le peuple exclu", also in *Les Temps Modernes* 580 (1995): 34-45.

### 2.

Michel Le Bris, "Pour une littérature monde en français", in Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud (eds.), *Pour une littérature monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007): 23-53 (p. 41).

### 3.

*Ibid.*, p. 43.

### 4.

Assia Djebbar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) p. 297, 298, p. 224. Henceforth AF.

### 5.

See Assia Djebbar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002) pp. 8-9; Assia Djebbar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999) p. 29.

### 6.

See Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983).

### 7.

Réda Bensmaïa, "Multilingualism and National 'Character': On Abdelkebir Khatibi's 'Bilanguage'", in Anne-Emmanuelle Berger (ed.), *Algeria in Others' Languages*, 161-183 (p. 168).

### 8.

Assia Djebbar, *Vaste est la prison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) p. 13.

**9.**

*Ibid.*, p. 15.

**10.**

See Anne Donadey, "Cultural Métissage and the Play of Identity in Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade* Trilogy", in Elazar Barzan and Marie-Denise Shelton (eds.), *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998): 257-73; Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonisation and Literatures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Valerie Orlando, *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

**11.**

Jane Hiddleston, *Reinventing Community: Identity and Difference in Late Twentieth-Century Philosophy and Literature in French* (Oxford: MHRA and Maney, 2005).

**12.**

Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995) p. 4. Lionnet draws on Jean-Loup Amselle, *Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs* (Paris: Payot, 1990).

**13.**

Leïla Sebbar, "Le Silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe", *Etudes littéraires* 33.3 (2001): 119-123 (p. 121).

**14.**

Leïla Sebbar, "La Moustiquaire", in Leïla Sebbar and Nancy Huston (eds.), *17 Ecrivains racontent une enfance d'ailleurs* (Paris: Belfond, 1993): 197-207.

**15.**

Leïla Sebbar, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (Paris: Julliard, 2003) p. 39. Henceforth *JPL*.

**16.**

Leïla Sebbar, "Si je parle la langue de ma mère", *Les Temps modernes* 379 (1978): 1179-1188; "Si je ne parle pas la langue de mon père", in Adine Sagalyn (ed.), *Voix de pères, voix de filles* (Paris: Maren Sell, 1988): 153-4; "La Moustiquaire", in Leïla Sebbar and Nancy Huston (eds.), *17 Ecrivains racontent une enfance d'ailleurs* (Paris: Belfond, 1993): 197-207; "Les jeunes filles de la colonie", in Leïla Sebbar (ed.), *Une Enfance outremer* (Paris: Seuil, 2001); *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (Paris: Julliard, 2003).

**17.**

Cathy Caruth, "Introduction: Trauma and Experience", in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 3-12 (p. 4).

**18.**

*Ibid.*, p. 5.

**19.**

Leïla Sebbar, "Si je parle la langue de ma mère", p. 1182.

**20.**

Leïla Sebbar, "La Moustiquaire", p. 200, p. 204-5.

**21.**

Leïla Sebbar, "Le Silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe", p. 122.

**22.**

Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 4.

**23.**

*Ibid.*, p. 15.

**24.**

*Ibid.*, p. 38.

25.

Carine Bourget, "Language, Filiation, and Affiliation in Leïla Sebbar's Autobiographical Narratives", *Research in African Literatures* 37.4 (2006): 121-135.

26.

Leïla Sebbar, *Mes Algéries en France* (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule: Bleu autour, 2004) p. 102.

27.

The mother figures are particularly important in *Fatima, ou les Algériennes au square* (Paris: Stock, 1981) and *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère* (Paris: Stock, 1984).

28.

Assia Djebbar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999) p. 25, 27.

29.

*Ibid.*, p. 27.

30.

Leïla Sebbar et Nancy Huston, *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie de l'exil* (Paris: Bernard Barrault, 1986) pp. 159-60.

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## ABSTRACTS

Dans cet article nous explorons le malaise d'Assia Djebbar et de Leïla devant la représentation de la langue arabe dans leurs textes francophones. Malgré les commentaires de Djebbar sur les inflexions multilingues de son écriture, et malgré les évocations de l'hybridité culturelle et du métissage dans beaucoup d'oeuvres fictionnelles de Sebbar, les deux écrivains continuent à évoquer l'écartèlement entre les langues, l'impossibilité de la traduction, et le silence de la langue arabe dans une écriture construite sur la rupture linguistique. Notre recherche sur le tiraillement entre le français et l'arabe, et l'aliénation de ces écrivains par rapport aux langues de leur terre natale entend mettre en question le triomphalisme prématuré de la rhétorique des théories récentes de la transculturation, de l'hybridisation et de la littérature-monde : cherchant de façon salutaire à dépasser les frontières linguistiques et culturelles, elles occultent le conflit linguistique et l'exil qu'il continue d'engendrer

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Assia Djebbar, Leïla Sebbar, Algérie, arabe, langage, francophone, silence, aliénation

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