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The story never ends: Rachid Mimouni's *Le Printemps n'en sera que plus beau* and the production of counter-discourse in Algerian state-sponsored literature

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Abstract

In the process of post-colonial nation-building, the State often attempts to impose its own discourse as the sole source of national identity in order to homogenize the nation. In his influential work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson notes the discrepancy between 'official' discourse, which supports the conception of a unified State, and the reality of a diverse people artificially grouped within the same political entity. To account for their disparity, Anderson argues that the nation is primarily a discursive phenomenon, i.e. a fiction supported by narratives. Based on his concept of imagined communities, literary works come to light as essential tools for nation-building, and writers emerge as key figures called upon to embrace the official model of the nationalist narrative. A new nation's literary production can rely on heavily codified structures of the novel to promote and preserve the fiction of a homogeneous national identity, defined here as an imagined community that shares the same collective values, a common understanding of History, and a profound commitment to the State. Such a propaganda-oriented mindset led Rachid Mimouni to challenge nationalist narrative in his first novel, *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau*. This text, all too often disregarded as an early work that shows less aesthetic maturity than Mimouni's later writing, merits further analysis as an initial attempt to challenge national narrative. In its closing lines, Mimouni contests not only the attempt to fix literary boundaries, but also the official discourse used in nationalist texts...

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In the process of post-colonial nation-building, the State often attempts to impose its own discourse as the sole source of national identity in order to homogenize the nation. In his influential work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson notes the discrepancy between 'official' discourse, which supports the conception of a unified State, and the reality of a diverse people artificially grouped within the same political entity. To account for their disparity, Anderson argues that the nation is primarily a discursive phenomenon, i.e. a fiction supported by narratives. Based on his concept of imagined communities, literary works come to light as essential tools for nation-building, and writers emerge as key figures called upon to embrace the official model of the nationalist narrative. A new nation's literary production can rely on heavily codified structures of the novel to promote and preserve the fiction of a homogeneous national identity, defined here as an imagined community that shares the same collective values, a common understanding of History, and a profound commitment to the State. Such a propaganda-oriented mindset led Rachid Mimouni to challenge nationalist narrative in his first novel, *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau*. This text, all too often disregarded as an early work that shows less aesthetic maturity than Mimouni's later writing, merits further analysis as an initial attempt to challenge national narrative. In its closing lines, Mimouni contests not only the attempt to fix literary boundaries, but also the official discourse used in nationalist texts.

When discussing Anderson's concept of imagined communities, Homi K. Bhabha suggests that nationalist texts differ from common literature by the stress that they place on boundaries, whether spatial or discursive, which are used to establish the limits of the nation. According to Bhabha, imagined communities are granted "essentialist identities" through the "totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual" found in nationalist literature. Bhabha further maintains that "counter-narratives of the nation [...] continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries" (300). The end of narratives, then, can be used as strategic places where identity archetypes are built and ideology implemented. They are an ideal site to forge the model of national heroes and to instill patriotism in the readership of a new nation. Yet, their employment towards this aim makes them an equally ideal site for dissident writing that draws national heroes and patriotism into question, while appearing to promote them.

In the case of Algeria, where Mimouni first lived and published, the standardized form of textual boundaries was particularly codified in both content and narrative structure

between 1965 and 1982, a period during which the newly independent state controlled its literature through a national publishing house and editorial censorship. Algerian authors long struggled against these constraints before post-national concerns came into play. Mimouni's refusal to conclude *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau* with a heroic ending that would respect the codes of nationalist Algerian texts draws into question the homogenous national identity that the state hoped to impress on its population during that period. Although the possibility of finishing a narrative is disputed throughout Mimouni's oeuvre, as Khalid Zekri has already suggested, I would argue that the author first conceived of the ending as a strategic place to erase totalizing boundaries in this novel.

One nation, one book, one ending

During the initial period of nation-building in Algeria, writers were strongly encouraged to glorify independence not only by celebrating an anti-colonial national identity, but also by justifying the new socialist regime. As Réda Bensmaïa emphasizes: "To write (the fiction) of Algeria was to write Algeria" (23). According to Bensmaïa, Algerian writers were perceived as key participants in the nation-building process, allowing their books to have an immediate and concrete impact on the emerging nation. Yet, as a result, they found themselves increasingly responsible for articulating a political agenda, often to the detriment of their own aesthetic goals. For writers publishing within Algeria, this situation left little room for artistic creativity and often led writers to reproduce state-ideology, rather than create their own discourse.

When the Algerian government created the state-run publishing company SNED (Société Nationale d'Édition et de Diffusion), its intent was to promote local literary production, counter French editorial hegemony and, above all, establish a monopoly on imports and distribution. By the mid-1970s, the state controlled every detail of the cultural landscape. Through editorial censorship, reading committees codified the literary canon and established its guidelines. Most writers were forced to conform to the constraints placed on them by the state company, with the notable exception of those who had already published in France during the War of Liberation and could continue to reach an audience outside Algeria.

It is not surprising that novels published in this editorial context tended to reproduce a nationalist agenda rather than reflect the writer's subjective world-view. A thorough study of the literature published by the SNED between 1962 and 1980 brings us to conclude that simplistic combat novels predominate, glorifying the revolution as the origin of the nation. The only novels approved by the national publishing press were epics praising the heroic struggle of freedom fighters, known as *moudjahid*, during the War of Liberation. In these texts, the exemplary figure of the brave Algerian is generally pitted against antagonistic French figures, such as the bloodthirsty soldier or the pieds-noir exploiter.

Although the narrative treatment of struggle differs from one text to another, the ending often remains the same. As the narration culminates in the hero's death, the freedom fighter becomes a martyr who sacrificed his life to free his homeland. Martyrdom serves as the only suitable ending in the state-sponsored literature: it commemorates the struggle

of Algerians during the War of Liberation, while acknowledging that the birth of the nation required the symbolic disappearance of the individual for the benefit of the community. The reader is brought to identify with the *moudjahid* and encouraged to emulate his gesture of self-sacrifice for the nation.

This climactic closure is generally reinforced through the fixed structure of the narration, which involves a linear narrative, presented by an omniscient narrator whose interpretation favors a closed ideological reading of the world. This structure implies an ability to streamline historical narrative, organize the chaos of war, and build a single cohesive national identity. We are encouraged to see the text as exhibiting similar transparency and closure. “When the text presents itself as a closed and complete totality,” Guy Larroux argues, “the closure of the text manifests the closure of the meaning [la clôture du texte renvoie à la clôture du sens si le texte considéré se présente comme une totalité fermée, complète]” (Larroux, 42). Hence, beyond this normative understanding of literature lies the idealistic conception of a closed, fixed and transparent Algerian identity.

This fixed form leads me to believe that resistance to the closure of the official discourse would also manifest itself within the state-codified ending. If Bhabha characterizes state-promoted narratives by their “totalizing boundaries,” then counter-narratives of the nation can be defined by their continual erasure of these totalizing boundaries. It is this “subversion from within” that I intend to study in *Le printemps n’en sera que plus beau*.

The story is not finished, the story never ends:

Having outlined the normative ending that novels published in Algeria were expected to reproduce, let us turn to Mimouni’s text. His first novel, *Le printemps n’en sera que plus beau*, published by the SNED in 1978, is considered by most critics to be the least important piece of his career. Among other criticisms, one might consider the following comment from Farida Abu-Haidar:

That writers feel more liberated when writing works for an international rather than a national readership is evident in the work of the late Rachid Mimouni. His first novel, *Le printemps n’en sera que plus beau*, [...] glorifying the Algerian national struggle (1954-1962), is a far cry from the daring exposés angrily voiced in some of his later novels. (15)

Haidar rightfully claims that maghrebi writers who have an international audience have more freedom in discussing subversive topics and using various aesthetics, because those writers are less likely to be censored and can appeal to a more diverse audience. However, the example she uses to illustrate her claim is not suited to this point. Faced with the generic hybridity of this literary work, other critics such as Charles Bonn were too often content to blame its inconsistencies on the lack of experience of a young writer who could not decide which genre to adopt. In their hasty judgment, they neglected two important aspects of the work: the role of theater conventions in denouncing nationalist narratives and, more importantly, the specificity of the theatrical form to which Mimouni resorted.

Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau recounts the struggle between colonial forces and a young couple, Djamila and Hamid, both fighters. Because of her beauty, Djamila has drawn both the attention and suspicion of a French captain, who believes she may belong to the resistance. To avoid capture of the entire group by the French army, her comrades decide to sacrifice her. Hamid, her fiancé, is the chosen executioner. As he shoots her to death, he is also murdered. The epilogue describes the defeat of the French army, and the resignation of the French captain who pursued the resistance group.

At first glance, *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau* seems to conform to the normative code of the SNED epic, although it is more complicated than the typical nationalist text. As expected, its plot is situated within the War of Liberation and is sympathetic to the anti-colonial struggle, while the protagonists demonstrate the expected binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized. All Algerian protagonists represented in the text are part of the resistance, whereas all of their French counterparts belong to the army. Furthermore, by devoting its epilogue to the defeat of the colonizer, the work ultimately proclaims the triumph of the colonized over the colonizer: “Aujourd’hui, un peuple en liesse est descendu dans les rues fêter sa liberté enfin retrouvée. [Today, a people in jubilation went down in the streets to celebrate its freedom, finally recovered]” (Mimouni 197).

We expect that the novel’s ending will be predictably in line with the SNED codified canon as well: the title of the book announces the arrival of spring, a season that often serves as a metaphor for independence recovered after the war. It seems like *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau* will be entirely geared toward the realization of its title and, thus, toward a conclusive victory in the War of Liberation. The narrative structure of the novel works, however, towards an entirely different end. In a simple heroic narrative, we might expect a linear narration, where emphasis is placed throughout the book on the trajectory towards freedom. Instead, the reader foresees the (tragic) end of the story near the beginning of the book, when the final meeting of the lovers is duplicated almost word for word in the fourth chapter (28-29; 160-161). Blurring the traditional separation between these parts of the narrative, Mimouni invites the reader to consider this narrative episode more carefully.

One of the protagonists even explicitly questions the traditional celebratory ending in the last chapter of the book. Despite victory over colonization, the chief freedom fighter describes himself as “definitively removed from [his] roots [définitivement coupé de toutes [s]es racines]” (Mimouni 196). Whereas readers might expect him to rejoice over his triumph, he deplores the deaths required to succeed in the resistance struggle. Finally, he realizes that his quest for ‘authentic identity’ will remain unattainable in post-independence Algeria, since no identity is more ‘authentic’ than another. Moreover, the fighters’ deaths are not portrayed as glorious sacrifices, but as assassinations perpetrated in the name of the nation and orchestrated by the chief freedom fighter himself. By depicting the traditional heroic death as a murder, the ending casts Djamila as a victim of the deceitful leader of the *moudjahidines* rather than the colonial power, and undermines the moral superiority of the revolutionaries over the French army. Mimouni thus invites

readers to reflect upon the contradictions of a country battling with itself as much as with its colonial past.

In addition, the lovers' deaths are not inscribed within the community even though they serve the struggle against the colonizers. The reunion of the couple after a long separation, which is followed by Djamila's profession of love, instead places the episode within the realm of intimacy; the final message takes on greater personal than ideological significance. This point is accentuated when the main protagonist defies the expected resolution of the plot and refuses his heroic martyrdom. After being killed, Hamid returns to life, stands up and call out to the reader:

Non, non, je refuse...J'ai encore quelque chose à dire aux gens qui sont venus ce soir pour nous voir jouer cette lamentable histoire ...Aujourd'hui on me fait tuer Djamila, et on me demande de la retuer chaque soir avant que le rideau ne tombe, pour finir l'histoire et quêter vos applaudissements. Mais je ne marche plus, *l'histoire n'est pas finie, l'histoire n'en finit pas*. (Mimouni 190-191, emphasis mine)

No, no, I refuse...I still have something to say to people who came tonight to see me play out this pitiful story...Today they made me kill Djamila, and every night they ask me to kill her over and over again before the curtain falls, in order to finish the story and seek your applause. But I am not falling for it anymore, the story/History is not finished, the story/History never ends.

If Hamid refuses to perform the traditional ending announced in chapter four, it is not only because of the injustice and arbitrary nature of the lovers' deaths, but also because of the ontological consequences of ending the story. If "the story never ends," it is presumably because History itself cannot be fixed in a specific meaning or annexed by official discourse: it must remain open. This rejection of ideological determinism is mirrored in the open-endedness of the narration as the original text concludes:

Est-ce ainsi que se termine une histoire séculaire?
Mais le point final est mis, et le conteur n'a plus qu'à se taire.

...

Is this the way that a secular story ends?
Yet, the period is typed, and the storyteller has only to fall silent. (197)

This passage appears to close the text through a series of marks: the adverb "thus" launches the conclusion of the story, followed by the verb "to end," reiterated in the following line by the expression "mettre un point final à [to put an end to]." As shown in the above translation, this expression means on a more literal level "to put a period at the end of a sentence." And yet, the interrogative mode of the first affirmation places emphasis on the questioning of the appropriateness of the story's ending, thus directly pointing out the subversive potential of the last scene, and leaving this novel indefinitely unfinished.

Furthermore, the abrupt passage from linear narration to theatrical form in the work's last pages represents the ultimate subversion in the rewriting of the final death scene. Presenting the couple's deaths as a staged tragedy shatters literary illusion. It suggests that the traditional nationalist ending would be an impossible performance, split from the reality of the characters. The narrative rupture not only allows Hamid to denounce the traditional ending, but also permits the author to insert a self-reflexive movement within the text. As highlighted by the play on words with "histoire" – meaning both "story" and "history" in French – the text condemns the process of staging History in state-promoted literature for what it is: a mere fiction. As Hamid declares in his last words: "Les spectateurs le savent maintenant, cette histoire n'a aucun lien avec la réalité. [Spectators now know that this story has nothing to do with reality]" (192).

The most intriguing aspect of Hamid's dramatic aside is its use to bring in a new character: the Poet. This figure, whose main role is to comment on the play, seems to correspond to the storyteller, or *goual*, in traditional popular theater called *halqa*. In this type of street theater, a storyteller interprets tales through mime while occasionally addressing spectators directly and asking them to participate via improvisation. This genre differs from traditional European theater to the degree in which it distances performance from reality. Hence, *halqa* provides a good source of analogy for literary devices used by the Poet at the close of *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau*: like a *goual*, he invites his readers to recognize their role in narrating the "story" as well as "history." By reminding them of their role as creative interpreters of the text, he prevents them from passively subscribing to nationalist fiction.

A new subversive strategy emerges from the use of theatrical performance. Mimouni's heterogeneous fictional model deconstructs the homogeneity of state-sponsored literature through its ending, the very part of the text typically most crucial to supporting official nation-building discourse. Even while working within imposed constraints, Mimouni exposes the impracticality of the monolithic identity promoted by the Algerian government, and to which state-sponsored literature would correspond. He suggests that a rebirth of Algerian culture cannot involve a monolithic interpretation of History.

Indeed, *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau* subverts the traditional SNED ending by (1) reworking the representation of the War of Liberation and problematizing post-independence history through the juxtaposition of conflicting narrative events and antagonistic images; (2) disturbing the established closure of the narration and, thus, revealing an awareness of the ideological pitfalls of nationalist literature; and (3) promoting a modern narrative technique by which traditional literary forms such as *halqa* are invested with a subversive role. The use of this literary form issued from folklore allows Mimouni to go beyond a simplistic dissident stand: instead, he challenges the reductive interpretation of nationalist texts as necessarily presenting an apology of the contemporary regime. Ultimately, Mimouni implies that a reconfiguration of literary form is a prerequisite to a liberated representation of the past.

Notes

Benedict Anderson defines official discourse as “emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost” (159). For his discussion of national narratives, see in particular his final chapter “Memory and Forgetting,” pp. 187-206.

Rachid Mimouni, *Le printemps n'en sera que plus beau*. Alger: SNED, 1978. Paris: Stock, 1995.

Starting in 1983, the government allowed the creation of competing publishing houses. However, this did not end the government’s control of the literary field. For example, in his study of censorship, Hafid Gafaïti mentions the case of Kateb Yacine’s biography, written in 1986 (*Kateb Yacine: Un homme, un livre, une oeuvre*). Although it was published at the time in an independent publishing house, Laphomic – thus theoretically escaping from the control of the State – the Algerian secret police confiscated all copies of this book and arrested its publisher (Gafaïti 71).

More recently, Malika Mokeddem intended to get her last novel *Mes Hommes*, already published in France in 2005, re-published in the French and then translated into Arabic by a small Algerian publisher (Sédia Editions, 2006). This project was meant to promote Algerian Francophone writers in their native country, and allow lower-income readers to buy books which may have been too expensive for them when published abroad. However, this project was partly sponsored by the Ministry of Culture which refused to grant permission for the translation of this book into Arabic, under the false pretense that it was not Mokeddem’s best book. (Conference “Un auteur, un livre,” at the Centre Culturel Français of Algiers, September 12th 2006).

The SNED would later be called ENAL (Entreprise Nationale du Livre) when the publishing market opened up in the early 1980s.

According to Charles Bonn, only two francophone novels published by the SNED between 1962 and 1980 fail to situate their plot at least partially within the framework of the War of Liberation: Jamal Ali-Khodja’s *La mante religieuse* and Chabane Ouahioune’s *Les conquérants au parc rouge* (Bonn 10).

All translations are mine.

Among other SNED works’ titles, one can find *Quand le soleil se lèvera*, *Les cinq doigts du jour*, *Rouge l’aube*, and *Les enfants des jours sombres* which all emphasize the advent of day, of light, and of the future as an allegory to the end of colonization.

In Arabic, *halqa* means circle and refers to the circle formed by the crowd around the representation. Although, as its name indicates, *halqa* is originally an Arabic theatrical form, it was later adopted in the popular tradition by Berbers. I am indebted to Khalid Zekri for the reference to this genre in his study of Mimouni’s oeuvre.

Although the concept of *distanciation*, working to distance the audience from the illusion of reality, has been implemented in twentieth-century European theater by Brecht and others, the sources of that theater are found in non-European thought.

The choice of a minor genre, taken from folklore to subvert the nationalist closure of the narration, is not an isolated case. Mimouni's recourse to a different genre in order to unsettle the traditional closure of the nationalist discourse is mirrored in other texts, such as Yamina Mechakra's extensive use of poetry at the end of *La grotte éclatée*. Other writers outside Algeria have also used the *halqa* extensively such as Tahar Ben Jelloun in *L'enfant de sable* and *La nuit sacrée*.

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