

Algeria's Linguistic Trauma and the Subversion in Mosteghanemi's Translation of *Dhakirat al-Jassad*

صدمة اللغة بالجزائر والتحويل و التحفظ في ترجمة رواية ذاكرة الجسد لمستغانمي

Le traumatisme linguistique de l'Algérie et la subversion dans la traduction du *Dhakirat al-Jassad* par Mosteghanemi

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Introduction

France's conquest of Algeria resulted in the inexorable disproportion of its identity. Indeed, the primordial aspiration of the French coloniser was the extermination of the Algerian identity through the *frenchification* of Arabic and the annexation of Algeria as part and parcel of France. Algeria's linguistic trauma after fifty eight years of independence manifests the long-term facade of French assimilation policy. Appropriation and abrogation of the Other's language in postcolonial Algeria are still polemical in quotidian life as well as in literature. The confrontation between Arabic and French in terms of periphery/cosmopolitan languages results in further sensibility and radicalism. In this regard, Thomas (1999) propounds that it is France's policy that "contributed to the extremist tendencies" (27). These tendencies led to discord among Arabophone and Francophone Algerians. From a postcolonial literary frame of reference, which is the focus of the paper, Ahlem Mosteghanemi's *Dhakirat al-Jassad* can be read as a novel of resistance which is written in Arabic as a *conscious* abrogation of the Other's language. Yet, its French and English translations put the cultural values and the resistance discourse into question given the omissions and subversion.

1. Algeria's (Im) Possible Linguistic Unity

Under French rule, the teaching of Arabic was proscribed and Algerians were compelled to use French. On March 8, 1938 the then prime minister launched the Chautemps Decree under which Arabic was reckoned a foreign language in Algeria (Groisy 85). Accordingly, teaching Arabic was prohibited unless the French government offered permission. The French would not of-

fer the stamp of approval and the decree unveils the long-term dimensions of France's assimilation policy. The foreignisation and the frenchification of the Arabic tongue have been pre-planned to frenchify Algerians. Furthermore, the supremacy of French has even been "part of the deal to end France's colonial presence in Algeria" (Benrabah 37). The covenant, which is part of Evian Accords, partly justifies the reason behind the supreme authority of French in politics wherein many politicians still represent Algeria in the Other's language.

In antiquity, the natives of Algeria used to communicate through Berber languages. However, the successive conquests by the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Turks and the French make their imprints clear upon Algeria's identity. Among other Tamazight dialects/languages, Kabyle, Chaouia, Mozabite and Tamahaq are spoken heretofore in Kabylie, Aures, Mzab and El Hoggar regions, respectively. What is more, the Algerian constitution of 2016 declares that Tamazight is an official and national language. Unlike the amendments of 1989 and 1996 that neglected both Tamazight and French, the new amendments included Tamazight, being part and parcel of Algerian identity. Pertaining to Arabic, the constitution avers that it is the official and national language of the country. Paradoxically, the CIA World Factbook (2019) concurs that French is the tangible lingua franca in Algeria. Indeed, the constitution makes no mention of French use in postcolonial Algeria, but people are aware of its omnipresence and predominance.

However, multilingualism in post-independence Algeria is not brought by France. It is rather an inevitable outcome of European colonial interventions. The distinctiveness of quotidian Algerian speech renders it indecipherable by non-Algerians. More often than not, the secret to understanding Algerians who communicate in a manner that is understood mainly -if not only- by them is to be in mastery of both *Darija* (Algerian dialect) and French given that the locals frequently frenchify Arabic and arabicise French. What is more, not all Algerians are able to maintain a conversation in one language, be it Standard Arabic, Darija or French. Thus, France's linguistic assimilation policy succeeded in the creation of a hybrid tongue which is neither Arabic nor French. Recurrent code-switching in conjunction with inaptitude in the job market due to their lack of fluency in Arabic and French raise questions whether Algerian people are bilingual, multilingual or what Maamri refers to as "trilingual illiterates" (85).

The linguistic trauma and collage in Algeria are conspicuously due to the historical interruptions but the diagnosis, knowing the reasons, is not enough to heal. Telling through writing or speaking, as opposed to silence, can be therapeutic. Yet, when language itself is tormented by trauma, the healing is near-im-

possible. Algerians' quotidian speech embodies a collective linguistic trauma which is, most likely, beyond repair. The anxiety of further encounter with the Other's language is becoming more and more a complex and an issue in post-colonial Algeria. Novelists, for example, are split between two languages whose encounter is politically and historically discarded. The attitude towards Francophone writers in particular exhibits Algerians' incapability of understanding diversity and unveils symptoms of schizophrenia because Algeria is "the second-largest French speaking country, after France itself" (Mokrane 45) and people still dart accusatory forefingers on Francophone writers as though none but writers promote the coloniser's language.

2. Algerian Postcolonial Literature: One Story, Two Languages

In postcolonial context, language is a mechanism of resistance, identity and belonging. Language and culture are intertwined (Ngugi, 1986) and the appropriation of a certain language connotes assumption of the culture (Fanon, 1967). Among other theorists and writers, Fanon and Ngugi have unequivocally expounded that the appropriation of the coloniser's language is *per se* an assumption of the culture in question and an approval of its ascendancy over the native one. Chinua Achebe, however, is for the appropriation of the English language in an African manner. Writers' anxiety as regards the use of the Other's language is oftentimes experienced by authors whose bilingualism is an unavoidable outcome of colonisation. The French language or "the step mother tongue"¹ to borrow Djebbar's phrase is considered against Algeria's mode of expression, at least historically and politically. Accordingly, the Algerian story is preordained to be told in two irreconcilable languages.

Mohammed Dib, Salima Ghezali, author of *Les amants de Shabrazade*, Leila Sebbar and Assia Djebbar are among Algerian Francophone novelists for whom the French language is an apparatus to make Algeria's voice heard inside and outside the Algerian territory. By reason of the country's turbulent history with France, Algerian Francophone writers are customarily criticised for using French and they are often accused of being culturally assimilated. Assia Djebbar, born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, is constantly criticised for writing in French even after Algeria's independence. In this regard, the author constantly explains that her soul and memory remain Algerian in spite of her French pen.. In *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, Djebbar further explicates that her writing "looks for a 1. Djebbar's phrase *the stepmother tongue* is telling of the conflict between mother and Other's language in postcolonial Algeria. It is mentioned in Djebbar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* wherein she maintains "French is my stepmother tongue" p. 214.

place where a linguistic armistice can be arranged” (215). Thus, rewriting Algeria's traumatic history in French is emphatically not affected by the language itself but rather by the author's memory and Algeria's past. For Djébar and the like, French is not appropriated to subvert Algerian identity, they “write back” to reclaim their own identity and condemn the colonialists in their own language.

Arabophone novelists such as Taher Ouetta, Abdelhamid Benhadouga, Waciny Laaredj and Ahlem Mosteghanemi maintain that only the Arabic language carries Algerian culture. Following Ngugi's pathway, the aforementioned writers are in favor of abrogation of the coloniser's language and culture to promote their own. Upon the Naguib Mahfouz award winning, Mosteghanemi, the first Algerian woman to write a novel in Arabic in spite of her mother tongue, French, proclaims that Arabophone Algerian writers fight patriotically as opposed to the Francophone ones. She is undeniably committed to Algerian history and her resistance through writing in Arabic reflects her postcolonial awareness as well as her mastery of the Arabic language. Yet, the Arabic language alone is emphatically not a cornerstone for assessment as regards writers' patriotism. In specie, French is not necessarily a sign of betrayal or lack of belonging. Assimilation can take place beyond the borders of native language/Other's language; it can be traced in translations.

To sketch an objective construal of the Arabophone/Francophone writers' discord, we appropriate Edward Said's concept of Contrapuntal Analysis. The latter is originally used to fathom and assess accounts on colonisation from both coloniser/colonised standpoints. Therefore, a contrapuntal reading of Algerian writers' accounts facilitates the encounter with the Other without any hostility or accusations of perfidy. Authors born during, or briefly after, colonisation were unwillingly overexposed to the coloniser's language and are still haunted by it. Yet, Mosteghanemi, born in 1953, takes pride in writing in a language that is, completely and unapologetically, hers in spite of the omnipresence of French in all parts of Algeria. She also bears in mind the martyrs who fought for their land, religion and language. For her, writing in her language is a mechanism of resistance and patriotism. Djébar was twenty-six by 1962, which fairly explains her Francophony without any doubt of her Algerian identity. After independence, she stopped writing in French for twelve years. Her literary silence after Algeria's independence is *per se* a political stance. In order to understand the abstruse Arabophone/Francophone conflict in Algeria, one should be attuned to “the Algerian linguicide” (Mokrane 2002). In a nutshell, writing in

Arabic shall make no writer more Algerian than the Francophone and writing in French shall make no writer less Algerian than the Arabophone.

The situation of the Arabic language is among the present-day preoccupations in Algerian postcolonial discourse. Paradoxically, Algerians' attitude towards Standard Arabic is an axiomatic disclosure of their schizophrenic behaviour and the inferiority complex instilled within their psyche. Fanon dexterously maintains that:

Every colonized people- in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of his local cultural originality- finds himself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation. (1967)

Formerly colonised people embrace and consecrate the coloniser's language and culture as a compensation for their inferiority complex. What is more, their conduct is a contribution to the acknowledgement of the existence of superior languages. This connotes conformity and complicity with the ubiquity of colonial languages in the allegedly postcolonial countries. The second part of Fanon's quotation is perfectly applicable to Algeria's present-day linguistic trauma. Arabic, we daresay, was on its deathbed during colonisation and in the wake of France's departure. Yet, its ultimate slaughter and interment in Algeria have been executed by Algerians who have othered it through their negative, off-putting attitude towards it.

3. Overlapping of Value and Commodity

The commodification of language and culture in postcolonial texts is a subject of debate. The phenomenon of commodification reduces postcolonial works into products whose primary dwelling is the commercialised marketplace. The terminology itself compulsorily alters: The writer becomes a merchant, the reader a customer, and the library a marketplace. The customers demand to be pleased in order to consume, and the merchants are compelled to provide sought-after materials to guarantee consumption and circulation of their works. This contractual relationship which is based upon commodification for the sake of selling puts the authenticity and legibility of merchants and products into question. Reminiscent of actors and actresses who are in pursuit of Prizes and Oscars, awards have become an obsession for some writers.

In the last decades, there appeared a hysterical increase of awards in almost all industries. The Other, for instance, guarantees the circulation of literary works due to the sensibility and exoticism of postcolonial discourse. As expounded by English, this hysteria of multitudinous awards reduces any society

to one that “can conceive of artistic achievements only in terms of stardom and success, and that is fast replacing a rich and varied cultural world” (3). Terms such as “bestselling” and “award-winning” have an effect on the reception of novels and compel people -consumers- to purchase. Accordingly, not all popular contemporary writers and artists merit titles or awards because, as proposed by English, “the cultural universe has become supersaturated with prizes” (17). Most writers, irrespective of merit, have many prizes. In this case, awards are not the cornerstone for assessment with respect to works of art. Rather, it is important to perceive and assess works regardless of their writers or the titles ascribed to them.

Awards are not merely offered to stars, bestsellers, and accomplished writers. Noticeably, the exponential overproduction resulted in the foundation of prizes of absurdity, celebrating poor standards. In the field of literature, for example, English explains that there are prizes for:

Worst book of the year (the J. Gordon Coogler Award), worst translation of the year (the Rach Award) [...] worst piece of academic writing (the Bad Writing Contest Gold Medal), and worst piece of nonfiction writing (the Silver Rhubarb Award). (117)

These are few examples of millions of absurd awards that manifest the prevailing nature of prestige and triviality in many aspects of life. Quality and aestheticism are no longer key elements of awards nomination and winning. The arbitrariness of the unnatural awards reduces the weight of prizes given that both qualified and underqualified are equally awarded. In addition to the aforementioned prizes, there are others for “intentionally bad writing, such as the Bulwer Lytton Grand Prize for Bad Writing [...] and the Hemingway Bad Writing Prize” (English 117). These, however, belong to the category of best-of awards intended as parody.

Mostly due to globalisation, the world is supersaturated with commodities and people are predisposed to consume anything irrespective of the increasing loss of cultural values. This being said, postcolonial literary works can be unapologetically commodified by periphery writers who are in search of recognition, circulation of works and fame after many a decade of exclusion. Feminist and cultural critic bell hooks elucidates the way the marginalized Other “can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation” (26). Some periphery writers are, as rightly suggested by hooks, in pursuance of stardom, and thus, appropriate the notion of Otherness and identity related issues for recognition and circulation of works.

4. Subversive Translation and Cultural Loss

In 1998, *Dhakhirat al-Jassad* had won the Naguib Mahfouz Prize and was translated into English as *Memory in the Flesh* in 2000 and *the Bridges of Constantine* in 2013. Through this novel, Mosteghanemi insistently, and deliberately, draws scholarly attention to the situation of the Arabic language in postcolonial Algeria. Ali El-Rai'i concurs that Mosteghanemi is "a writer who has banished the linguistic exile to which French colonialism pushed Algerian intellectuals" (qtd. in Holt 125). In the award acceptance speech, Mosteghanemi accentuates the importance of the Arabic language as a telling sign of patriotism and resistance. The Arabophone/Francophone hero/villain discord in conjunction with the author's appraisal of Arabophone writers show her tacit *accusation of Francophone writers as though they have willingly chosen to embrace the step-mother tongue* instead of their mother tongue. Rachid Boujedra who wrote in the French language from 1965 until 1981 then returned to it in 1992 maintains "I didn't choose the French language. It rather chose me. It has imposed itself" (qtd. in Maamri 87).

Prior to the dedication page in the original, Mosteghanemi (2013) avers the borrowing of Khaled Ben Toubal, Malek Haddad's protagonist in *Le Quai aux fleurs ne répond plus* (*The Flower Quay No Longer Answers*). The author proclaims that after half a century, Khaled Ben Tobal is back in another novel to write in the language he was deprived of. Then, Khaled is resuscitated to fulfil Haddad's aspiration. This corroborates the author's attachment to the Algerian cause as well as her commitment to the Arabic language. Indisputably, not only is the narrative atmospheric but it is also aesthetic. The writer's full mastery of the Arabic language is unmistakable and she can even be described as rebellious, linguistically speaking. *The Bridges of Constantine* is, without reservation, a tour-de-force novel detailing Algeria's struggle for liberation as well as the disenchantments of the postcolonial reality and corruption.

In the original, Mosteghanemi's word choice in the dedication, which is addressed to her father Si Cherif and to Algerian poet and writer Malek Haddad, substantiates the readers' sense of empathy. The first part is dedicated to Haddad wherein the author proclaims that he swore after Algeria's independence not to write in a language which was not his own and consequently died of the cancer of silence to become a martyr of the Arabic language. The oath and the author's metaphor are sufficient for the arousal of the readers' emotions and the resuscitation of their feelings of belonging. The second part of the dedication is addressed to her deceased father, hoping someone reads him the book given

that he does not read in Arabic. Any writer would pay undivided attention to the dedication because it is among the first elements upon which the readers base their decision to read the book or not. Accordingly, Mosteghanemi's words have been consciously chosen. In this case, her words allude to the fact that there would be no French translation and her father who does not master Arabic has to seek external assistance. Indeed, after the Naguib Mahfouz Prize, the novel was translated into English but there was no French translation even if "Algeria is the second-largest Francophone country, after France itself" (Mokrane 53).

In 2002, however, *Dhakhirat al-Jassad* was translated into French as *Mémoires de la Chair* by Mohamed Mokaddem. This French version "significantly mutes the linguistic drama being staged" (Holt 123) and "the novel enters the world of francophonie through translation" (125). Both Algerian and French readers are concerned with this specific work due to the shared historical experience. When the protagonist Khaled is informed that Hayat writes in Arabic and she confirms "Je pourrais écrire en français, mais l'arabe est la langue de mon cœur"², the French readers in particular are undoubtedly perplexed in front of such contradictions and incongruities given that the passage itself is written in French. The readers are further alienated from the text when the two protagonists -figuratively- make a contract to speak merely in Arabic when Khaled proposes "On ne se parle plus qu'en arabe. Je vais changer vos habitudes à partir d'aujourd'hui."³ Contradictorily again, the passage is written in French and the reader is further confused.

The first part of the dedication in the French translation reads "A Malek Haddad, l'enfant de Constantine qui fait le serment après l'indépendance de ne pas écrire dans une langue qui n'était pas la sienne il est mort de son silence"⁴ The sensibility felt in the original dedication and obscured in the French translation proffers the market's needs. The word choice itself is not as steadfast as in the original. The phrases "a martyr of the Arabic language" and "independence of Algeria" are consciously left out of the French translation because the sensibility of these words would infuriate the French readers. *Mémoires de la Chair*

2. "I could have written in French, but Arabic is the language of my heart" The Bridges of Constantine, p. 62. The female protagonist, Hayat, has affinities with the author herself. Both writer and character write in Arabic despite the French milieu they are in.

3. "We're only going to speak Arabic. I'll change your habits as of today." The Bridges of Constantine, p. 63.

4. To Malek Haddad, the child of Constantine who swore after independence not to write in a language that was not his own... He died of silence. This translation is my own since the English translation does not mention Malek Haddad.

is in reality addressed to a Western audience, mainly French, blasé of Algerians' sensibility in this regard. Surprisingly, the author herself maintains that:

Writers are free to choose between pleasing the West and reforming the East through their ideas. Or they can choose to direct their words to the Western and Eastern reader at the same time. I choose to serve my nation and Arabism as the first priority. (Baaqueel 152)

Undeniably, Mosteghanemi's *Dhakirat al-jassad* is an authentic account of Algeria's history, written in Arabic for an Algerian and an Arab audience. Yet, the French language cannot remain objective in the translation of this historical text which involves its own history. Thus, the omissions in the dedication, deliberate or otherwise, and the contradictions -in the text- corroborate the futility of a French translation and demonstrate the author's eagerness for a wider readership in the West. Had the novel been written originally in French, it would not have been subversive as the translation of *Dhakirat al-Jassad* which fails in the reconciliation of the original and the translated due to the long-standing historical conflict.

The relation between author and translator, original and translated text is consequential. As expounded in *Translation, History, Culture*, which is a reference to grasp the nomenclature of translation, Susan Bassnett argues that translation "can penetrate the native culture, challenge it and even contribute to subverting it" (Introduction 2). This is pertinent when it comes to Mosteghanemi's *Mémoires de la Chair* given the external influences and omissions which primarily serve the target text and audience at the expense of the original. The author's sensed pride in the original dedication is nowhere to be found in the French translation. In reality, the sensibility of the Algerian history with France, Mosteghanemi's *conscions* commitment to the Arabic language and the perplexing French translation make it a product for sale irrespective of its cultural value. In the same manner, if not worse, the English translation by Raphael Cohen makes no mention of Malek Haddad or Algeria in the dedication. For Mosteghanemi, writing about Algeria in Arabic is a mechanism of resistance and belonging as she constantly states. That being said, the novel makes a new phase in prestige through the French and English translations. Therefore, the whole process of writing in Arabic and translating -with moderation- is a mélange of paradoxes.

Conclusion

To bring this paper to an end, the protracted linguistic trauma still haunts Algerians whose sense of belongingness is lost somewhere between colonialism and postcolonialism. Even if it appears to be a

trauma beyond repair by reason of its deep-rootedness, it is necessary to probe into Algeria's history to fathom today's identity crisis. Nonetheless, it is still partly incumbent on both people and government to preserve Algeria's language and dislodge the linguistic intermarriage between two languages and cultures whose convergence is historically and politically discarded. The paper showed how the postcolonial reality is commodified for marketable purposes through Mosteghanemi's translations of *Dhakirat al-Jassad*. We also argued that, like Algerian Arabophone writers, Francophone writers are in a mission to re-tell the Algerian story from an Algerian frame of reference without deformation or partiality.

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Abstract

Algeria's colonial history (1830-1962) instigated linguistic dislocation which was and still is to the core of identity crisis. This paper attempts to examine the unapologetic ubiquity of French and *frenchified* Arabic in postcolonial Algeria. It also highlights the ambivalence as regards staunch resistance to the colonizer's language and concurrent commodification of the postcolonial condition through translation into the Other's language. Mosteghanemi's translations of *Dhakirat al-Jassad*, blasé of Algerians' sensibility as regards national matters, are read in relation to cultural loss and prestige.

Keywords

postcolonial Algeria, linguistic trauma, commodity, cultural loss.

مستخلص

كان تاريخ الجزائر الاستعماري (1830-1962) سببا في التفكك اللغوي الذي كان ولازال في لب أزمة الهوية. يحاول هذا المقال دراسة الوجود المفرط والصادر للغة الفرنسية والعربية المتفرنسة في الجزائر ما بعد الاستعمار. كما يسلط الضوء على التناقض بخصوص مقاومة لغة المستعمر بثبات وسلعة ظرف ما بعد الاستعمار من خلال الترجمة بتحفظ إلى لغة الأخر. في هذا السياق، نعتبر ترجمة ذاكرة الجسد لمستغاني، الغير مكترثة لحساسية الجزائريين فيما يخص المسائل الوطنية، نموذجا للبرستيج والخسارة الثقافية والسلعة الأدبية.

كلمات مفتاحية

الجزائر ما بعد الاستعمار، صدمة لغوية، سلعة، خسارة ثقافية.

Résumé

L'histoire coloniale de l'Algérie (1830-1962) a provoqué un bouleversement linguistique qui a été et est toujours au cœur de la crise identitaire. Cet article tente d'examiner l'omniprésence sans excuse du français et de l'arabe francisé dans l'Algérie postcoloniale. Il souligne également l'ambivalence de la résistance acharnée à la langue du

colonisateur et la marchandisation concomitante de la condition postcoloniale par la traduction dans la langue de l'Autre. Les traductions de Mosteghanemi du Dhakirat al-Jassad, blasées de la sensibilité des Algériens à l'égard des questions nationales, sont lues en relation avec la perte culturelle et le prestige

Mots-clés

Algérie postcoloniale, traumatisme linguistique, marchandise, perte culturelle.