

Identity Construction in Chukri Khodja's *El Euldj, Captif des Barbaresques* (1929)

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Abstract

This paper examines Chukri Khodja's *El-Euldj captif des Barbaresques* (1929) as an early challenge to the colonial paradigm of assimilation through its author's re-appropriation and subversion of colonial discourse. The novel attests to an active literary dialogue that evolved in response to changes in the Third Republic's colonial policies following the First World War. Taking that critical moment of French colonial history into account, Chukri Khodja's narrative deconstructs the French discourse and reveals its disturbing, hidden implications. The present article explores how the text responds to or comment on the characters, topics, and assumptions of a (colonialist) work by following Helen Tiffin's theoretical guiding principles, which examine how can a postcolonial text reshape the reader's previous interpretations of canonical texts. Our final goal is to show how each of the work and its author contributed to a growing sentiment of anti-colonialism that would eventually lead to Algerian independence.

Résumé en français

Ce présent article considère *El-Euldj captif des Barbaresques* de Chukri Khodja (1929) comme étant un défi contre l'idéologie assimilationniste à travers la réappropriation et la subversion du discours colonial. Par le biais de son roman l'auteur propose un dialogue littéraire actif évoluant en réponse aux changements dans la politique coloniale de la Troisième République après la Première Guerre mondiale. Mettant en exergue ce moment critique de l'histoire coloniale française le récit de Chukri Khodja déconstruit le discours français et dévoile ses implications inquiétantes et cachées à travers les commentaires des personnages du récit. Notre analyse a pour objectif d'explorer le texte utilisant une base théorique suggérée par le théoricien Helen Tiffin, qui démontre comment un texte postcolonial peut remodeler des interprétations antérieures de textes canoniques. Le but étant de montrer comment l'œuvre de Chukri Khodja a contribué à un sentiment croissant anticolonial qui a conduit à l'indépendance de l'Algérie.

The present article explores how Chukri Khodja's *El Euldj, Captif des Barbaresques* (1929) responds to or comments on the colonialist discourse and its principles that manifest therein. It investigates how this postcolonial texts reshapes the prototypes of representation particularly as they pertain to the notion of counter discourse and counter hegemonic modalities of resistance and

subversion. Our final goal is to show how its author contributes to the expression of the growing anti-colonial sentiment that led to the war of independence. The task is to explore the discursive methods Choukri Khodja uses to represent the West and highlights how western cultural prejudices and stereotypes can be destabilized and how the discursively inflected distortions of the Orientalist mindset can be disturbed. The choice of this text is determined by a strong desire to discover how the "Other" of the Orientalist ideology examines and understands the Western "Self" and how the Centre vs the Margin binarism of imperial discourse can be debunked. Choukri Khodja moves farther away from the content of the Western accounts about Barbary captivity and foregrounds, instead, the ways in which a text is interpreted by a different culture to fit the ideological needs of its own power structures, which is the main concern of postcolonial writers. In this context, the novelist tells a story as a corrective to some Western accounts with their colonialist ideologies. In this sense, cultural exchange challenges the project of cultural identity that Homi Bhabha describes as the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in a mythic memory of a unique identity (Bhabha [1994] 2004:88).

However, before starting our analysis, since the writer is not well known, it seems necessary to give some biographical references. Choukri Khodja is the pseudonym of Hassen Khodja of Hamdan. He was born on February 11, 1891 in Algiers (Casbah). He is issued from a wealthy and well ranked family of small traders. At the age of sixteen, after the death of his father, he enlisted as an accountant in a Jewish merchant Lyre Street in Algiers. The following year, he was admitted in a religious Madrasa, which he attended until 1922 where he obtained the higher degree. Then, he worked as a court interpreter; he was also appointed to do the same job successively in many regions such as Remchi, Oued Fodda, Tablat, Medea. Finally he settled in Blida. In 1933, he was selected to be the supervisor to all the Court interpreters' classes. He was then affected by the trials imposed by the war of liberation. Consequently, he demanded his retirement by gradually ceasing his activities in 1960. A few years before his death in 1967, he suffered from a depressive crisis and destroyed all he had as manuscripts (Ahour. 1990:37).

As mentioned earlier, many postcolonial theorists argue that postcolonial identity is necessarily a dynamic, constantly evolving hybrid of native and colonial cultures. Moreover, they assert that this hybridity, or syncretism as it is sometimes called, does not consist of a deadlock between two warring cultures but is rather a productive exciting, positive force in a shrinking world that is itself becoming more and more culturally hybrid. This view encourages ex-colonials to embrace the multiple and often conflicting aspects of the blended culture that is theirs and that is an indelible fact of history.² What makes Chukri Khodja's *Eluldj* important, in this context, is the fact that it offers a narration of an experience through the times and spaces of colonial Algerian society. The story speaks of the violence of the Algerian settler-state as an integrative assault on the author's own identity as a 'native' through a gridlocked system of interlocking modes of oppression. The text also provides a site of colonial contest for such "in-between space", to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, and a ground for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity, innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of Algerian society (Bhabha [1994] 2004:123-125). The text of Chukri Khodja demonstrates that crossing transcultural borders exposes the captive not only to physical hardships but also to psychological trauma. It also reveals that such crossing expose the captive and the reader to the alternative paradigms of his captors. So how does Choukri Khodja's novel respond to or comment on the characters? What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference; the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity, in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live? One answer to these questions is that a plurality of voices, including an equal representation of historical narratives from all groups, helps ensure that a narrative told from a single cultural point of view that, nevertheless, presumes to offer the only accurate version of history will no longer control our historical understanding.

Following Helen Tiffin's lead, we examine how *Eluldj* as a postcolonial text that reshapes the previous interpretations of the Barbary tales. When looked at through Helen Tiffin's ideas provided in her essay namely, "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse" (1987), it appears that Khodja's novel resists the

French colonialist ideology by depicting the misdeeds of the colonizers, the suffering of the colonized, or the detrimental effects of colonialism on the colonized. Such analysis is not always as straightforward as a simple outline might lead the reader to expect, however. For the ideological content of literary texts is rarely able to confine itself to such tidy categories. Choukri Khodja's *El Euldj*, for example, is extremely anti-colonialist in its negative representation of the colonial enterprise. The other attempt to find a common denominator in postcolonial literature is made by Helen Tiffin, who claims that the "subversive anticolonialist maneuver, which characterizes post-colonial texts" does not lie in "the construction or reconstruction" of national cultural identity, but rather in "the rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record". The theorist argues that, as it is impossible to retrieve a precolonial past or construct a new cultural identity completely free of the colonial past, most postcolonial literature has attempted, instead, "to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world". One of the many ways postcolonial literature accomplishes this task, Tiffin maintains, is through the use of what she calls "canonical counter-discourse," a strategy whereby "a post-colonial writer takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils its colonialist assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes". As Tiffin observes, canonical counter-discourse doesn't unmask merely the literary works to which it responds, but the whole fabric of colonialist discourse in which those works participate (Tiffin. 1987:95).

It is important to mention that Chukri Khodja belongs to the group of intellectuals educated and trained in French colonial schools. He masters the culture of the colonizer then he uses such an education to assert his Algerian identity. His novel *El Euldj, captif des Barbaresques*, illustrates the writing movement, challenges the colonial ideology, and subverts its historical significance. Throughout his third novel, he tells the story of a French character named Brenard Ledieux who was captured by the Barbary pirates. To escape the harsh living conditions of captivity, he converts to Islam but not totally because he renounces his Muslim religion to become Christian again. Thus, he suffers from an inner conflict as his identity becomes disturbed and unable to enter the

world of the "Other" and ends in death. Khodja's *El Euldj*, *Captives of Barbarians* reveals, in the character of Bernard Ledieux, the detrimental effects of colonialist psychology even on the culturally privileged who are its apparent beneficiaries. Ledieux is clearly the most culturally privileged character in the novel; he is also the character who most overtly exhibits the attitudes and behaviors associated with colonialist psychology. For one thing, he fervently believes in French and Christian supremacy, a colonialist ideology that Anglo-European people used in order to justify their subordination of the Africans. Re-appropriation and subversion of the colonial discourse might be one area of analysis here. What appears from Choukri Khoudja's novel is the idea that colonialist psychology is not confined to the depiction of characters the novel itself discredits, such as Bernard Ledieux. Rather, colonialist psychology is a pervasive presence in the narrative as a whole because that psychology is central to the characterization of the narrator, a voice from inside. In addition, the novel helps us understand colonialist psychology from the viewpoint of the colonial subject, who, remaining a cultural outsider even after he regains his freedom and status.

Choukri Khodja's Novel: an Alternative Voice.

The date of publication of the novel is very significant. It corresponds to the centenary of the conquest of Algeria. French colonization was about to celebrate its centenary. It was a crucial time in Algerian history it corresponded to the eve of the centenary when settlement was preparing to celebrate in Algiers and in the rest of the country one hundred years of French presence and domination. There was a decade from 1920 to 1930 as defined by two famous events, the first is the end of the First World War, the other is the centenary of French colonization. The oppressor no longer felt threatened. After a century, it has established its domination over the whole Algerian territory and succeeded in deconstructing the society. *El Euldj* was produced during the first quarter of the century and contains all Westerners' clichés and colonial stereotypes about the evils of the Barbary pirates, insecurity, poverty, marginalization, and especially religious conflicts. It can be regarded as the outcome of writing and literary requirements, which is expressed in the language of the occupier denying this literature in its practice of the assimilation policy advocated by the French colonial power. More significantly, the novel follows closely the political events of the period and aspires to be heard as an alternative voice of the colonized. Its author provides his views on issues from

the colonial phenomenon by coordinating the narrative around dichotomous reports such as history vs. ideology; colonized vs. colonizer, Metropolis vs. Colony. In short, it is a moralizing text that marks a series of formal and ideological breaks. The author examines through a discursive narrative how group identity is represented, constructed and negotiated and how the relationships between identities and actions build up group self-representations.

Chukri Khodja in his *El Euldj, a Barbary Captive*, has no interest in attaching importance to the Turkish period at that crucial time in history when French colonization put the country in turmoil. Already in his first novel, he shows his awareness about colonial injustice. Khodja wanted in his way, to be a specific witness of his country under French colonization where the theme of the barbarism of colonizer was dominating. His work has not failed to show and to insist, like the main character of the narrative, that Algeria's accession enclosed by the colonial system, means its allegiance was only a pretext for this character oppressed for survival. This suggestion can be justified by the author's appeal to the mask and his desire to divert attention from censorship. Indeed, the movement of nationalism did not yet exist. It grew more and more during the thirties. But to answer the question: why precisely the Turkish period? We can justify this choice by the fact that it was the period immediately preceding the French domination. There is a certain relationship between barbarism practiced by Turks and the one practiced by the French even though they were more ferocious than their predecessors. For the author there are strong relationships between narrative and identity. He explores the various linguistic and rhetorical resources that can allow identifying the narrator's identification in the storytelling. By telling stories, the narrator represents not only the social worlds and to evaluate them but also to establish himself as a member of particular groups through interactional, linguistic, rhetorical and stylistic choices. In so doing, he evaluates how the colonized people present themselves in relation to others through an examination of narrative technique to express solidarity. He also looks at the kinds of categories that the narrator uses to talk about the self and the other. In the narrative, Algerian identity is expressed through the use of different local terms such as: *reïss*, *oukil el hardj*, *saïgi*, *khaznadar*, *khodja el khil*, *muphti*, *pacha*, *officier des janissaires* (Khodja.1929: 6, 18, 58). The author maps the discourses of two groups: the Captive's discourse

but also other discourses of the Algerians' experience of colonization. The author looks at how encounters between the two groups have an impact on their self-reflection and the emergence of new identities. Choukri Khodja shows that the image of the captive as a naïve and unreflective individual is quite wrong as, even though one can easily get the impression that he searches for authenticity. His discourse evolves between various (often contradictory) positions and dimensions. For example, Bernard Ledieux is well aware that the local people are actually "inventing" their cultural identity for them. It seems that the author is interested in how his informants understand the racial, ethnic and cultural labels created by the "other". By using a dialogical self approach, which challenges static identities, he debunks the idea of the Westerners captives, who hold fast to their ideals while courageously struggling for freedom. The study of the polyphonic construction of self in dialogue with the other can help review canonical "culturalist" and static approaches to acculturation and assimilation often used by the colonizer.

In order to escape censorship, Choukri Khodja anchors his story about Algeria during the Turkish period. The central character is a French Christian captive, named Bernard Ledieux. To escape the unbearable conditions of his captivity by the Barbary pirates, Ledieux agrees to be converted to the Muslim religion and accepts also to change his identity. He becomes Omar Lediousse, who marries Zineb a Muslim daughter of an Algerian notable Baba Hadji. As many Christians converted to Islam, Bernard Ledieux becomes Muslim from a perceived necessity of a slave; he thought it was in his best interests to do so in order to improve his conditions and escape servitude. It stems also from his desire to improve his social status and material circumstances. But deep inside himself, the new convert feels overwhelmed by his French and Christian faith. The conflict works on a historical situation of displacement. It can be interpreted as a kind of "deviation" by the author to express himself freely on the Algerian situation, not from the Turkish period, but of the French colonial situation. Choukri Khodja uses deviations and stratagems in his discourse to show and express his awareness of colonial injustice. He highlights the oppositions and differences between the Muslim and the Christian worlds while proving that assimilation is a "façade" or an appearance that hides a lot of things.

Far from meaning a full integration in the cultural and religious systems imposed by the colonizer, the story of Bernard Ledieux or Omar Lediousse is not presented as a positive example of assimilation. As an illustration, during one of his prayers at the mosque, the hero reaffirms his Christian identity and publicly renounces to his adopted religion Islam. His route ends in madness and death. The work focuses on the barbaric and despicable act that the occupant requires a colonized to assimilate the religion and culture of colonizer. The novel offers also to be read that French colonization, which lasted a century in Algeria, may follow the same fate as the powerful Turkish Regency, which was dismantled by the French colonization. More importantly, in this historical novel, Chukri Khodja lets the voice of the oppressed heard rather than that the oppressor. In so doing, the author breaks the oppressor's monological discourse. The Algerian population becomes the basis of the breakdown of colonial monological discourse and shows that Islam posed a problem since it encouraged far greater piety among its adherents than Christianity.

Re-telling of the Barbary Captivity Narratives

As it has been mentioned earlier, no discourse can be completely silenced or negated. If the perspective known as Orientalism focuses on the West's perception of the Orient in the process of self-representation, what could then be the discursive ramifications of a strategic reversal of modes of representation inherent in such a perception? The author of *El Euldj, Captif des Barbaresques's eyes* on the French, Turkish, and Western domination underlines an invective and counter hegemonic attitude of the author who is functioning not simply as an individual but metonymically as the eye and voice of long silenced and misrepresented Algerian. Based on the author's experience of colonial history, the novel is a good example of how the "cultural contested codes" are used. It is closely concerned with the ways in which different modes of interpreting culture are tight to the historical, institutional, and social contexts in which these interpretations are produced. If Chukri Khodja develops a whole speech about assimilation, it is because it was part of the daily political agenda of Algeria during the twenties. French colonial system required of the indigenous people a renunciation of personal status to join the class citizens of the first order. Apart from a few isolated cases, the Algerians pointed at it as a betrayal. While hiding behind his main characters, Choukri Khodja holds the same discourse which is

expressed as follows: "I do not want to be Arab", "Do not worry, as I am intelligent and because is rejected by his native society. He declares: « *Je suis déçu, Cuisinier, je pensais trouver auprès de toi un peu de réconfort, je trouve haine et mépris* » (P.45). Ledieux, the renegade is rejected in the image of any person committing that "forbidden act (Haram)." It is therefore repudiated and it is called "M'tourni" as he states: « *je ne pouvais me défaire de ma foi chrétienne, celle que je crois aujourd'hui la seule lumineuse et pure* » (P.14). El Euldj goes on to say: "I have done more than to murder aman, I murdered a religion, my religion, that so beautiful and enchanting" [...] I could not rid myself of my Christian faith, which I think know the only bright and pure faith (108). The main character's confession explains well the tormented life of the renegades who are harassed by remorse for having denied one day their native religion. Indeed, assimilation is always "crowned" by failure. Moreover, in his religious discourse, the Mufti, Youssef talks about the true Muslim religion. He reinforces his arguments with the image of an Islam free of any Marabout practices; an Islam that refuses fatalism; the following passage tells more: « *L'homme serait une négation s'il n'avait pas de volonté propre, s'il n'avait pas de personnalité et s'il se condamnait à une activité béate, attendant de la volonté divine la direction de ses gestes et de ses mouvements* » (P.177). Furthermore the mufti discusses by reference to the development of a dynamic Islam taking every possible step when stating: « *Le monde arrivera à un stade d'apogée qui constituera pour l'humanité le sommet de la perfection scientifique et artistique [...]. La pensée humaine sera publiée en un clin d'œil dans les quatre points du monde. Et tout cela, mes chers élèves se conjuguera à merveille avec la volonté divine* » (P.109). In reality, this speech is addressed to the ones who consider Islam as a religion of intolerance and intransigence. Chukri Khodja, through the voice of Youcef wanted to overturn prejudices on the fatalism of Islam and Muslims, he allows the reader to discover that "the people receive the instruction to which he is entitled. Such a description reflects the disintegration of the education system imposed by the colonizer. The French fought against the Algerian school. They were aware that teaching and instructing Algerians is a real danger for them as this declaration shows it clearly: « *L'instruction des indigènes fait courir en Algérie un véritable péril. Si l'instruction se généralisait, le*

cri unanime des indigènes serait:l'Algérie aux Arabes» (P.97). If ChukriKhodja forces Arabic to take place in a speech of the characters, it is because this language has been marginalized for benefit of the French that was broadcasted by the privileged channel of school: « *Elle (l'école coloniale) devra assurer la prédominance de notre langue sur les divers idiomes locaux inculquer aux Musulmans l'idée que nous avons-nous mêmes de la France et de son rôle dans le monde»* (P.85). The other points raised by ChukriKhodja in his work, that appears as a direct transposition of the aspects of the historical situation of colonial Algeria lies in his description of and the transformation of Djamaâ Ketchaoua into a Cathedral. This act is common during the period of French Algeria. Several mosques were transformed into hospitals, stores or churches. We can even say that the attempted landing of Charles Vin Algiers in 1541-50, mentioned in the work of ChukriKhodja is only a reference to the crimes of the French and their acts of violence against Algerian people. In addition, the names of characters refer to Islamic figures. This ties the reality of Colonized Algerians who fought to keep the Arab-Islamic identity. It can be said that *El Euldj* is a work based on careful observation of reality of social life. It is a study of the problems of Algeria during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The attentive reader cannot fail to see the presence of a committed writer who depicts and presents Algeria with its history, religion, language and culture. History and society appear in the novel as so many texts that maintain a dialogue of many voices.

Moreover, by inserting the history in the period of Turkish rule of Algeria, the writer of *El Euldj, the Barbary Captive*, implicitly attacks the French occupation emphasizing enforcement actions experienced by Bernard Ledieux; an experience that directly reflects the fate of any Algerian slave of the French period. This sort of camouflage allows the narrator to speak with a lot of freedom on the differences and the oppositions between Muslim and Christian worlds, that of the 'Other'. The voice and the tone used by the writer stresses a much more mature resisting discourse and voices out the subversive postcolonial attitude of the author who emerges as a "dissenting voice" capable of contesting the western hegemonic discourse. His subversive attitude remains intensely self-conscious and it is meant both to destabilize the West in its essence through a systematic reversal of the "order of things" and to allow the reader to mock modernity through a political eye-witness who possesses

a distinctive postcolonial critical consciousness in order to serve his cultural expression, and self-representation.

ChukriKhodja is a writer fed in the arabo-islamic tradition but he is also the product of the colonial school system as we mentioned it earlier. His double heritage is reflected by the character of Youssef who "could not resist the very legitimate curiosity to taste the fruits of the French garden i.e, the French rhetoric. The author combines his Arab religion and a French blood and culture, which Youssef voices as follows: *«J'ai idée que je puis avoir du sang français dans les veines et alimenter mon cerveau de la nourriture généreuse que contient l'islam»*(P.62). We can deduce that ChukriKhodja and his character are open to dialogue and exchange between cultures, religions and languages while respecting differences and interests. Youssef is the son who is able to save the life of his father at the time where he publicly abjures Islam as the excerpt shows it clearly: *«Mais Dieu a commandé cela. Dieu a voulu que le fils musulman d'un français redevenu chrétien ait en lui le mélange altier de la fierté arabe conjuguée à l'esprit chevaleresque français, grâce auquel il a su se protéger contre le mauvais parti que tous les croyants avaient décidé de te faire»* (P.247). The passage shows a reversed situation of the main character. The author claims that the French school system allows him to take his place among the Algerian intellectuals between the two World Wars that filled this role of "spokesman" of his indigenous culture. He becomes the one, who claims to the colonizer through Youssef's behavior the right of being different. The author wants to achieve synthetic and complementarily between Algerian and Islamic modernity, French social, cultural identity between Algerian and French education. This reminds of the duplication of social personality of the author, who has been placed between two cultural spheres. The complexity of personality ChoukriKhodja is clear in his writing. These inner-turns were strong probably the basis of a depressive crisis a few years before his death, and during which he destroyed everything he had as manuscripts.

Conclusion

It appears from our analysis of ChoukriKhodja's third novel that during the period between the wars, the social conditions have been the basis of the creation of many literary works; his novel cannot be deaf to that time. More significantly, the novel may be viewed as a loud call for radical revisions of the old body of assumptions and misrepresentations that have fostered the Western Orientalist discourse. ChoukriKhodja's subversive strategies markedly acquire greater levels of importance as

they have undertaken the task to strike back for self-empowerment and self-assertion, through a metaphorically massive penetration of the Western colonial mindset. As a response to the western conventional paradigms of subordination and exclusion, ChoukriKhodjagives voice to the Algerian silenced voices, which have been driven by a strong desire to question the basic assumptions upon the legacies of western discourse. This audacity of the writer formed in the colonial school system prompted him to speak at a time of risk and obliges him to use deviation and camouflage as ways to cope with censorship. His veiled writing allows the author to be ironic while he invites the colonizer to review the issue of assimilation and asserts the permanence of an authentically Arab-Islamic identity.

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