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### Abstract

*This paper explores how Khaled, in Ahlem Mostaghanemi's The Bridges of Constantine(1993), is a prototype of Algerian people who are left homeless after independence and who have opted for exile as an escape from the disillusionment that overwhelmed the atmosphere of the newly-independent Algeria. Being a revolutionary in the Algerian liberation war, Khaled has lost his arm, which arouses a sense of alienation inside him since he can no longer take part in the war. Khaled resorts to painting and writing in order to overcome his physical pain and to voice all his social, political and psychological grievances; however, his art has not been appreciated in his country, which leads him to search for his missing hope in France. Accordingly, this paper reveals how art becomes both a source of nostalgia and a form of invasion for Khaled who attempts to survive the trauma of exile by painting his city Constantine and his lover Hayet.*

**Keywords:** art, postcolonial, home, trauma and exile.

### ملخص

تستكشف هذه الورقة كيف أن خالد، في رواية أحلام مستغانمي، جسور قسنطينة (1993)، هو نموذج أولي للشعب الجزائري الذي ترك بلا مأوى بعد الاستقلال والذي اختار المنفى باعتباره هروباً من خيبة الأمل التي طغت على أجواء الجزائر المستقلة حديثاً. كونه ثورياً في حرب التحرير الجزائرية، فقد خالده ذراعه، مما أثار إحساساً بالغربة داخله لأنه لم يعد قادراً على المشاركة في الحرب. لذلك يلجأ خالد إلى الرسم والكتابة للتغلب على آلامه الجسدية والتعبير عن جميع مظالمه الاجتماعية والسياسية والنفسية. ومع ذلك، لم يتم تقدير فنه في بلده، مما دفعه للبحث عن أمله المفقود في فرنسا. وفقاً لذلك، تكشف هذه الورقة كيف أصبح الفن مصدرًا للحنين وشكلاً من أشكال الغزو لخالد الذي يحاول النجاة من صدمة المنفى من خلال رسم مدينته قسنطينة وحبيبته حياة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الفن، ما بعد الاستعمار، الوطن، الصدمة والنفي.

## 1. Introduction:

Ahlem Mosteghanemi is an Algerian female author who grapples with the effects of political and social issues on the Algerian individual. She also sheds light on the theme of the connection between trauma and corporeality through the disfigured body as it is the case in *The bridges of Constantine* (1993). In such novel, the author shows how the war leaves scars on Khaled Ben Tubal's body as he was a part of it. This current study emphasizes the role of art in expressing Khaled's psychic wounds and in resisting the postcolonial trauma. It also deals with the protagonist as a traumatized individual who represents the Algerian society, highlighting how he overcomes his sense of disillusionment and despair through art. Specifically, it reveals how art becomes both a source of nostalgia and a form of invasion for Khaled. It equally reveals how Khaled can heal his psychic wounds through different means especially art, writing and storytelling. In order to achieve these goals, the study seeks to answer the following questions: Can art be a medium of expressing various psychic wounds? How does art work as a counter discourse to postcolonial trauma in Ahlem Mosteghanemi's *The Bridges of Constantine*. And how do Khaled's paintings project his nostalgic feelings for his homeland? Finally, can a trauma victim as Khaled successfully heal from trauma via art? To fix these questions, the study engages with various theoretical propositions on trauma and its projection via art.

Mosteghanemi's *Bridges of Constantine* revolves around Khaled Ben Tubal who lost his arm in the Algerian independence war. As he refused to accept the corrupt life of post-revolutionary Algeria, Khaled left to Paris looking for a place where he is embraced. As a disappointed person, Khaled opts in exile for artistic creation not only to erase his traumatic memories out of his consciousness but also to find a surrogate home. It is worth mentioning that Mosteghanemi uses metaphor in the novel to show how Khaled is the prototype of the Algerian community. Khaled's amputated arm, for instance, can be read as a metaphor for Algerian people's paralysis that resulted from colonialism. Khaled's contradictory reaction (humiliation/ sense of pride) to his amputated arm is a metaphor for Algeria's situation after independence. While Khaled's paintings can be a symbol for Algerian people who strive to recover from their psychological plight in the

post-colonial Algeria. More than that, Khaled's paintings can be also a symbol for Algerian people who seek to find a solace from the trauma of the war that keeps haunting them. In "A Setback into the Body: A Study of Women Identity and National Identity in Ahlem Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*" (2020) Iman Fathi Yahya and Huda Baheen Abdul Wahhad argue that in *The Bridges of Constantine*, Mosteghanemi "goes on to reveal the effects of [the]psychological scars on Khaled and Algeria. She captures the impact of colonization on a country using the impact of an amputation on an individual" (p 15703). It is worth highlighting that Mosteghanemi's novel is approached from different angles. In "Unlocking the Female in Ahlem Mosteghanemi" (2002), Ellen McLarney scrutinizes the theme of nostalgia in the novel, highlighting how Khaled is being nostalgic for his beloved Hayet and for his homeland Constantine. In "The (Im)possibility of Telling: of Algeria and *Memory in the Flesh* (2010)," Tanja Stampfl grapples with the theme of the body as a complex construction of Khaled's historical, cultural and national belonging using the theories of Judith Butler. Stampfl argues that "Mosteghanemi introduces the body as object of desire, as an allegory for the nation, and a symbol for the physical connection to and the responsibility of one's country and its people" (p.130). In "Postcolonial Condition: Remembering to Resist or Forgetting to Persist in Ahlem Mosteghanemi's *The Bridges of Constantine*" (2019), Hana Bougherira maintains how the author sheds light on the sense of disillusionment in the independent Algeria. The body of criticism dealing with Mosteghanemi's novel does not refer to art's role in representing the protagonist's wounds of the war. In other words, the theme of healing psychological wounds and physical paralysis through art in Ahlem Mosteghanemi's *The Bridges of Constantine* is less trodden. On this basis, the current paper addresses art as a part of Khaled's healing process and as a counter discourse to his postcolonial trauma.

## 2. Art as a counter Discourse to Postcolonial trauma in Mosteghanemi's Novel

Mosteghanemi's novel depicts the protagonist khaled Ben Tubal, a warrior and later painter, who falls into a depression, fragmentation and isolation after losing his arm in the war. Being rejected in his country, Khaled opts for exile to escape from the disillusioned, despaired and the corrupt life in the newly independent Algeria. He

narrates: “I was after independence, running away from the political positions offered to me, which everyone was eager to reach” (p.147). The author particularly depicts Khaled as an exilic intellectual who resorts to painting in Paris looking for intellectual sophistication, artistic milieu, and a new lifestyle. Accordingly, Khaled mentions:

I was confronted with a strange contradiction: I lived in a country that respected my talents but rejected my wounds, and belonged to a nation that respected my wounds but rejected me. Which one to choose when I was the person and the wound at the same time? When I was the disabled memory of which this disabled body was only a façade? (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p 49).

As he went to France, Khaled decided to start painting as a way to survive the wounds of the war. In exile, Khaled, however, experiences moments of low self-esteem, humiliation, a sense of puzzlement and emotional upset. Khaled mentions: “A quarter of a century later, I was ashamed of the empty sleeve of my suit. So I would tuck it into my jacket pocket, as though hiding my own memory and apologizing for my past to all those who had no past. The missing hand unsettled them. Disconcerted. Made them lose their appetite” (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p 48). The quote shows that Mosteghanemi uses different literary techniques to convey Khaled’s fragmentation and alienation. The heterogeneity in the narrative techniques is manifest through the use of interior monologue and a deviation from the grammatical rules of language.

Locking feelings is what Khaled has been doing since his departure to France. He never speaks a word about how he feels or what troubles him, which relates to Cathy Caruth’s view on trauma as an unspeakable experience. He has not told anyone that he feels a sense of nothingness in both his homeland and even in exile. In this vein, he says: “I did not say anything to him that day. For an obscure reason, I felt that I had been orphaned again. A tear froze in each eye. I was bleeding, and the pain in my arm was gradually spreading to my whole body. It settled in my throat as a lump of pain, disappointment and fear of the unknown” (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p.22). He narrates that neither in France nor in present Constantine he can get rid of the feeling of nothingness since he is overwhelmed by the memories of

his motherly home. Relatively, he declares: "As I listened to myself narrating this for the first time, it was as if I were discovering it with you" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p 71).

Khaled is unwilling to narrate his feelings or his story. For him, hiding them is the best solution. However, these memories of the war keep haunting him. It is very hard to use words that describe his state. What is interesting is how he could form a collection of words in his mind that reflect his emotions, but he never gives them the permission to be set free out of its prison. Khaled's attempts to forget his traumatic memories fails; his use of the bridge metaphors is a sign that he is still torn between the past and the present. He further speaks in a repetitive way about bridges. In an interior monologue, he expresses: "Khaled, why do you surround yourself with all these bridges? I do not surround myself with them. I carry them inside me. There are people like that, born on a suspension bridge who come between two tracks" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p303). Due to the fragility of his consciousness, his alienation, and his fragmentation, Khaled's earlier memories return back to the surface in a form of nostalgia. In this vein, he declares: "Tonight the past awakens bewilderingly inside me. It lures me into the labyrinth of memory. I try to resist, but can I resist my memory? I close the door of my room and open the window again. I try to see something other than myself, but the window looks back at me" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p.13).

In exile, Khaled is conquered by feelings of longing and love after meeting Hayet, the daughter of Si Tahar, Khaled's commander, who is killed in the war for independence. Khaled has not visited his homeland Constantine for years. With Hayet's presence, Khaled's memories return to manifest again in his consciousness. He feels nostalgic for his memories with Si Tahar since he represents the ideals of the Algerian revolution. Khaled also feels nostalgic for his childhood and his memories with his mother. He says: "silence could have been a blessing this night in particular, just like forgetting. On such occasions, memory does not come in installments, but overwhelms me in torrents, sending me tumbling down unknown slopes" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p.16). He also feels nostalgic for his city Constantine that existed before the death of his parents and his arm was amputated. In order to express his connection with his homeland, Khaled resorts to painting and writing as ways to survive such nostalgic feelings. Khaled repetitively refers to Hayet's

appearance in his life and how she triggers his memories of his homeland. He asserts:

I went back to that picture from time to time, and would wonder how you had managed to waylay me after I had avoided every avenue leading back to you. How did you come back after the wound had so nearly healed? My heart that once brimmed with your memory had little by little emptied of you, you who had packed love's bags and taken off for another heart. You left my heart like a package tourist leaves a city. Everything pre-arranged, even the departure time; everything pre-booked, even the sights to visit, the play to see and the gift shop to buy souvenirs. Was your journey as tedious as that?" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p7)

As time runs, Khaled becomes convinced that he has to heal himself from all his wounds. Khaled remembers the Yugoslavian doctor's advice for him to "build a new relationship with the world through writing or painting" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p.39). On this basis, Khaled resorts to painting as a way to recover himself from the shackles of his psychic wounds. Here, the author accentuates the role of art as a therapy, emphasizing how art helps Khaled to no longer be imprisoned within his memories of the war. Respectively, Khaled mentions: "it was an attempt at creativity or designed to go down in history. I was just trying to live, to escape despair. I had painted it like an art student taking an exam in which the assignment is to paint the scene closest to who you are" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p38).

Writing is considered to be another medium through which the traumatized subject comes to terms with his/her earlier traumatic memories. The power of writing is projected in Louise De Salvo's book *Writing as a Way of Healing* (2000), in which she insists on the importance of writing in facing and understanding trauma asserting: "what we believed happened to us, shifts and changes, it is not that we use writing to deny what we have experienced. Rather, we use it to shift our perspectives" (p.11). In *The Bridges of Constantine*, writing is another medium that helps Khaled to cope with his trauma. In the beginning, the Yugoslavian doctor advises Khaled to find a

solace in writing, asserting "you must choose which you prefer and then sit and write down everything that is on your mind, without inhibition. The kind of writing is not important, nor its literary quality. What matters is simply writing as a means to get it all out and rebuild yourself internally" (Mostaghanemi, 1998, p39). Through his writings, the reader recognizes that Khaled falls in love with Hayet. He writes that he continued loving her till he received the invitation to attend her wedding. He writes to Hayet that, at that moment, he feels a strange mixed feeling between pain and surprise. He significantly reveals all the psychic wounds that Hayet's love had caused him. Khaled wonders about the power of writing in recovering certain psychic wounds, asserting:

Can paper extinguish memory when we leave the ash of nostalgia and the fag ends of disappointment on it? Which one of us snuffed out or fired up the other? I do not know, but before you I had not written anything worth mentioning. I will only start writing with you. Inevitably, I will finally find the words to write me. It is my right, today, to choose this story- a story that might not have been mine, if fate had not kept inserting you into every twist of the plot. (Mostaghanemi, 1998, p2)

Khaled was afraid of writing letters to Hayet especially that he strives to forget those memories. He states accordingly: "these are the words I have been denied; naked, raw and painful, the way I want them. So why is my hand trembling fearfully, unable to write? Maybe it is only just dawned on me that I have exchanged my brushes for a knife. Writing to you is a fatal as loving you" (Mostaghanemi, 1998, p.3). Through writing, Khaled comes to terms with his psychic wounds, finding a solution to his isolation, embracing a feeling of relief and comfort. He declares:

Before today, I believed we could only write about our lives once we had been cured of them. When we could probe old wounds with the pen and not feel the pain again; when we could look back without nostalgia, without going mad and, also, without bitterness. Is that really possible? We are never cured of memory. That is

why we paint and why we write. And why some of us die (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p1).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, turning the traumatic memory into words is not an easy step, but once he succeeds in it, the feeling of repression will disappear. By doing so, Khaled overcomes his fears and expresses his anger and grief successfully. Similar to art and writing, storytelling is utilized in the novel as a medium through which Khaled expresses his psychic wounds especially his feelings of nothingness.

In dealing with Khaled as an exilic intellectual, Edward Said's *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993) is needed here. In this book, Said grapples with the exilic individual intellectual, referring to him/her as a marginalized amateur, asserting "My characterizations of the intellectual as exile and marginal, as amateur" (p. XIV). Said (1993) specifies a chapter entitled "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals," to deal with the above- mentioned figure. Likewise, he lists some parameters that he attached to the exilic individual intellectual. He sheds light on self-reliance and affiliation as main criteria for the exilic intellectual: "[The intellectual] must develop a resistant intellectual consciousness before he can become an artist" (1993, p.13). To put it differently, the exilic intellectual has to reject all the pressures that prevent him/ her from intellectual sophistication. Based on Said's conceptualization, the exilic intellectual has to avoid the influence of one's culture and nationalism because they pave the way for shallowness, bias and subjectivity. Furthermore, Said (1993) points out that the intellectual has to be autonomous and objective in his/ her thought and action. Importantly, he stresses that the exilic intellectual has to accept his exilic situation as a way to avoid all sorts of pressure, and to have a sense of intellectuality, saying that "The intellectual as exile tends to be happy with the idea of unhappiness" (1993, p.53).

After being a painter, Khaled, as an exilic intellectual, becomes "one of Algeria's major artists, perhaps the biggest of all" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p41). The author shows that Khaled did not surrender to his paralysis. He rather empowers himself to confront the void he feels. Using Said's parameters for the intellectual, one can say that Khaled becomes happy with his unhappiness in exile in the way he focuses on expressing those memories in a form of paintings. In



exile, Khaled succeeds in overcoming feelings of worthlessness, disillusionment, helplessness and despair. He rather regains feelings of pride and self-confidence. In this vein, he states: "Some vestige of pride and honor made me prefer to stay standing, holding on with one hand" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p49). By painting with one hand, Khaled also feels a sense of victorhood. He feels that with one hand, he "mocked the world and recast the features of things" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p.49). Strikingly, Khaled develops an individual consciousness in the way he represents the prototype of the Algerian revolutionary individual, indicating that it is the individual's responsibility to heal the wounds of the war. Khaled, then, releases himself from the shackles of the past memories via art. Here, art is seen as solace from such traumatic memories. William Steel (2005) highlights that "externalizing the story into a visual representation of the elements of the traumatic experience promotes safety and contributes to a successful psychiatric intervention" (p.10).

Said(1993) maintains that commitment is one of the functions that the exilic intellectual has to focus on; that is, the exilic intellectual has to devote his/ her time to capture the spirit of his age through emphasizing the vices of his society in a universal way. By using Said's line of thought, one says that Khaled, as an exilic person, has an intellectual consciousness to liberate the Algerian mind from the psychological plight of the post-colonial Algeria. To illustrate this, when Hayet asks for the ten commandments, Khaled answers her: "you[have] an inner light I [have not] seen it in a woman before. A seed of purity I did not want to disregard" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p287). Here, Khaled uses the expression of purity to show that Hayet is an epitome of the traditional Algerian woman who remains close to her roots. This idea is exemplified through her use of Constantinian dialect, her traditional clothing 'Kandoura and Miqyas'. Khaled further gives Hayet the eleventh commandment to see herself with "greater pride [...]with profound awareness that[she is] more than a woman[she is]an entire nation" (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p287).From this quote, one can say that Khaled is an exilic person who strives to reconstruct the nation.

It is worth adding that Edward Said agrees with Ralph Waldo Emerson in diagnosing the parameters of an individual intellectual. In his "Self-Reliance," Emerson(1841) does not use the term exile, yet he mentions that the individual intellectual has to build up a self that

can transcend all sorts of pressure, “a special power within every man that should be made manifest ‘trust the self: every heart vibrates to that iron string accept the place the divine providence has found for you” (p2). In *The Bridges of Constantine*, Mosteghanemi uses Khaled as an exilic character who has an individual consciousness to reconstruct the country. She also depicts him as a self-reliant individual who uses art to resist his physical paralysis and to voice his social, political and psychological grievances. As an example, Khaled addresses the thieves who steal the nation’s sources, asserting “we will keep blood and memory[...]we will haunt you with them and rebuild this homeland with them” (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p298). Significantly, as an exilic intellectual, Khaled uses art a sort of invasion by painting Catherine who represents the modern French woman and who symbolizes at the same time modern France. More than that, he gives all his paintings to Catherine, asking her to “hang [his]memory on her wall; a symbolism which she fails to grasp” (Mosteghanemi, 1998, p301). Here, Khaled is seen as a conqueror of France, employing art as a counter discourse to colonialism by showing how he overcomes the trauma of the war in the colonizer’s land.

### **Conclusion**

This study deals with Khaled as a prototype of Algerian people who are left homeless after independence and who have opted for exile as an escape from the disillusionment that overwhelmed the atmosphere of the newly-independent Algeria. The study also highlights how art is used in Mostaghanemi's *The Bridges of Constantine* as a central point that connects Khaled's feelings of loss, remembrance, resistance and belonging. It equally shows how Khaled, after being ostracized and alienated in his country, turns to painting and writing as non-verbal forms of trauma narratives to explore his relationship to his country and culture.

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