

SELF-REFLEXIVE WRITING IN *MEMORY IN THE FLESH* AND *L'AMOUR LA FANTASIA*

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Abstract:

This paper analyses how both Ahlem Mosteghanemi and Assia Djébar attempt to account for metafiction. The analysis of Memory in the Flesh proposes that Mosteghanemi addresses the question of writing in a consistent way, which makes language and writing central to the understanding of her novel. Unlike Mosteghanemi, Djébar's focus on self-conscious narration is less consistent and may be viewed as a minor concern in L'Amour la fantasia. While both authors account for metafiction, each of these works is written against the background in postcolonial Algeria, marking a remarkable change in literature and affecting the process of writing. The paper will, also, illustrate how metafiction is mediated by modern conventions including the use of internal monologue, less description, first person narrator, sequence of interwoven short stories, the notion of anti-hero, etc. Besides the narrative techniques, the use of two different languages by two Algerian female writers, whose works were published in 1985 is highly significant. The choice of Arabic by Mosteghanemi and French by Djébar has its justifications and implications that I will discuss later in this paper. One may argue for the differences and similarities between these two female writers in terms of autobiographical, historical, and cultural contexts along with the language of writing in order to understand what each novelist means by the art of writing and its relation to identity. However before embarking on the analysis of both works it might be useful to, first, introduce both the novels and novelists to the reader and, second, to explore the theme of writing on a theoretical level because it seems necessary to scrutinize what is called the "Nouveau Roman" and the significance of writing both novels in the style of the Nouveau Roman (The New Novel).

Keywords: *Writing, self-reflexive, metafiction, New Novel, postcolonial.*

To begin with, Ahlem Mostaghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* tells the story of a painter named Khaled, who after the war of Independence in Algeria, with an amputated arm, decides to immigrate to Paris, where he meets with a visitor to his painting exhibition. This visitor is Hayet as mentioned in her birth certificate; she is also the daughter of a close friend of Khaled Mr. Taher who was shot toward the end of the war before he could meet with his newly born daughter. In the painter, Hayet; also known as Ahlem has found the figure of the missing father to express her platonic love. In Hayet, Khaled found an illusionary replacement for Katherine, his French girlfriend. Most importantly, In Hayet, Khaled found the image of the city Constantine and that of the nation, Algeria with all that it represents through its complex social, economic and political memories. Khaled pays a visit to Algeria on two occasions; first to attend Ahlem's wedding and the second to settle again in Algeria after the sudden death of his younger brother Hassan. Upon his departure from Paris, Khaled confided all his paintings to Katherine, whose relationship to Khaled is mainly nourished by her love for painting. The mix of painting and writing forms, thus, the base of Mostaghanemi's novel in which the narrator Khaled explores painting through duplicating the bridges of Constantine and the art of writing through rethinking the process of writing which has become

the central focus of the novel.

Mostaghanemi's exploration of writing resonates with the concept of The French "Nouveau Roman" or the so-called New Novel, which emerged in the 1950s as a cultural and critical phenomenon. This movement started in the nineteenth century, but gained prominence in the post-modern era. Robbe-Grillet is the best known among practitioners of the Nouveau Roman. From his perspective, writing does not consist of merely explaining things, but rather in exploring them. Robbe-Grillet stresses that the "new novel" does not hold ready-made ideas. Instead, the novel undergoes a process of continuous change. In his own words, "the New Novel is merely pursuing a constant evolution of the genre" (Robbe-Grillet, 135). In such a panorama, Robbe-Grillet asserts that the new novel must not define itself in comparison with the nineteenth century realist novel. The critic explains that "[i]t is not a question of doing better, but of advancing in ways as yet unknown, in which a new kind of writing becomes necessary" (158). This statement suggests that it will be totally misleading to impose fixed ideas on the new novel based on the components of its traditional counterpart. These components may relate to characterization, plot, time, narration, etc. Robbe-Grillet, also, argues that the modern novel poses many challenges. The multitude of seeming contradictions, for instance, account for one major characteristic of the new novel, namely uncertainty. This concept goes along with the argument that, "in art, nothing is ever known in advance" (141). As a result, the novel seems to be questioning its genre continuously. Robbe-Grillet affirms that "[a]rt cannot exist without this permanent condition of being put in question" (159). Besides this perpetual regeneration of the novel, Robbe-Grillet questions the issue of writing itself. For instance, he inquires why writers actually write in the first place. Having listed several different possible answers, such as diverting oneself, winning belief, or teaching something, the writer seems to suggest that the novel can be a tool of self-exploration itself. Robbe-Grillet writes: "The modern novel is an exploration, but an exploration which itself creates its own significations, as it proceeds... the novel does not express, it explores, and what it explores is itself" (141, 160).

The insights of Robbe-Grillet will be pertinent to the following part of this study because there are similarities as well as differences with regard to metafiction as conceived in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, particularly in the first part of the novel. Djébar's philosophy of writing has several aspects in common with what Robbe-Grillet identifies as the New Novel. For example, we notice that Djébar adopts some narrative techniques such as the series of intertwined stories and the multiple female voices, breaking with the hegemony of the protagonist. The writer applies a fragmented chronology as well. She constantly refers back and forth to various dates, which are not stated in a chronological order. For instance, the writer cites: "19 Juin", "le 22 et 23 Juin", "le 24 Juin", "Du 24 au 28 Juin", "le 25 Juin", "le 30 Juin", "le 4 Juillet 1830." At the same time, the author tries to provide her readers with a response concerning the reason as to why she writes. For Djébar, writing is a means of liberation. For her, the battle of Algerians is not only against independence, but also against all manners of repression that can be removed by means of writing. Djébar herself faced a form of repression as she was among the few girls who attended school at her time. From the outset the link between liberation and writing is established in the novel. Djébar relates her story as a small Arab girl experiencing her first day at the French school in an Algerian village, commenting on her relation to writing and its implications. « Viendra l'heure pour elle où l'amour qui s'écrit est plus dangereux que l'amour séquestré ». (11). Writing becomes a means of liberation for young girls in their relation to men: "Les jeunes filles cloitrées écrivaient; écrivaient des lettres; des lettres à des hommes; à des hommes aux quatre coins du monde; du Djébaradds: « Si la jeune fille écrit ? Sa voix, en dépit du silence, circule »(12). In that sense, writing is an avenue for Djébar to break with silence so as to assert the young self.

In addition to writing for self-assertion, the narrator proposes writing as a product of living in exile. In her words, « l'écriture de l'expatriation » has silence as a purpose (139). In response to the question,

“Qu'est-ce écrire ?” raised at a conference in Leeds in 1997, Djébar replied: “j'écris à force de me taire” (Salhi66). If writing battles against repressive silence, then it may be understood as a form of liberation, namely women's yearning hearts looking for self-expression through the medium of writing. In such a context, Djébar, too, situates herself outside of languages. She defines how writing is not only “hors-les-langues” but also “unemiseenécrit de la voix” Writing in this sense becomes like a shadow of voice (s) a written voice or an expression of it, then regardless of the language in use.

Furthermore, the narrator explores the complexity of using French as a medium of writing despite her claim of writing at a remove from language. The title of the first part of the novel, indeed, “La prise de la ville ou l'amour écrit” suggests the importance of writing, which seems to be tightly related to exploration, conquest and love, but furthermore French. The narrator notes: “A mon tour, j'écris dans sa langue, mais plus de cent cinquante ans après.” Her conscious use of French reveals a controversial relationship to the language of writing. She states: “Dans cette amorce d'éducation sentimentale, la correspondance secrète se fait en Français: ainsi, cette langue que m'a donnée le père me devient entremetteuse et mon initiation, dès lors, se place sous un signe double, contradictoire”(12) The complexity of the language may also be understood based on the narrator's approach to Arabic.

Rewriting the Arab culture in French is revealed in narrating the story of the narrator's mother, particularly, the latter's relationship with French. The narrator describes how her mother having been accustomed to addressing her husband by his first name, and without recourse to any euphemism, is suddenly in control of her liberal use of language when she meets with her sisters in summertime, for fear of shocking them. The narrator writes: “Unetellelibération du langage aurait paru, à l'ouïe des vieilles dévotes, de l'insolence ou de l'incongruité” (55) For her mother, too, French is a medium of liberalism while Arabic reflects a culture that is fraught with taboos. Even so, the narrator expresses nostalgia for her native culture and for women's activities, in particular. She notes:

Dans la plus vaste des salles, proche de l'office, l'une coud ou brode tandis qu'une autre, courbée au-dessus du sol, trie vivement lentilles ou pois chiches... cet été-là, nous allions par les rues du hameau pour diverses commissions : porter le plateau de pâtisseries à cuire au four du boulanger. (19, 37)

References to the distinguished cultural activities in her local environment create nostalgic moments in the novel. The concept of reconstructing stories is, also, discussed in Jenny Murray's work on Djébar's novels. The critic mentions that writing serves to reconstruct a people that was once dominated, particularly, women who were repressed. In her words, “By gathering together the various fragments of their lives from the traces in the French texts, Djébar performs a rebellious act on behalf of the multitudes of voiceless Algerian women, whose stories she rescues from oblivion” (57)

The issue of writing is subject to further debate in connection to identity and has been discussed by scholars such as David Coward, who considers writing an autobiography in French to be virtually impossible. The critic notes:

[I]t is impossible to write autobiography in French which is incapable of expressing the formality, the self-effacement, the nuances, the colors, the individuality of Arabic, which is why French can never ultimately be a 'langue mère' but a 'langue marâtre', and even 'la langue de l'ennemi.' (62)

In its relation to identity the art of writing is, thus, understood in myriad, even contrasted ways. While Coward considers that French is a second language or even the language of the enemy, the narrator uses writing to reconcile the opposed identities; French and Arabic, by providing instances of friendship that were born in spite of the conflicting political context, describing the Algerian girls who appear to have an amicable relationship with the wife of a gendarme and his daughters. Writing becomes a way to bridge the gap between the Arabic and French cultures. In her description of Janine, the narrator says: “C'est mon amie! C'est une Française, mais c'est mon amie!... Janine parlait l'arabe sans accent,

comme une autochtone” (34-5) Janine is a character that demonstrates how the integration of the French within the prevailing Arabic culture is possible. In this respect, Gafaiti asserts how Djébar's work helps transgress animosity between the two cultures. To the critic, Djébar “... à partir de *L'Amour, la fantasia*, tente de sortir de la rhétorique de l'Identité et de la Différence » (140) In reflecting on the question of identity, Gafaiti shows how Djébar's writing may additionally be comprehended as a means to reconcile conflicting ideologies during the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s:

Dans cette mesure, elle contribue de manière salutaire au dépassement nécessaire de la pensée binaire du manichéisme destructeur et de l'antagonisme superficiel que les extrémistes de tous bords, qu'ils soient d'Orient ou d'Occident, veulent entretenir pour séparer les individus, les peuples et les cultures. (141)

Reconciling conflicting ideologies through the medium of French while Arabic is regarded as the language of writing off the French is an attempt to challenge them. In her paper, “Exposing the Ravages of Colonialism: A Political Analysis of Memory in the Flesh,” Samah Elhajbrahim notes that Mosteghanemi's expression in Arabic is a way of challenging the French colonization. In her words, “Her use of the Arabic language helps erase the barbarian marks of colonialism” (12) In a similar context, Edward Said argues that “everyone lives life in a given language,” which means that the author who chooses to write in the language of the colonized is displaced.

However, drawing the two poles of both the Arabic and the French cultures seems to be a utopian aspiration that does not survive for long because love and animosity, *amour* and *fantasia*, peace and war are among the dichotomies that no one can ignore if he/she wants to provide an accurate description of two cultures that were once at war. Soon after describing a very promising and tolerable atmosphere where the Arab and French girls socialize, the narrator depicts the same relationship in condemnatory terms. The image of the French as occupants worsens as the narrator advances in the text. The narrator states: “Une secrète supériorité se manifeste là, chez ces sauvages « coupeurs de têtes » : mutiler certes le corps ennemi mais ne rien céder, mort ou vif, de celui des leurs.... » (51). And so the conquest is portrayed from a variety of perspectives. A dramatist like Matterer views the war as a spectacle. The journalist J.T. Merle, on the other hand, portrays the conquest of Algiers as a simple fact. “Aucune culpabilité d'embusque ne le tourmente” (46) The intertwined multiple stories serve the author to break with the one traditional story that has a sole protagonist, or a sole interpretation of memory site. Djébar shows that each character present in her novel has a different account of Algiers as a site of memory. Most importantly is the account of Chérifa related from her cell. The prisoner narrates the devastating events and the painful memories, both personal and collective of the year 1956 in Algeria.

In a similar way to Djébar's writing, the insights of the Nouveau Roman may serve to understand *Memory in the Flesh* in terms of metafiction. The narrator dispenses with the single protagonist, and the one main story outline, providing multiple characters. Mosteghanemi's interest in writing appears in her attempt to answer the question, why do writers write in the first place? The writer explains that a book should be written and not explained. In Mosteghanemi's words:

The writer has to say everything while writing his book and not after its publication. He does not have to tell the reader more than what he/ she wrote in order to explain to others what he/ she intended to say. Any writing must lead to silence. The most beautiful thing for a writer to do is to keep silence after writing a book so that he respects his reader's intelligence” (4)

Through the voice of Khaled who embodies Mosteghanemi's concern for writing, we comprehend that readership matters considerably to the author and to the reader. In the fourth chapter, writing as a concept establishes a bridge between the writer and his/ her audience. Through the voice of Khaled who embodies Mosteghanemi's concern for writing, we learn that readership matters a lot to the reader. In the fourth chapter, Khaled declares: In her article entitled “certificate in writing,” the author explains that she is “a

woman made of paper” (3). This expression apparently suggests that she is absorbed in writing. It may also mean that language itself becomes a character. Based on the idea that a piece of paper is white, Mosteghanemi elaborates her understanding of writing in terms of nudity implying self-recognition and self-assertion. The white paper is given to the Algerian victim, Khaled, to relate his story and the story of Algeria.

In the fourth chapter, Khaled points out the importance of painting as an invitation for engaging the Algerian audience. He explains: “I do not enjoy being in the spotlight, sitting and talking to a journalist for hours about myself. But I had wanted to do that interview so I could finally talk at length to the only person who really mattered to me, the Algerian reader” (118). Hence, the post-modern novel engages the reader in interpreting the text and respects his interpretation. Employing a masculine narrative voice, which seems to be as critical as the principal narrator in the novel, implies that an Algerian-Arab female writer faces a challenging situation. In this case writing, mediates the conflict that gender posits by using a masculine narrative voice.

Writing in Arabic is not only meant to address an Arab audience, but further to celebrate language itself. The immediate interpretation of Mostaghanemi's choice of Arabic may fit within the historical and political post-independence circumstances in Algeria. The importance attached to self-assertion is also understood in the context of Arabization, which announces a tendency to reclaim a national identity based on the dominance of Arabic language in all aspects of life. Moreover, being written in Arabic, the novel has an esthetic dimension as well. Mosteghanemi seems to enjoy the poetic dimensions of the Arabic language on the basis of semantic, stylistic, and phonetic levels. For instance, the writer exploits the ability of her language to explore the significance of the name. Mosteghanemi writes:

Between the first letter *alif* of the word, 'pain,' and the first letter *mim* of the word *mut'a*, 'pleasure,' was your name, Ahlam, 'dreams,' split in the middle by the letter *ha* of the word *hurqa*, 'burning,' and the *La*, meaning 'no': warning. How could I have failed to be mindful of your name, born in the midst of those first fires, a small flame in the war? How could I not be aware of a name that contains within itself its own opposite, beginning with *Ah* of both pain and pleasure. How could I have failed to be aware of a name that was both singular and plural, like the name of this nation-Algeria, *al-Jaz'ir*, meaning islands. I realized this from the start, that the plural was always created only to be divided. (21).

This statement summarizes the notion of pain and pleasure that the writer seems to derive from writing the text in Arabic. We notice that the text is full of the joy of creation based on the acrobatic aspects of the language. The critic Ellen McLarney confirms this interpretation. She explains thus:

Tahir, meaning “virtuous, righteous, unblemished, and blameless”... similarly Khalid, meaning “eternal, undying, unforgettable, glorious,” denotes the character's preoccupation with the past (Wehr, 1976: 254, 571). Mustaghanami most exploits the semantic and morphological value of “Ahlam.”. Her name is a “singular-plural” noun, being both the plural of dream (*hulm*), meaning “dreams”, but also denoting “utopia” or “irreality” (Wehr, 1976: 202; Mustaghanami, 1993: 37). (32)

A careful scrutiny of name selection and implications reveals the writer's concern with the process of writing, as an art to be distinguished from that of painting. The author has established a link between painting and writing, which appears to be significant in terms of revision and self-reflexivity. The narrator has reminded us of the reason why Khaled calls his earliest painting Hanin (not Ahlam) and why he does not want to paint Ahlam the same way that he does Katherine. Painting Ahlam, in this context, would imply nostalgia and the past, but Ahlam can only be written to, possibly, predict the future. Like the Nouveau Roman, Ahlam escapes any fixed or predetermined destiny and moves toward an unpredictable future. This notion of unpredictability can only be revealed through writing. Painting illustrates how the artist can

capture a moment in the past without, however, having the possibility to forecast the future. For instance, despite its reference to the past, Hanin has been reworked. Similarly, a series of 11 paintings of the bridge of Constantine has been painted by Khaled. In similar fashion, the author is continuously reviewing her novel while writing it. Reading the novel one cannot help perceiving how Mostaghanemi starts and ends on the same note. The author writes:

Today, now that it is all over, I can say, "If that's the case, we're lucky that it's just in a book. However, what didn't happen could fill volumes. We're also lucky in the beauty of the love we did have. What will not happen is also beautiful..."

You once said, "what happened between us was real love. What didn't happen was the stuff of romantic novels"

Yes, but...

And between what happened and what did not, other things did happen that had nothing to do with love or literature, because in the end we only make words in both cases. Our own homeland made the events and wrote us up the way it wanted. Were we not after all merely the ink used for writing? (1, and 261-62)

Based on the first and final lines of the novel, it is noted how the genre continues to explore itself on a perpetual basis. The novel cannot predict what will happen, nor what did not happen; it works only within the limits of uncertainty, being informed by the unexplored. But most importantly, the novel remains experimental in the sense that the author experiments with words within the limits of a book. What is unexplored may still fill volumes, as stated in the quote above.

In addition to uncertainty, metafiction may also be understood in terms of a nonlinear structure. Mostaghanemi's novel is based on a fragmented chronology because it is laden with memories especially on the part of Khaled. McLarney writes: "The book progresses through a series of flashbacks leading further and further back into Khalid's past, with Ahlam as a chain of transmission through them, like a Madeleine leading him back through time and space" (29). Hence, the structure of the novel is reminiscent of Proust's work entitled *Du Côté de chez Swann*, which seems to have emerged from the cookie scene. Jabouri-Gazoul clarifies further this argument: "The structure of Musteghanemi's novel, as Hafez himself mentioned, lies in 'the games of prolepsis and flashback with regard to time.'"

The self-conscious narrative suggests a rewriting of the history of Algeria, for the account that prevails in *Memory of the Flesh* is the story of Algeria prior to and following the revolutionary war of independence. It may be a reasonable choice to entrust Khaled, who served as a soldier, with the responsibility of rewriting the history of Algeria. Khaled seems to be the perfect character to draw together artistic originality and political engagement. He would entirely fit the image Mostaghanemi wants to depict for Algeria. Therefore, literature or art, and history are intertwined. In a similar context, Stephan, G. Meyer explains how different discourses enter into dialogue in the self-conscious novel. The experimental novel appears to cohabit the nation in its process of shaping its own identity. Self-conscious narration is an important concept if we may apply it to the nation and the way it should review its mistakes during the post-colonial era when the concrete enemy is no longer present. In other words, the nation has to experience a process of self-evaluation in order to prosper and evolve.

To conclude, we could state that both Djébar and Mosteghanemi have not only marked post-independence literature, but they have also exposed the experience of postcolonialism in Algeria in similar fashion. In both *Memory of the Flesh* and *L'Amour, la fantasia*, writing appears to be a significant theme. Therefore, both Mosteghanemi and Djébar not only assess politics, but also the craft of writing, because this genre has been subject to experimentation, too. In addition to this, the language of writing is also open to diverse interpretations. Whether French or Arabic are used to increase or decrease the gap between the ideologies of both colonizer and the colonized has been widely debated. Indeed, in the two novels both

Mosteghanemi and Djébar include several examples of the infiltration of the French culture into the Algerian social fabric. Both works, too, illustrate the usefulness of the New Novel in understanding the choice of the two authors herein for their lack of chronology and use of a multiplicity of voices to diverge from outmoded narrative techniques.

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Note:

1. ("June monde arabe naturellement."(21). As a result, writing asserts the voice of the female writer. 19... June 22 and 23... June the 24th... From June 24 to 28... June the 25th... July 4th, 1830"; 45-49; all translations from French to English are mine).
2. ("Will come the moment when the love that is written is more dangerous than the sequestered love."; 11)
3. ("What if the young maiden writes? Her voice, despite the silence, circulates."; 12)
4. ("Expatriation writing"; 139)
5. ("What is to write?" ... I write by dint of being silent."; 66)
6. ("The city being taken over or the love being written."; 10)
7. ("In my turn, I write in his language; but more than one hundred and fifty years later."; 16)
8. ("In this beginning of sentimental education, secret correspondence is made in French: thus, this language given to me by the father becomes a mediator and my initiation, since then, is placed under a double,

- contradictory sign.”; 12)
9. (“Such a liberation of language would have seemed, when heard by the old devotees, as insolence or incongruity”; 55)
 10. (“In the largest of the rooms, close to the office, one sews or embroiders while another, bent above the ground, sharply sorts lentils or chickpeas... that summer, we went through the streets of the village for various activities: to carry the tray of pastries to bake in the baker's oven.”; 19, 37)
 11. (“a mother tongue ... a second language..., and even the language of the enemy.”; 62).
 12. (“She's my friend! She's a French woman, but she's my friend!... Janine spoke Arabic without an accent, like a native.”; 34-5)
 13. (“Strating from *L'Amour, la Fantasia*, [Djebar] tries to get out of the rhetoric of Identity and Difference”; 34-5)
 14. (“To this extent, she contributes in a salutary manner to the necessary overcoming of the binary thinking of destructive Manichaeism and the superficial antagonism that extremists of all stripes, whether from the East or the West, want to maintain in order to separate individuals, peoples and cultures.”; 141)
 15. (“A secret superiority manifests itself there, in these savages “head cutters”: (“A secret superiority manifests itself there, in these savages “head cutters”: mutilate certainly the enemy body but not yield anything, dead or alive, from that of their own...”; 51)
 16. (“No guilt of ambush torments him”; 46)
 17. It is argued by Lamiaa Youssef that “choosing a male perspective as the narrative voice gives her greater freedom to tackle themes and emotions that would be objectionable in the novel's country of origin were they presented through a female perspective.” (8)