

CULTURAL ALIENATION AND LANGUAGE DISCONTINUITY IN *LA MÉMOIRE TATTOUÉE*

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Abstract

The question of Alienation is a core subject-matter of human conditioning in the present era. Therefore, it is natural that a controversial issue like alienation should leave such an indelible influence upon contemporary literature. The question of Alienation, in its different manifestations, has been conceptualized and discussed, most importantly, within the existentialistic literary perspective. Due to its historical and socio-cultural conditions, the African as well as the Maghrebian literature could not shy away from the influence of alienation, understood as an identity loss and as a sense of inferiority, experienced either before or after the contact with the Other. The dispossessed personality's search for identity is a commonplace theme in modern fiction. The present paper will discuss the different nuances of the word alienation and analyze this theme in *La Mémoire Tattouée* (1971), a Moroccan literary text written in French by Abdelkebir Khatibi. The aim is to show how language discontinuity stands as a cause that creates a sense of inferiority, subordination, and alienation.

Key words: identity, alienation, inferiority, existentialism, *La Mémoire Tatuée*, Abdelkebir Khatibi

LA ALIENACIÓN CULTURAL Y LA DISCONTINUIDAD LINGÜÍSTICA EN *LA MÉMOIRE TATUÉE*

Resumen

La Alienación es un tema central de la condición humana en la época actual. Por lo tanto, es natural que un tema controvertido como la alienación deje una impronta marcada en la literatura contemporánea. La cuestión de la alienación, en sus distintas manifestaciones, ha sido conceptualizada y abordada principalmente desde una perspectiva literaria existencialista. Debido a sus condiciones históricas y socioculturales, tanto la literatura africana como la Magrebí no podían evitar la influencia de la alienación, entendida como pérdida de identidad y como sentimiento de inferioridad experimentado antes o después del contacto con el Otro. La búsqueda de identidad de la personalidad desposeída es un argumento frecuente en la ficción moderna. El presente artículo trata sobre los diferentes matices de la palabra alienación y analiza este tema en la novela marroquí *La Mémoire Tatuée* (1971), escrita en francés por Abdelkebir Khatibi. El propósito es examinar cómo la discontinuidad lingüística se erige en un factor de sentimiento de inferioridad, subordinación y alienación.

Palabras clave: identidad, alienación, inferioridad, existencialismo, *La Mémoire Tatuée*, Abdelkebir Khatibi

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Many characters in different literary texts experience a feeling of alienation from their different social institutions. Characters like Jake Barnes in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, feel alienated from their society. Caddy Compson, in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, also went through what can be termed as love and family alienation. Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* got alienated from the religious institutions in which he has been raised. Sometimes this type of alienation extends so far that the character or characters feel alienated from God as a Divine force. Besides, Meursault is another character whom Albert Camus, in *The Stranger*, portrayed one of the most extreme forms of alienation: his feeling of alienation from everything that surrounds him, including his family, his society, and the new modern aspect of life. The proliferation of literary characters who experience alienation is a result of the real-life stress that individuals feel when they are disconnected or shunned by their individual peers and the surrounding societal institutions that contribute to their belonging and being. Therefore, alienation is a powerful force that leads the one towards the negative feeling of self-pity, vulnerability, and violence. It may also result in the positive feeling of deep introspection and intellectual independence. Many writers associate alienation primarily with the 20th century and beyond, and indeed, with the modernist movement, dated roughly between 1890s and 1950s. The latter period is characterized with its increased reliance on science and technology, and the gradual mobility of individuals from rural community into urban centers, where both individuals and society are at odds with one another.

The Tattooed Memory (1971) is an autobiographical novel. It is a fictional exposition of the identity of the narrator/writer. The author Abdelkebir Khatibi (1938-2009) has made his novel a place of narration and questioning on an issue that preoccupies him obsessively: the question of identity and difference. The text recounts Khatibi's personal story by returning to his childhood in order to restore the stages of his life according to the space in which he lived. The text also questions the Moroccan society and its

functioning in the aftermath of Independence. Culture, religion, traditions, family relations, the status of women, and modernity are amongst the many questions treated as problematic issues in Khatibi's life. The main concern of the Khatibian writing is an existentialist interpellation of the subject in his relationship with himself and with the other.

Khatibi and his text portray one of those dozen writers and characters whose attempt to define their relationship with society leads them to alienation from their identity. Khatibi, for instance, writes his fiction in French, the language of the superior *Other*, and, as a matter of fact, he remains alienated and exiled in that language. The author of *L'écrivain public* (1983), Taher Ben Jelloune, writes about his sense of alienation when he writes in French:

Ecrire c'est se séparer : quitter le corps de la mère, s'éloigner (un temps) de la terre natale. Ecrire c'est habiter son nom. Moi je l'habite dans une autre langue que celle de la mère. Je suis séparé et non exilé. J'écris dans cette langue rupture. J'éloigne de moi et de ce que j'écris mon visage. Cette brûlure d'absence est passion. Deux maisons. Deux rives. Un même exil. (Ben Jelloun 1985 : 40)

[To write is to separate: to leave the body of the mother, to move away (a native one, to write is to live in one's name, but I live in another language than that of the mother. I am writing in this language of rupture, I am moving away from myself and from writing my face, this burning of absence is passion, two houses, two banks, the same exile.]

Accordingly, the French words are “treacherous travesties, attempting to encompass him and define him while also denying the parts of his identity upon which he is unable to reflect” (Hiddlestone 2005: 120).

In fact, Khatibi's penchant for writing in French is inspired from his early education at Marrakech boarding school, where he studied and tried to master the French literature and gained a comprehensive knowledge of the French culture. The young man later earned his doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris. It is in the Franco-Maghrebian school where Khatibi started to experience alienation and go through various alienated situations, especially with his French teachers and classmates. In so doing, Khatibi, because of his sense of alienation, will do his best to overcome that feeling of inferiority by not only speaking French, but also excelling at it.

The narrator of *The Tattooed Memory* informs us that the father decides to send young Abdelkebir to the Franco-Moroccan school. The narrator

describes the moment the decision is taken when he says “J’arrivais en troisième position: mon père accepta de m’expédier à l’école franco-marocaine, je devins la conscience dégradée, donnée à la mécréance” (Khatibi 1971: 16) [“I came in third place: my father agreed to send me to the Franco-Moroccan school, I became the degraded conscience, given to the disbelief”]. Maybe the father’s decision could be associated, in a way to make an analogy, to a scene in which the narrator describes the day of Abdelkebir’s birth. The scene goes on “un jour qui rappelle cet acte symbolique de la part d’Abraham de vouloir sacrifier son fils pour l’amour de Dieu” [“a day that recalls this symbolic act on the part of Abraham to want to sacrifice his son for God’s sake”] (1971: 39). This means that the father’s choice is a form of sacrifice similar to the one in the previous passage. The father sacrifices his son by sending him to the other side, the father’s intention is that his son can learn French, the language of the enemy, in an attempt to better understand them. The protagonist starts to understand colonization the moment he gets enrolled in the French school; of course, the French language is the most important component of colonialization. For our protagonist, the school provides a space for the full interaction with the French colonialization. As a result, the most important contribution of the French schooling system to the formation of the protagonist is his introduction to French literature and culture.

This introduction to the French culture and language will separate the protagonist from his native culture and language and, therefore, leads him to feel inferior and alienated. In this regard, the narrator says: “A l’école un enseignement laïc imposé à ma religion ; je devins triglotte, lisant le français sans le parler, jouant avec quelques bribes de l’arabe écrit, et parlant le dialecte comme quotidien. Où, dans ce chassé-croisé, la cohérence et la continuité?” [“At school a secular education imposed on my religion; I became a triglotte, reading French without speaking it, playing with some bits of written Arabic, and speaking the dialect as every day. Where is in this crossover, coherence and continuity?”] (1971: 52). The above passage describes the protagonist’s opinion about the school and explains the difference between the protagonist, who still lacks good French linguistic abilities, and his French peers. The protagonist faces a difficulty in coping with the transition; after learning to write and read in a linguistic system, he has to adjust himself to a new linguistic one that operates differently from the one he was acquainted with at the Qur’anic school. The linguistic difficulty is clearly explained in the narrator’s word when he says that the protagonist,

along with reading and writing a little classical Arabic without speaking it, can also read French without speaking it.

As it has mentioned earlier, the skill of reading and writing involves both visual and auditory skills. The protagonist, as he says, becomes tri-lingual and, in a sense, an incomplete polyglot. In addition, the narrator, while experiencing the two languages together, lacks the ability to perform very well. This proves the language discontinuity especially when it comes to learning the language of the other. The learning of the language of the sacred, Arabic, enables the narrator to read, write and make connections between grapheme and phoneme and, therefore, he can use these skills to improve his learning of French. The two language systems play a double-edged role for the protagonist: first, they provide an opportunity to widen his horizons; and second, they also create limitations for him. Colonization is an effort to impose the colonizer's way of life upon the colonized and to erase their way of life, including language. Thus, the only effective way for the colonizer to conduct an erasure is to impose their language as well as their cultural system upon the colonized. This is clearly stated in the text, when the narrator says: "A l'école un enseignement laïc imposé à ma religion" ["At school a secular education imposed on my religion"] (1971: 52).

In Morocco, the colonizer replaced Arabic with French in most institutions. This replacement took place easily, due to the high figures of illiteracy as well as to the difference between the classical Arabic and the widely spoken dialects of Moroccan Arabic. For Khatibi's generation, the introduction to Arabic writing and reading took place only at the Qur'anic schools; but, once they got enrolled in French educational institutions, they shifted to French as a mode of learning and teaching. They had Arabic only as a foreign language course. In a similar discussion, Assia Djebar explains that, during colonization, she had to learn English and Greek before Arabic. She adds that until high school students did not go to study Arabic.

Furthermore, the narrator mentions that he rarely read or wrote Arabic during his days at the French school. Yet, the narrator mentions that he has an affinity to Arabic poetry, especially the pre-Islamic one. In a revealing passage from the autobiography, the protagonist mentions that "La poésie fit le reste. Je l'aimai d'abord bédouine, brûlée dans l'allégorie, celle des bardes préislamiques et surtout Imrou Al Qaïs et sa tendre incantation" ["Poetry did the rest. I loved it first Bedouin, burned in allegory, that of pre-Islamic bards and especially Imrou Al Qais and his tender incantation"] (1971: 78). Later on in the autobiography, the narrator mentions that the protagonist reads some contemporary Arabic literary texts: "Grâce au frère aîné, je bifurquai un

moment vers le roman arabe moderne” [“Thanks to the elder brother, I bifurcated a moment towards the modern Arabic novel”] (1971: 86). In another scene, the narrator mentions “Antar”, “le barde arabe” [“the Arab bard”] (1971: 165), in a context of nomadic travels in the desert. The passages where the main character is presented reading Arabic texts are very rare. Also regarding the protagonist’s relationship to reading and writing Arabic, the narrator talks about a very short-lived experience of him trying to write some Arabic poetry. The move to the French school causes a radical impact on the protagonist’s reading and writing skills; most of his discussions, writings and readings will be related to French and French literature.

The introduction to French, the language of the colonizer, creates a sense of alienation, inferiority, and subordination for the protagonist. This feeling is expressed in some passages. For instance, during one of the protagonist’s composition classes, he felt a difficulty while he was trying to write a passage about winter in France. Another similar scene occurs when the narrator describes his opinion about the colonizer’s division of the year into seasons. The narrator says: “Les hommes qui me colonisaient et leurs enfants semblaient vivre au rythme des saisons, à l’harmonie cosmique cataloguée, retransmise. Jusqu’à dix-sept ans, je n’avais jamais vu ni la neige, ni la forêt, la vraie et la grande” [“The men who colonized me and their children seemed to live according to the rhythm of the seasons, to the cosmic harmony cataloged and transmitted. Until I was seventeen, I had never seen the snow or the forest, the true and the great”] (1971: 20). These types of tasks intensify the feeling of alienation for young Moroccan students. Why to ask them to write about events which they are not directly acquainted with? These methods of teaching at the French schools strengthen the colonizer’s dominance and manipulation of the colonized. These tasks create feelings of shame and place them in an inferior position, in comparison to their French classmates.

More importantly, the narrator talks about a child’s feeling of guilt and shame when facing a teacher who asks him to write a short account in French about winter in France; he also adds that producing such a piece of writing is beyond his conception: “Cela ne changeait rien de notre culpabilité, on se sentait des enfants conçus en dehors des livres, dans un imaginaire anonyme” [“It did not change our guilt, we felt children conceived outside books, in an anonymous imaginary”] (1971: 56). In fact, the colonizer does not only impose his language, but also erases the culture of the native. Frantz Fanon supports the previous argument in *A dying colonialist*. As he argues, “It is not the soil that is occupied. It is not the ports or the airdromes. French

colonialism has settled itself in the very center of the Algerian individual and has undertaken a sustained work of cleanup, of expulsion of self, of rationally pursued mutilation” (Fanon 1967: 65). Taking Fanon’s argument in consideration, the colonizer does not only aim at erasing the native culture, but also at replacing it with colonial cultural system and reference. Fanon refers to this as expulsion of the self and mutilation of itself and its identity (Fanon 1967: 65). In addition, the feeling of alienation grows tense when students read texts about which they have no previous reference or knowledge. Sometimes, the texts they read represent their native country, Morocco, from the colonizer’s perspective. For instance, the narrator provides an example of a text where Morocco is represented to students from a colonial angle:

Certes, le Maroc, dans ces textes, sous la forme d’un joyeux folklore, tuniques blanches, babouches vif écarlate, pastèques ensanglantées, et que dire? Un muezzin mécanique, enfourchant une humanité endormie et qui ne se réveillait que pour se mouiller le bout des doigts, ébauchant quelques génuflexions. La prière, c’était parler au vide. Etonnés par cette image de nous- mêmes, nous gloussions, un peu honteux. (57)

[Certainly, Morocco, in these texts, in the form of a merry folklore, white tunics, bright scarlet slippers, bloody watermelons, and what to say? A mechanical muezzin straddling a sleeping humanity and waking only to wet his fingertips, sketching a few genuflections. Prayer was talking in a vacuum. Surprised by this image of ourselves, we chuckled, a little ashamed.]

The students as well as the protagonist’s reaction to the above passage is, of course, to feel alienated and do their best to hide that part of themselves in which they feel inferior in the eyes of the colonizer. The Moroccan students’ culture undergoes an erasure, and so their sense of the self. Therefore, the sense of alienation the students feel pushes them to look for ways out to be like the Other. One of these ways out is to speak its language, French, and embrace a new identity. Fanon argues that this is the outcome of colonization, to push the colonized, while the colonizer’ sway of life and language are considered better than theirs. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon says “When we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial

domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness” (Fanon 1963: 210-211).

The narrator provides further descriptions about the protagonist’s desire to be one of the Other and his attempt to be accepted by the French, especially the French girls who are studying with him:

ces filles que je désirais profondément me caressaient de loin. Elles disaient que je différais de mes compatriotes. On m’acceptait parce que j’étais semblable, annihilant d’avance toute mon enfance, toute ma culture. Devant un tel plaisir complexe, je me mis des moustaches et une cravate de soie ariolée. Le personnage se donnait un certain air dévergondé. J’apprenais aux autres à écrire leur propre langue. (Abdelkebir 1971: 112)

[Those girls that I deeply desired caressed me from afar. They said that I differed from my compatriots. I was accepted because I was alike, annihilating in advance all my childhood, all my culture. In front of such a complex pleasure, I put on mustaches and a motley silk tie. The character gave himself a certain shameless look. I taught others to write their own language.]

In the above passage, the use of the word “personage” is a reference to the past self. For the protagonist, this character is obsolete and unrecognizable. In addition, this reference suggests that this adaptation is like someone playing a temporary role. Any attempt to fit in, to belong or to accommodate with the French will result in a double failure: the protagonist will end up losing himself and not achieving his goal. In another passage, the narrator confirms that he had a dream of being like the Other. He says “J’étais un autre Vivre, le jour et la nuit, de rêves empruntés, était l’image absente d’un corps déréalisé, comme traversé par une simple divagation d’un désir contourné, vibratoire et jamais nommé” [“I was another Living, day and night, borrowed dreams, was the image absent from a derealized body, as if traversed by a simple divagation of a desire bypassed, vibratory and never named”] (1971: 81). This shows how the protagonist’s desire to fit into the colonizer’s way of life and speak their language is stronger.

The narrator continues, as it has just been mentioned, narrating that young Abdelkebir does his best to be amongst the others and even to excel at what is supposed to be theirs. The scene of the protagonist teaching others how to write their own language shows that Abdelkebir reaches a very high level of proficiency in his learning of French. Also, this shows how learning French

has contributed to the development of Khatibi and has paved the way for him to intellectually prosper through reading French books and using French to articulate his ideas. For many colonized intellectuals, learning French serves as a new kind of conquest of the Other. Through mastering the language of the Other, one can taste freedom and no more feel alienated (Rushdie 1991: 17). This desire of mastering the language of the colonizer is common amongst many colonized intellectuals. For instance, Albert Memmi, in his *La Statue de Sel*, tells us about his efforts in giving private lessons in French to help his classmates with their homework (Memmi 1966). Assia Djebar has also spoken about her desire to excel in her class and master the French : “Je me suis dit: «Le français n’est pas ma langue mais je vais être la meilleure. Si je suis la meilleure dans cette langue, ce sera une manière de montrer qu’à travers moi tous les miens sont aussi bons que vous! »” [“I said to myself : « French is not my language, but I am going to be the best. If I am the best in this language, this will be a way to prove that, through me, all my people is so good as you!»”] (Djebar 1996: 82).

The strong motivation to master the language of the Other and excel its native speakers reflects a sense of ambivalence towards the statues of the colonizer’s language. Learning French, though mastering it, produces a sense of inferiority and a feeling of alienation in our protagonist, but it also introduces him to a wide range of French literature to read and write about.

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