

Rachida Sadouni, Ph. D.¹
Faculty of Arts and Languages
University of Blida 2, Algeria

GENDER IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: MOROCCAN AND ALGERIAN LITERATURE AS A CASE STUDY

Abstract

The present paper deals with Moroccan and Algerian post-colonial literature written by women. It will specifically approach the issue of gender as seen and analyzed by four female novelists: Leila Abou Zeid, Zahra Ramidj, Malika Mokeddem and Maissa Bey. We will attempt to exemplify gender as for stereotypes, (in) equality and roles. Ranging from reality to fiction and from self-history to social-History, our paper commits itself to present an evolution of women as objects/subjects, at individual, social and historical backgrounds. Through this research, we reached the results that in the four novels, Algerian and Moroccan women are in constant fight for their emancipation in their respective patriarchal societies.

Keywords: Algerian literature, discourse, gender, identity, Moroccan literature.

1. Introduction

Women writers in Morocco and Algeria, among other North-African women writers, have committed to focus on gender, more and more. Until a recent time, this issue has been developed by men. Yet, the scope within which men deal with gender may seem discriminate. Indeed, to men, women have always been inferior. Therefore, our paper comes to break this long-term rooted image by presenting a new image based on four women novelists who are: Leila Abou Zeid and Zahra Ramidj from Morocco, and Malika Mokeddem and Maissa Bey from Algeria.

We will start by giving a literature review about Moroccan and Algerian literature written by women. Then, we will move to talk about the two Moroccan novelists, including studies conducted as analyzes and critics about their works. After that, we will deal with the two Algerian novelists, using the same steps as for the two first novelists. Finally, we will conclude our paper by presenting an overview about the main results we found out while dealing with gender as seen by the four above-mentioned novelists, as well as in previous studies.

As for the choice of these novelists, we believe that the four of them have one major thing in common: they all used female characters to abolish the general and usual point of view about women as inferior creatures compared to men, as they mixed reality and fiction in an autobiographical way to denounce certain social biases regarding women in both societies.

Therefore, our study stands on the following question: How is gender, and especially woman, (re)presented in Algerian and Moroccan literature written by women?

2. Moroccan literature written by women: Literature review

Compared to Algeria, Moroccan women writings are recent, “Similar to the situation in Tunisia, Moroccan women writers only began to find a strong literary voice in the 1980s and 1990s” (Khalil, 2007). This is also the observation of Laamiri (2013) who thinks that “Except for a few texts which appeared in the 1980s, before the 1990s, literature which was

¹ Email: rachi130@yahoo.fr

written by women was very limited” (p. 20). The same author lists back *Aïcha La rebelle* by Halima Ben Haddou (1982), as the first publication by a Moroccan woman. Despite this time difference, Berrada (2004) shows that Moroccan women writers were aware of defending women’s rights and displaying their struggle in a patriarchal society. He gives the example of Bannuna’s *Al-Ghad Wa Al-Ghadab* (1980) in which “the heroine develops a sense of alienation and deprivation because existing types of social bonds do not allow her to exercise her freedom, and she cannot have an active presence in a society that turns its back on women’s questions and aspirations. ” (p. 248) It goes without saying that like Algerian women writers, Moroccan women writers desired to supplant a new image of women, and give these latter the chance to emancipate. However, Sihem Benchekroun, a writer herself recognizes the difficulty of writing for the woman, unlike the man, as well as the general Moroccan society’s negative point of view as for women. She says in this context: “In the collective mind, the man is the mankind. The woman is a specificity of mankind. It would be ridiculous, isn’t it? To ask a male writer -forgive my joke- about the impact of gender in the management of his writing? But if writing is that of a woman, then it becomes sexual. ” [Our translation] In other words, in Moroccan society, male writings have not been judged by the general opinion, unlike women’s writings.

The issue is not about writing in itself, but expressing a great deal of autobiography and taboo in writings. Another point should be emphasized here. It is the upbringing of girls in the Moroccan society that has largely contributed to make women passive and enslaved when it comes to intimate matters. Halima Hamdane’s *Laissez-moi parler!* According to Charpentier (2013), “Stresses the alienation transmitted by women to their daughters, the obedience expected from her gender and her position as a housewife: do not answer, look down, kiss the hands, smile and thank. ” (p. 92) [Our translation]

In the next section, we will deal with two women writers, Leila Abou Zeid and Zahra Ramidj. Our aim is to clarify the issue of gender seen by these two writers that express women’s matters for women and on behalf of women.

2.1. Leila Abou Zeid: Gender at Collective and Individual Scales

Many studies on Abou Zeid’s *Am Al Fil* (The Year of the Elephant) showed that this novel has been the corner stone to the emergence of more works on gender and feminism in Morocco, and the call for women’s prosperity. The reader should be informed immediately that Abou Zeid’s is the first novel in Arabic, written by a woman, to be translated into English (Orlando, 2004). As for the distinguished feature of this novel, Rachel Strohman (2011) points out that: “Her characters are women from a variety of social classes who seek independence and equity in a country with patriarchal laws and traditions. Such individuals are important for Moroccan readers to see in order to reveal or remind them of the difficulties women encounter. ” (p. 8) Indeed, *The Year of the Elephant* gives a strong image of Moroccan women who are aware of their status and role in the society. In addition, what made this novel well-known among different spheres of the Moroccan society is the fact that “Many of the events of Abouzeid’s narrative (divorce, the struggle against poverty, interfamilial conflict, etc.) are common themes in contemporary Moroccan literature, but are presented here in a new perspective—that of a woman. ” (Noakes, 1991, p. 80). It is clear for the reader that in this novel, a parallelism is made between collective resistance against colonialism, and individual resistance against male dominated society. In other words and borrowing Ahmed Fakhri’s quotation (2011): “On numerous occasions, the author explicitly draws parallels and establishes links between the public resistance against the colonizers and Zahra’s private marital predicament. ” (p. 2) Zahra, who is the main protagonist in Abou Zeid’s, struggles after her divorce to regain dignity and self-funding in the post-colonial Morocco. As a matter of fact, Abou Zeid chose a female character to show the important role

of the Moroccan woman during and after French colonization. Some critics (Khannous, 2010; Hall, 1992) think that Arabic, the language in which the novel is written, shows the determination of its author to describe, in her mother tongue, what lies behind the Moroccan society. It is no longer about the confinement of the woman and the limitation of her actions, but the novelist attempted to describe and analyze gender as a permanent imposition and revolt.

2.2. Zahra Ramidj: Women under Male and Female Domination

By contrast to women writers in Morocco and Algeria, who think man as the main impeachment to woman's emancipation, Moroccan novelist Zahra Ramidj deals with gender in a very different way. In *Azouza*, Maridj focuses on the power of women, as a preventing agent against individual freedom, unlike usual literary works that shows patriarchal power as the only impediment for women's freedom. Ahmed's mother (Azouza's mother-in-law) incited him to marry a second time because Azouza was infertile. Despite the strong love that Ahmed showed to her wife, he eventually divorced her as a fulfillment of his mother's wish. Through the story, Maridj shows that social traditions are the major reference for the population when it comes to the management of their life. However, they can play, at a great extent, a destructive role because people place them on top of general rules. Moreover, Ramidj displays woman's challenge and rebel against social customs, and maybe the first challenge was by the novelist herself when she selected the unusual female name "Azouza", derived from the usual male name Azouz. Indeed, naming the main character Azouza, Maridj wanted probably to express the thought that woman is equal to man, and even better and stronger than him. The author also involves implicitly some facts that have ever existed in the society, such as the different weapons a woman can use to have power on man.

Maridj expressed gender in her novel, as the superiority of woman on man. The most tempting of the weapons mentioned above, is the body. In other words, a woman's body can incredibly weakens a man. However, on behalf of the main character, Maridj asserts that education is with no doubt the most effective and ever-lasting weapon against woman's enslavement. Kafih (2011) adds that the recourse to magic, enabled women to impose themselves easily and cleverly, and enchain men. As for choosing the countryside as a frame for her novel, Ramidj declared in an interview to Saïda Cherif (2010) that she had always been charmed by her original hometown, and she wanted to give it a tribute through her novel. She didn't omit to add that the accurate descriptions she used came from her own imagination, and "as long as the author is granted a broad and accurate observation, he certainly would be able to imagine all worlds and all the sensations, and use an accurate description." With *Azouza*, Maridj could give voice to women, and even place them on top of social scale.

3. Algerian Literature Written by Women: Literature Review

It is interesting to know that Algerian female writers have used literature as a space to deal with gender and other topics tightly related to it as women, exile, identity and feminism (Mikhail, 2004; Berrada, 2004; Benamara, 2011). Women may be the topic which has been most discussed and analyzed by these writers. It is generally portrayed under two angles. The first one represents women as passive characters of the patriarchal society, and the second one, as victims of colonization. Berrada (2004) assumes that "some women writers have used the novel as a means of conveying their perspective and relating their stories and adventures." (p. 247) In other words, the novel has had a large access for women who aspired at telling their own stories, compared to short story and poetry. Of course, this goes without saying that by expressing their personal experience, these female writers express at the same time other women's experiences, and their works act as a collective mirror that reflect all Algerian

women who belong to the same patriarchal society, and who lived under colonialism. It makes sense, then, when Berrada (2004, pp. 247-248) notes that the first Algerian novels written by women, dealt with history and social themes, and that lasted till the 1890's. For Nasser Benamara (2011), even if these women committed themselves to deal with women's issues, "it is important not to limit these literatures under a militant feminist literature, but to understand them as a culture, a language, and even a vision of the world and of others. » (p. 2) [my translation]

However, Berrada (2004) notes that after north African countries got their independence and the emancipation that has gone with, women writers turned their literary discourse to deal with women freedom, and rise against patriarchal power: "The newer texts (...) engage with the rapid social transformations that have taken place since independence. These have had a clear impact on women's status and consciousness and have led them to begin expressing themselves through an anti-patriarchal discourse."

Approaching gender has aimed firstly at searching the novelist's identity. Indeed, we think that most of Algerian female novelists use novels as a means to deal with their own identity. In this regard, Mikhail (2004) asserts that "The search for an identity is coupled by a search for new formulas to build the world of tomorrow, and it is the woman more than the man who incarnates the decisive changes taking place today. The suffering and lacerations experienced in the process of transition to modernity are best represented by the many faces of Eve." (p. 112). For Mehta (2014, p. 4), writing has allowed Algerian novelists to unveil many women issues related to silence and violence. The same author thinks that writing has also been used to condemn injustice, inhumanity, and the triple fundamentalist, nationalist and colonialist guilt. Furthermore, writing has been, for Algerian female writers, a sort of challenge as for many obstacles that surround women's life. In this context, Winifred Woodhull (1993) expresses the aim of writing about gender, on the behalf of Assia Djébar as "A point for take-off, a combat zone. A restoration of body. Bodies of new women in spite of new barriers."(xxi) It should be said, however, at this point, that dealing with gender has always been a difficult task for Algerian female writers because it involves revealing secrets about the intimacy of the family and the very private sector. This is why most of female writers have used pen names as a means to overcome this difficulty, such as Djébar and Maïssa Bey.

There is an important point that should be raised, here, which is the language in used to talk about gender. Most Algerian female writers write their works in French. We assume that this has a reasonable explanation if we consider the religious and social background of the Algerian society. Indeed, to deal with gender, a woman could not do it in Arabic due to patriarchal and societal restrictions against women. By observing these social issues, Algerian female novelists have used writing to convey them and, at the same time, express their disagreement, their revolt and their eagerness for freedom.

In the following section, we will deal with two Algerian female novelists, Malika Mokeddem and Maïssa Bey. We will specifically analyze some of their works as for the issue of gender and the tightly topics related to it. Both authors started publishing in the 1990's when Algeria knew its darkest times, due to the rise of terrorism.

3.1. Malika Mokeddem: Gender as Exile and Identity

The reader must know firstly that Mokeddem has lived in France for more than thirty years. Therefore, her writings mainly discuss gender in binary relationship with exile. The latter has visibly led to influence, at a large scale, the first. When she was a school girl, she used to spend her free time in her room, reading. This sharpened her knowledge and sense of awareness about woman's condition within a patriarchal society. This novelist who comes from a nomad family from Kenadsa, Bechar, in the northwest of Algeria, declares in an

interview to Lebdaï Benaouda, in 2007 (Longou, 2009) that she recognizes that reading was the only way out to flee both weather hard conditions (hot summer in the Sahara) and family restrictions. She says:

That life was, for me, a real imprisonment and, for four months of vacation, an ordeal. It was more poverty and traditions that sequestered me. The extreme temperatures added to it. Only reading allowed me to escape that prison-like. Books were the only possible trips. Reading was my only freedom till the baccalaureate. But what freedom! It fed my rebellion and structured my thinking. It is through that adolescence period buried in books that I became a writer. (p. 114) [Our translation]

Mostly autobiographical, Mokeddem's novels combine autobiography and fiction to go deeper in women's suffering under patriarchal and traditional rules. Using, as said above, the binary form of Western culture and Islamic culture, she talks about the hard living of women in Algeria, especially when they're not educated. Fortunately, for her, things went well when she got her baccalaureate and travelled to France to continue her studies, and live there later. In her first novel *Les Hommes qui Marchent*, Mokeddem gives gender a touch of identity and exile. Indeed, we believe that Mokeddem builds, in this novel, gender along with the deconstruction of her original identity and the reconstruction of a new identity, and exile in a binary relation with her nomad hometown. She seems to deal with gender in its traditional meaning, but soon shapes it to go beyond the usual concepts of obedience and both patriarchal and colonial oppressions. In this regard, Assa Assa (2015) writes: "Malika Mokeddem recalls in his writings and especially in his first novel, behavioral code against which it stands, rising and against the law of oppressive and restrictive group that prevents the individual, especially women, to flourish and live freely." (pp. 47-48) [Our translation]

Agar-Mendousse, cited by the same author, adds: "his writing denounces patriarchal as well as colonial violence, to build a new relationship between colonizers and colonized, between men and women." (p. 48) [Our translation]

When exile is mentioned within gender, it is father's exclusion (from the family circle), from one hand, and land's exclusion (immigration to France), from the other hand. That is to say that in the social and religious Islamic contexts, Mokeddem's parents used to prefer boys to girls, and that profoundly touched her. She expresses this feeling clearly in her *Mes Hommes* (2015):

I had always been outside. Disenchantment led me to exclusion from love. That's exile. It started there. Since childhood, my parents' affection was unequal (...) between girls and boys. The amplification of this inequity by the entire society, its ratification by a State (...). My rebellion against this chain of injustices made me a woman of gaps, of borders. (p. 84) [Our translation]

These two exclusions have led to a third physical exclusion which is "exile in the body of men" as expressed by Banu Akin (2015, p. 14). With Malika Mokeddem, gender holds the double meaning of liberation: liberation from tribal customs through courting men, seen as social transgression, and liberation from original space through a long-term journey to France where she could free herself as for dating other men. (Akin, 2015, pp. 12-13)

We join Mokeddem's opinion as we think that gender goes with freedom, writing and exile. It is not about subjecting women anymore, and gender evolves as an independent entity.

3.2. Maïssa Bey: Expressing Gender from the individual through the collective

Maïssa Bey started writing in the 1990's, a period which witnessed a huge rise of women writings within a difficult political context of the rise of terrorism in Algeria. Thus, she had recourse to a pen name as a way to flee terrorism threat, as well as other social constraints. In this regard, Batalha (2012) believes that :

The pen name adopted by the Algerian writer allowed her to escape the adverse conditions of a period of great political instability in Algeria in the 1990s. It became a tool to stand against the silence imposed on the history of her country and the fate of an entire people that the violence of the pain or the violence of power had silenced. (p. 167)

Bey used memory as a technique of narration, and deals with gender from three angles: patriarchy, colonialism and terrorism. Bendjelid (2009) describes Bey's writings as "writing of testimony" (p. 228) [Our translation]. Indeed, in this novelist's works, it is about giving her own version of what happened in history and in History, not as she witnessed it, but as other persons had told her. According to Longou (2009), the novelist welcomes the culture of the Other as an enrichment of her original Algerian culture, but she points out, at the same time, its danger and consequences as for the Algerian people, especially women: "She accepts her dual cultural heritage as an enriching benefit. However, she brings the focus on violence from foreign intrusion, and its impact on the Algerian people." (p. 72) [Our translation]

Batalha (2012) argues this point of view when she declares:

She [Bey] shows, for example, that the conquest of freedom following the victory against French colonialism paradoxically revealed its own contingency. The precariousness of the political order established then plunged the country into a bloody civil war of which it is one of the victims. (p. 168)

For Batalha, women's situation didn't change after the independence due to the incessant undergoing of social and patriarchal violence. The emancipation and freedom into which women were aspiring had been revealed to be illusions. It is worthy to mention, moreover, that Bey's novels are polyphonic. That is to say that gender was dealt with under multi-dimensional aspect when Bey gives voice to women from different social classes to express their opinions, their fears and their expectations, as it is the case in her *Cette Fille Là* (2001).

Gender, for Bey, is best expressed by writing, especially when the latter is performed by women. Longou (2009), once again, points out that Bey used writing as a weapon to fight injustice against women, and as a space that had been occupied by men for quite a long time: "Through writing, Bey monopolizes the space dominated by men for so a long time and attempts a restructuring of evils by words." (p. 77) [Our translation]

4. Conclusion

Moroccan and Algerian literatures written by women have broken with the usual rules of male domination. The four novelists, we deal with in our paper, have highlighted the position of women in Moroccan and Algerian society. Women can overtake men to become a key element in the family circle as well as in the whole society. Gender is no longer limited to the deep-rooted idea on women's enslavement, and for the four novelists, women are represented as emancipated, intelligent and dominating instead of dominated. The language in which gender is expressed ranges from Arabic and French. These two languages could display the importance and the need to be a woman in Moroccan and Algerian societies.

As a result, we found out, through this study, that Algerian and Moroccan literature written by women converge into the common point of (re)presenting the continuous fight of women against secular and patriarchal traditions, in order to live and to express their emancipation.

References

1. Akin, B. (2015). Mots pour maux, Les hommes, la médecine et l'écriture dans Mes Hommes de Malika Mokeddem. In De Jesus Cabral et al. (dir.), *Maux en Mots Traitements littéraires de la maladie* (323). Porto: Universidade do Porto. Faculdade de Letras. <http://ler.letras.up.pt/site/default.aspx?qry=id022id1458&sum=sim>
2. Berrada, M. (2008). Arab North Africa, In Radwa Ashour et al. (dir.), *Arab Women Writers, a critical reference Guide 1873-1999*, translated by Mandy McClure (542). Cairo: the American University in Cairo Press.
3. Charpentier, I. (2013). *Le Rouge aux Joues, virginité, Interdits, sexuels et Rapports de Genre au Maghreb*, Paris : Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne.
4. Fakhri, A. (2011). Schema Theory and the Language of Fear in Leila Abouzeid's Novel Year of the Elephant. *Journal of literature, language and linguistics*, 3 (1), 1-9.
5. Hall, M. (1992). Leila Abouzeid's Year of the Elephant: A Postcolonial Reading. Proceedings of the SPACLALS Triennial Conference. Ed. by Michèle Drouart. *Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, 36.
6. Kerboubi, L., Les stratégies énonciatives dans Entendez-vous dans les montagnes de Maïssa Bey : L'écriture impersonnelle, *Synergies Algérie* n° 16, 2012, 59-65.
7. Khannous, T. (2016). « Islam, Gender, and Identity in Leila Abouzeid's. The Last Chapter: A Postcolonial Critique”, *College Literature*, 37 (1). Retrieved from : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20642080>
8. Laamiri, M. (2013). Moroccan Literature in French and English, A Comparative Survey. *Francosphère*, 2 (1), 15-28.
9. Longou, S. (2009). Violence et rébellion chez trois romancières de l'Algérie contemporaine : Maïssa Bey, Malika Mokeddem et Leila Marouane). ” Ph.D. thesis, Iowa University. Retrieved from <http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/401>
10. Mehta, B. (2014). Fractures historiques, trauma et résistance dans l'écriture féministe algérienne : Maïssa Bey, Assia Djebar et Leïla Sebbar. FMSH-WP-2014-82.
11. Mikhail, M.N. (2004). *Seen and Heard, A Century in Arab Women in Literature and Culture*, Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press. <https://en.qantara.de/content/portrait-of-the-algerian-writer-maissa-bey-we-intellectuals-expect-nothing-more-from-europe>.
12. Orlando, V. (2010). Femin(ine)ist Dialogues: Women and the Role of the French Language in Contemporary Morocco [as part of a semester-long course entitled: Contemporary Issues in Francophone Women's Writing of the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco)]”. Retrieved from <https://arablit.org/2010/05/20/laila-lalami-on-moroccan-literature-and-why-she-writes-in-english/>
13. Strohman, R. (2011). *Literature in the Language of Life: The Importance of Writing in Colloquial Moroccan Arabic*, University Honors in Literature.
14. Syntyche, A.A. (2014). *Migrations et quête de l'identité chez quatre*

romancières francophones : Malika Mokeddem, Fawzia Zouari, Gisèle Pineau et Conde, Masters' thesis. Paul Valéry University, Montpellier III. Retrieved from: <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01127052/2011>

15. كفيح، ع.و. (2011). "عزوزة" لزهرة رميح رواية تعبق برائحة الطين. <http://www.qabaqaosayn.com/%D8%B9%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A9/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B6-%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA>

(accessed 6/5/2016)

16. Benchekroun, S. (2005). Être une femme, être Marocaine, écrire, in *Le récit féminin au Maroc*. <http://www.sihambenchekroun.com/etre-femme>. (accessed 14/05/2016)