

## The Embodiment of Algerian Trauma as Injury in Literature and Film: Two Female Voices from Memory in the Flesh and Rachida

Dr. Lamiaa Youssef<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

---

This paper explores the depiction of trauma and exile in an Arabic novel and motion picture set in the 80s and 90s in Algeria. Through the experiences of the protagonists in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novel *Memory in the Flesh* and Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's film *Rachida*, the article examines the body as a site and record of trauma and exile, where loss is experienced at both national and individual levels. Through the damaged bodies of men and women, these works demonstrate the disintegrating effects of the Algerian civil war.

---

**Keywords:** Algerian women, trauma, civil war, body as canvas

### 1. Introduction

Sociopolitical trauma has been a part of Algerian history as a French colony from 1830 to 1962, and as an independent nation from 1962 until the present. The War of Independence was followed by a relatively peaceful period, which ended when changes in governmental authority and widespread corruption brought about a civil war. Riots started in 1988 due to dissatisfaction with the ruling party, the National Liberation Front (FLN). During the Dark Years from 1991 to 2002, Algeria was thrown into turbulence by fundamentalism and terrorism. The resurgence of violence throughout Algeria marked the return to a time of trauma and resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. This time, however, instead of fighting a colonial force, Algeria was fighting corruption and extremism internally. Algerian literature and cinema offer depictions of trauma and associated diminishment of self-expression preceding the healing process. Characters undergo a time of abnegation and silence before they can fully accept themselves and move past their injuries. In both Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novel *Memory in the Flesh* (first published in 1985 in Arabic as *Dhakirat al-Jasad*) and Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's feature film *Rachida* (2002), the body and the voice are inextricably linked in the protagonists Khaled and Rachida, respectively; the two characters are united in their search for self-expression, as their respective bodily injuries force them into silence and escape.

### 2. Narrative Approaches

In *Memory in the Flesh*, the first novel written in Arabic by an Algerian female author, Ahlam Mosteghanemi uses an epistolary style, writing in the form of a diary from the point of view of a male narrator. The novel is primarily set in Constantine, Algeria, and Paris, France, and is written as a monologue by Khaled, a war veteran. He is an Algerian man originally from Constantine who fights in the War of Independence, is wounded, and has his left arm amputated. He moves to Paris where he paints scenes from his memories of Constantine. The novel covers Khaled's life in exile from the 1960s to 1980s, up until the beginning of rioting in Algeria in 1988. Mosteghanemi also makes use of flashbacks to fighting during the Algerian Revolution. The novel was published in Arabic in 1985 at a time when Algerian society was becoming more restrictive towards women and moving towards more fundamentalist politics. It precedes the most violent of Algeria's Dark Years and serves as a precursor to the national trauma that ensued. *Rachida*, a film directed by Yamina Bachir-Chouikh in 2002 upon the end of the Algerian Civil War, is set during the 1990s at a time when terror gripped Algeria. The main character is Rachida, a young female teacher from Algiers. She is stopped by Sophiane, one of her former students, and his companions in the street one day.

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Norfolk State University, 700 Park Avenue, Norfolk, Virginia 23504, USA. Email: [LSYOUSSEF@NSU.EDU](mailto:LSYOUSSEF@NSU.EDU), Phone: +1-757-823-2997

The young men try to force her to carry a bomb to school. When Rachida refuses, one of them shoots her in the abdomen, leaving her for dead. Although she survives, she is left with an abdominal scar and a feeling of shame of exposing the scar for fear of being perceived as having had a Cesarean section while unmarried. To escape from harm, she hides with her mother in a remote village, only to realize that there is nowhere to hide from violence in Algeria. The cinematic lens pans across scenes of destruction and chaos among civilians. It shows the progression of attacks by armed militiamen and their devastating results on Rachida and the innocent villagers around her, especially women. Most close-ups are of Rachida, who becomes a representative of Algerian women.

The film, however, does not have a narrator or framing consciousness, giving the director greater freedom to move the lens and expand the focus to more than one character. Bachir-Chouikh chooses to further portray women's suffering through Zohra, a young woman who gets kidnapped and gang raped by terrorists, and is subsequently rejected by her father in a final act of repression and erasure. Another example of trauma experienced by women is a bride who gets kidnapped by terrorists on her wedding night and is referred to as "booty" (Bachir-Chouikh, 2002). Bachir-Chouikh uses a polyphony of female experiences to show that Rachida's injury is not an isolated case, but both a site and symbol of national instability in postcolonial Algeria. Thus, the visual aspect of the film allows for greater portrayal of the surroundings and context in which the civil war takes place. One of its distinguishing features as a film is that *Rachida* "approaches the subject of civil war and its massacres head-on" (Hadj-Moussa, 2008, p. 189). Images from daily life show poverty, idle youth, and governmental inefficiency, among other factors that allow for the growth of terrorist groups during the time period.

After her recuperation, Rachida lives in fear and refuses to leave her house. After a series of terrorist attacks, kidnappings, and assassinations in Algiers she says, "I'm in exile in my own country" (Bachir-Chouikh, 2002). She is both enraged and petrified by the atrocities taking place around her. Rachida and her mother decide to escape from Algiers to a rural village, and Rachida only returns to Algiers for a medical check-up where she complains to the doctor examining her healing wound that "it's the wound in my head that won't heal" (Bachir-Chouikh, 2002). Even after her physical injury heals, emotional scars continue to haunt her. Each crime that Rachida witnesses reawakens her trauma, reminding both protagonist and viewer that her injuries transcend the physical. Nevertheless, she makes progress in confronting her fears and returns to teaching amid the omnipresent threat of terrorism. In a moment of incredible strength, resilience, and resistance that marks the final scene, Rachida turns to face children seated in a destroyed classroom and begins a new lesson. In a film that builds scene upon scene of carnage, suffering, and loss witnessed by the protagonist, a defiant stand of a woman determined to carry out her mission strikes a positive note that resurrects an Algerian unyielding spirit and poses a challenge to those who seek to silence it.

In both novel and film, the narrative voice moves in two dimensions: individual and collective. In *Memory in the Flesh*, Mosteghanemi uses the voice of a male narrator, allowing her to escape the boundaries of the social and cultural norms that would restrict a female author or narrator who is writing or speaking in and about Algeria. Although challenging, the technique gives her the advantage of maximizing the movement of voice in both dimensions, as the individual narrative voice has more freedom as a male and the collective voice gains a wider representation as a former-freedom-fighter-turned-artist-in-exile male who carries on his body a permanent reminder of the country's past struggles. The author's use of Khaled as the main narrative voice "sheds light on the fate of the women's emancipation anticipated after the war and it supplements the accounts given by other almost exclusively male Algerian writers" (Bamia, 1997, p. 86). In this manner, the author compounds the narrative voice, while safely expressing her own views as an Algerian female writer. In *Rachida*, Bachir-Chouikh uses a female leading role to directly address the Dark Years from a typical Algerian woman's perspective. As a character, Rachida is easily relatable in her desire to live an honest and peaceful life, a desire that gets thwarted by external forces reflecting the harsh realities of a country torn by inner strife. Most of the film's action takes place through her eyesand, as the camera follows her movement through each scene, it sheds light on her experiences both as individual and nation.

Just as the narrative voice moves on a spatial level between the individual and the collective, it also moves on a temporal level as the here-and-now versus the there-and-past. On this level, voice encompasses memory and expands its focus to the country and its history in what becomes a national recollection of trauma. Thus, both Khaled's and Rachida's bodies become canvases upon which Algerian history records itself. Khaled's amputated arm is not only a reflection of his sacrifices for Algeria, but also the memory of an injury that is "complemented and explained by the rhetorical context of war, still seared on the minds of a nation and its citizens" (McLarney, 2002, p. 30).

Rachida's injury is a record of trauma, and its hidden scar is symbolic of the unspoken suffering of a nation during the civil war. Through her direct treatment of the body as canvas and injury as record, Bachir-Chouikh uses film as "an opportunity to conquer the social terrain to which access has been denied and to give voice to the voiceless" (Salhi, 2004, p. 59). In Bachir-Chouikh's realistic depiction of the time period, she appropriates and restores to the victims voices lost in the Dark Years.

### 3. Homeland, Motherhood, and Exile: A Woman's Hidden Voice

In *Memory in the Flesh*, Mosteghanemi juxtaposes two views of Ahlam: one as a person and another as a nation. These views, as communicated by the narrator Khaled, constantly change according to his impressions, as his experiences drive him to readjust his views on Ahlam, motherhood, and homeland. His rejection by Ahlam mirrors his exile from Algeria, and his obsessive love-hate attachment to her concentrates his feelings towards his homeland into Ahlam, transforming her to a symbol of a nation. Writing the novel from the perspective of Khaled, who is both a victim of war and unrequited love for Ahlam and Algeria, Mosteghanemi makes her two main characters, a man and a woman, play the dual role of individuals and symbols. Furthermore, 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.

Mosteghanemi presents *Memory in the Flesh* through a single perspective in the form of a monologue or diary. Her use of a male narrator allows her to remain outside the novel as Khaled analyzes Ahlam and composes her into a vessel of symbols and mysteries, a beacon for the collective Algerian identity. Ellen McLarney (2002) contends that "Khalid's voice eclipses that of Ahlam, and she is buried under layers of abstracted images, metaphors, and symbols" (p. 25). Thus, the reader does not hear Ahlam's voice, but can only see her in light of Khaled's testimonies. Ahlam is made to transcend the physical through Khaled's renditions of her as a bridge in a series of paintings. She takes the form of changing memories and shifting ideals, remaining an ambiguous figure throughout the novel. As a representation of Constantine, her femininity is ambiguous. This is exacerbated by Khaled's desire for her, a desire that she does not alleviate or reciprocate. Khaled yearns for a physical dimension to their relationship, only to see Ahlam give herself up to another man, leaving Khaled yet again injured and exiled.

Initially, Mosteghanemi does not present Ahlam as an entity separate from the male figures around her. She introduces Ahlam as Si Taher's daughter, as Khaled's fantasy, and as Si X's wife. Ironically, the only time Ahlam is an independent figure is on the cover of her book. Although Ahlam's voice is not audible in the novel, it is obvious that she does possess one through her writing. Shaden Tageldin (2009) remarks that "at first blush, Mustaghānīmī appears trapped in patriarchy; we cannot extricate an autonomous subject named 'Ahlam' from the jaws of father, *patrie*, and their intertwined histories" (p. 484). However, this constricted view of Ahlam can be expanded by examining her literary background. Ahlam is firmly grounded in Arabic literary tradition and is well educated in the language, while Khaled must teach himself to write in Arabic in order to break his estrangement. In search of his own voice and identity he confesses, "I envy the minaret. I envy newborn babies. Only they have the right to scream and the ability to do so before life tames their vocal chords and teaches them silence" (Mosteghanemi, 2003, p. 15). In the end, both characters obtain a voice, and Mosteghanemi liberates them from their respective constraints. Both are victims of war; Ahlam loses her father to the resistance, and Khaled loses his arm. Painting and writing enable Khaled and Ahlam, respectively, to break their silence and make their experiences known.

Khaled projects his feelings of exile and loss onto Ahlam and tries to fashion her into a replacement for his mother and his homeland, simultaneously. As an orphan, he grows up without knowing his mother, and he remembers her only through a collage of disconnected sensory memories. Tanja Stampfl (2010) remarks that "the loss of the mother results in an identification of the homeland with motherhood; the motherland becomes a substitute for the mother's love" (p. 135). He begins to see Ahlam as a physical representation of Algeria, intertwining her physical image with the tenuous love he has for Algeria. In his consciousness, Ahlam becomes inextricable from his sense of what constitutes his homeland. Mosteghanemi emphasizes the contrast between Khaled and Ahlam by creating a generational gap between the two characters. The most obvious source of this gap is a two-decade age difference: Ahlam is born just as Algeria gains its independence, at a time when Khaled is a young resistance fighter. In their juxtaposition, Ahlam and Khaled "represent two generations of Algerians in a confrontational position, juxtaposing their views of life in postcolonial Algeria. This generational clash is represented here by two incompatible individuals in a love relationship that soon appears to be one-sided, for while Khaled is overwhelmed by his love for Hayat [i.e. Ahlam], she is more difficult to sound" (Bamia, 1997, p. 89).

Khaled feels a sense of ownership towards the struggle for Algerian independence coupled with a kinship with those who participated with him, leading him to yearn for and idealize all symbols of his homeland. Upon meeting Ahlam as a young woman, Khaled extends his sense of ownership and responsibility towards her.

From the first encounter between the two main characters, Khaled fashions an image of Ahlam as an embodiment of Constantine. Upon meeting her, Khaled thinks “I discovered how I could tame you and control your burning fire. In my heart, I decided to make you my fine city ... I condemned you to be my Constantine, and sentenced myself to insanity” (Mosteghenami, 2003, p. 77). When Khaled the painter and Ahlam the grown woman meet, he notices a traditional bracelet on her wrist. The relic at once reminds him of his mother and country. By her appearance at the art gallery, she brings back memories that he has suppressed during his exile in France. In Ahlam, he sees a vessel for his memories and emotions of longing for Constantine.

Just as Algeria struggles to assert its independence, Ahlam struggles to maintain her autonomy in light of Khaled’s unattainable expectations. Their relationship transcends the physical, becoming emblematic of the dynamic between citizen and homeland. Khaled advises Ahlam to “carry this name of yours with greater pride, not necessarily with arrogance but with the deep awareness that you are more than just a woman. You are the consciousness of a nation. Do you understand? Symbols are not supposed to shatter” (Mosteghanemi, 2003, p. 249). He says this while assuming the role of a father for Ahlam, giving her guidance and telling her which path to take in life. He sees her as the last remaining unadulterated and untarnished relic of Algerian martyrs. Having participated in the liberation of Algeria, and losing an arm in the process, Khaled places himself in a position as the last defender of the homeland. However, failing to influence her or prevent her marriage to Si X, Khaled comes to realize that ultimately he has no control over her. By failing to reciprocate Khaled’s love and committing herself to another man from the “nouveau riche” class, Ahlam at once establishes her independence by rejecting Khaled’s ownership of her and mirrors the country’s attempt at detaching itself from its militant past in favor of a new political and economic order.

For Khaled, Algeria epitomizes his conception of motherhood, and he sees Ahlam as the physical representation of both motherhood and country. This idea is destroyed with Ahlam’s marriage to the corrupt Si X. Khaled addresses the object of his desire, saying “You killed a whole nation inside of me... You were not my daughter, nor were you my mother. You were just like my homeland, with all its paradoxes” (Mosteghanemi, 2003, p. 248). To his mind, Ahlam’s decision to break away from him causes a rift that separates his notions of motherhood and homeland. Thus, the motherly/daughterly figure that he assigned to Ahlam is destroyed. Nevertheless, she remains for him a symbol for Algeria as a nation characterized by unwavering love for its countrymen. The nation knows no better than to love both its loyal defenders and its corrupt dismantlers. Khaled sees this indiscriminate love as an insidious and disguised form of indifference.

Khaled furthers his estrangement from his homeland by becoming more resolutely entrenched in his exile. He recalls that after his return from the wedding in Algeria, “I had broken my links with my own country. In fact, I had assumed an attitude of hopelessness” (Mosteghanemi, 2003, p. 250). His dejection mirrors the rejection he feels from Ahlam. This mental state is a reflection of his physical exile from Constantine, as well as the psychological exile he imposes upon himself from modern, postcolonial Algeria.

Khaled’s sense of exile stems from the distance between conflicting views of the mother-homeland as both nurturing and destructive. Stampfl (2010) posits that “while the fatherland traditionally implies national pride and strength, the motherland equals roots and unconditional love. One fights for the fatherland, but sacrifices everything for the motherland” (p. 134). Khaled loses his mother, is robbed of his childhood during his six-month stay in prison, sacrifices his left arm during battle, and finally gives up his sanity to his unreciprocated love for Ahlam. However, none of these sacrifices are enough for his homeland, and Algeria claims his brother Hassan. It is at this moment that Khaled realizes that Algeria is not a source of nurture, but a “tyrant mother” (Mosteghanemi, 2003, p. 254). She is a mother who destroys her children and rewards her desecrators. Khaled finally accepts the contradictions of the homeland and realizes the dangerous allure of his dreams, dreams that encompass Ahlam, Constantine, liberation, and life.

As *Memory in the Flesh* progresses, Khaled’s views on Ahlam, Algeria, and the concept of motherhood change with his experiences and his losses. He accepts Algeria as his mother during the revolution, exiles himself from his homeland after the loss of his arm, and readjusts his belief in the mother-homeland upon Ahlam’s rejection of him and Hassan’s death. Mosteghanemi writes the novel through the voice of a male narrator, which helps her reader create a distance between author and protagonist.

This allows her greater freedom in writing the novel, making it less plausible for the reader to identify her with the novel's primary voice, thus accomplishing the difficult task of maintaining an author's voice while allowing her main characters means of self-expression. Furthermore, by creating the dual role for her characters as both symbols and individuals, she succeeds in presenting the voice of a conscious Arabic female writer, personifications of an entire city or nation, and individuals who experience the past, present, and future of a nation.

#### 4. Representations of Trauma and Injury

In both works, the main characters use escape as a coping strategy. In his analysis of the incorporation of Algeria's Dark Years in cinema, Guy Austin (2009) asserts that "traumatic events are never fully assimilated in the present but take time to manifest themselves, often migrating to a different place and a later time to make their impact felt" (p. 19). Khaled exiles himself to France after being treated in Tunisia for his wounds. Of France and Algeria, respectively, he says "it is an awkward contradiction to live in a country that recognizes your talents but rejects your injuries, to belong to a country that respects your injuries but refuses the person" (Mosteghanemi, 2003, p. 40). Despite his attempt to escape his trauma, Khaled does not feel intact in France or Algeria as those around him fragment his being into the separate identities of painter and amputee. He is both war victim and war hero, a double-bind that keeps him from being whole. His maimed body "no longer signifies, but functions rather as a surface to be impregnated with meaning by the post-colonial new Algerian elite on one hand and the Parisian constituency on the other" (Stampfl, 2010, p. 136). The amputation of his arm symbolizes both his severance from modern-day Algeria and his incompleteness as an Algerian living in exile. Nevertheless, Khaled's spatial and temporal separation from the location where he is injured allows him to take up painting as a means of healing and reconnecting with the world around him. The relationship with his environment is partially severed upon the amputation of his arm; however, the act of painting allows him to build a bridge with his surroundings. Khaled maintains his distance from Algeria, the land that has kept part of him, by remaining in Paris while expressing his bond with his homeland through his paintings of Constantine, which compensate for his partitioned body and identity.

Physical and psychological injuries in the characters in *Rachida* and *Memory in the Flesh* are reflections of traumatic years in Algerian history. Both Khaled's and Rachida's bodies serve as mediums of expression and records of suffering. Although Khaled and Rachida attempt to hide their scars and suppress the memory of their traumatic experiences, they discover that coping through escape and amnesia does not heal the injuries resulting from trauma. As painful and threatening as it may seem, learning to face trauma and fill in the gaps left by injuries enables them to restore equilibrium to their lives. By addressing socio-political turmoil and the failure of the postcolonial regime to materialize the aspirations of a nation that fought long and hard for its freedom, both works present a record of Algerian history seen through the eyes and inscribed on the bodies of Khaled and Rachida.

#### References

- Austin, Guy. (2009). Trauma, cinema and the Algerian war. *New Readings*, 10, 18–25.
- Bachir-Chouikh, Yamina, (Director and Writer). (2002). *Rachida* [Motion picture]. France: Canal+, Ciel Production, & Ciné-Sud Promotion.
- Bamia, Aida A. (1997). Dhakirat al-jasad (the body's memory): A new outlook on old themes. *Research in African Literatures*, 28(3), 85–93.
- Hadj-Moussa, Ratiba. (2008). Marginality and ordinary memory: Body centrality and the plea for recognition in recent Algerian films. *Journal of North African Studies*, 13(2), 187–199.
- McLarney, Ellen. (2002). Unlocking the female in Ahlam Mustaghanami. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 33(1), 24–44.
- Mosteghanemi, Ahlam. (2003). *Memory in the flesh*. (Baria Ahmar Sreih, Trans.). Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. (Original work published 1985)
- Salhi, Zahia S. (2004). Maghrebi women film-makers and the challenge of modernity: Breaking women's silence. In Naomi Sakr (Ed.), *Women and media in the Middle East: Power through self-expression* (pp. 53–71). London: I.B. Tauris.
- Stampfl, Tanja. (2010). The (im)possibility of telling: Of Algeria and *Memory in the flesh*. *College Literature*, 37(1), 129–158.
- Tageldin, Shaden M. (2009). Which *qalam* for Algeria? *Comparative Literature Studies*, 46(3), 467–497.