

## Historical Realities in Selected Works of Leila Sebbar

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### Abstract

*Historical realities such as political wars and colonisation are recurrent themes in Sebbar's narratives. Previous studies on her writings have dwelt largely on the analysis of these themes, with less attention paid to the dynamics of her portrayal of such themes. This study has attempted using the postcolonial theory, to answer questions on the position of Leïla Sebbar as a historical realist writer of the post colonial era with a view to depicting her perspective on the Algerian historical realities. This has been done through the analysis of the Algerian historical realities in four of her novels: *La Jeune Fille au Balcon*, *Fatima ou les Algériennes au Square*, *La Seine Etait Rouge* and *Mon Cher Fils*. The four narratives of course were chosen purposively. This study has also generated further questions on how colonisation and western education influence people from an area that has been through colonisation especially the young ones who did not even witness the colonial period, this is the case as seen with the new generations of Algerians.*

**Keywords :** Leïla Sebbar, Historical realities, Post colonial, Maghrebian literature.

### Introduction

Schöpfel (7) insists that the French invasion of Algeria in 1930 gave birth to what is known today as francophone Maghrebian literature. In reality, this literature which is believed to be an essential part of African literature was born out of the French colonial occupation and that is why Atilade (126) states that the Maghrebian writers are products of intense colonisation. Atilade (126) also reveals that the French colonial policy of assimilation gave birth to a class of Maghrebian elites. Colonisation as well led to the emergence of youths trained in the language of the colonial masters. These young Maghrebians decided to write and condemn the colonisers and their political system, interestingly using the colonial master's language. They also maintain the act of writing real life stories concerning the Maghreb and the colonial masters. That is why Schöpfel (41) refers to them as "des écrivains observateurs et très attachés au réel". Maghrebian literature shares the same history with other African literature, at least as far as the colonial situation is concerned. Francophone Maghrebian literature is not complete without authors like Assia Djebar, Mouloud Mammeri, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Rachid Mimouni, Azouz Beggag and Leïla Sebbar, to mention but a few.

Leila Sebbar is an author of Maghrebian

origin with an Algerian father and a French mother. She was born in 1941 in Aflou, in the district of Oran, Algeria. Her parents were both teachers. Having grown up in the family, where mother was French and studied in the school where only French language was allowed, she adopted her maternal language as her first language from her childhood. Sebbar's writings are usually centered on issues related to the social and historical realities of the Maghreb, especially Algeria.

This study will explore the historical realities of the Algerians as recorded by Leïla Sebbar in four of her novels: *La Jeune Fille au Balcon*, *Fatima ou les Algériennes au Square*, *La Seine Etait Rouge* and *Mon Cher Fils*. The four narratives were chosen because they share the same thematic preoccupation. Postcolonial theory which suits the context of our study will be applied to deal thoroughly with the different themes. Actually, this theory fits in because the study is about the historical realities of a country that passed through colonisation. Finally, Sebbar will be analysed as a postcolonial writer. But before going into the analysis of the themes, it will be necessary to quickly define the said theory and provide some information about its development.

### Postcolonialism in literature

Postcolonialism in literature includes the



study of theory and practice of literature as it relates to the coloniser-colonised experience. Edward Saïd of Palestine is the leading theorist in this field. Concerning post-colonial literature, his book titled *Orientalism* (1978) is regarded as the avant garde of post-colonial studies. In this book the author analyses how European states initiated colonialism as a result of what they called their own racial superiority. Saïd assigned an important role to exoticism in the discursive representation of the Orient. Because exoticism is relevant not only in the representation of the Oriental, but in the representation of the world in general, the usefulness of his theory goes much beyond the Orient, so it may be applied to postcolonial representations almost anywhere. According to Saïd, Western discourse created a particular Orient in order to justify its assumed economic, intellectual and moral superiority over the conquered territories and their subjects.

Postcolonial theory applies to the coloniser-colonised experience, especially as regards the sufferings the colonised African countries went through. The postcolonial style of writing is a branch of post-modernism in literature which is concerned with the political and cultural independence of peoples formerly subjugated in colonial empires. It deals with the conflicts between ruler and subject, mainstream and marginalized, oppressors and oppressed and, at the same time, celebrates the suppressed "other," challenging the dominant culture and questioning concepts of established authority. The post-colonial authors' challenge was to find and re-establish their lost national identity, history and literature, and to redefine their relationship with the land and language of their former masters. Leïla Sebbar is one of the Maghrebian authors known for her postcolonial and historical writings.

#### **Historical realities in Sebbar's narratives**

The historical realities represented in the selected novels are the Algerian war, the use of historical topics, colonisation and the use of real names. These historical realities are explored below.

##### **i) The Algerian war**

In the literature of Algeria, the war and

the Independence are central pieces. A series of novels have been published on this topic. The particularity of the novels consists in an attempt to recollect pieces of memory of that period (Geys, 2009:24). The Algerian war of independence is a reality faced by the Algerians. The war started in 1954 and ended in 1962 with Algeria gaining her independence from France (Stora, 1993:40). Sebbar in her fictional novels portrays the Algerian war in many different ways. Her *La Seine était rouge* is a historical novel which focuses on the event that happened during the Algerian war, especially the event of the 17th October, 1961 in France. She also gave out the date of the war when she writes:

Louis filme le mur de la prison, à l'angle de La Santé et du boulevard Arago, la plaque commémorative fixée sur la pierre et à droite, les lettres rouges bombées:

"1954 - 1962  
DANS CETTE PRISON  
FURENT GUILLOTINES  
DES RESISTANTS  
ALGERIENS  
QUI SE DRESERENT  
CONTRE L'OCCUPANT  
FRANCAIS"  
(Sebbar, 1999:30)

From the foregoing, Sebbar states the date that the Algerian war took place, from 1954 to 1962. She also clearly shows the injustice meted out to the Algerians during the war. Many of them are imprisoned for fighting for the right cause.

In her other narratives, Sebbar also makes allusion to the Algerian war. In the short story "La jeune fille au balcon", Mélissa tells her mother and aunties about her friend whose father is an officer of the ALN. She says: 'J'avais pensé jusqu'ici à une photo qu'une amie m'a montrée. Son père était officier dans l'ALN pendant la guerre' (Sebbar, 1996:14). Sebbar explains in the footnote of the same page : "ALN: l'Armée de libération nationale, pendant la guerre d'Algérie (1954 - 1962)". (ALN: National Liberation Army,



during the Algerian war (1954-1962). Mélissa also talks about the "moudjahidine"; Sebbar says: "Moudjahidine: nom donné aux Algériens qui se bûtaient pour l'indépendance de leur pays contre l'armée française pendant la guerre d'Algérie." (Sebbar, 1996:15). (Moudjahidine: name given to Algerians who fought against the French army for the independence of their country during the Algerian war). With these footnote explanations, Sebbar makes it clear that she is talking about the Algerian war and she also gives out the date of the war.

"La photo d'identité" is another short story, where Sebbar shows some elements of reality about the Algerian war. Yacine, an Algerian immigrant in France, a young beur who likes seeing war movies and reading war books, comes to find out about the Algerian war through movies and books. Talking about the bookshop where Yacine goes every day, the narrator says: "La librairie a exposé des albums et des journaux de la guerre d'Algérie" (Sebbar, 1996:60). (The bookshop displayed albums and magazines of the Algerian war). The narrator also makes mention of a date that coincides with the Algerian war, he says: "En 1960, la guerre n'était pas terminée ..." (Sebbar, 1996:65). (In 1960, the war had not ended ...). The Algerian war is also referred to throughout the story. Sebbar shows her interest in the history of Algeria especially the story of the Algerian war of independence.

Just like the other narratives of Sebbar examined in this study, *Mon cher fils* also makes allusion to the Algerian war. The old man whose son refuses to reply his letters says: "Je ne sais pas. Peut-être parce qu'ils ne m'auraient pas écouté, des vieilles histoires pour les vieux, même la guerre d'Algérie ..." (Sebbar, 2012:32) (I don't know. Maybe because they would not listen to me, old histories for the old, even the Algerian war ...)

From the novel, other real factors like the women's riot that happened during the Algerian war are fictionalised by Sebbar: "Je suis allé à la manifestation des femmes algériennes, le 20 Octobre." (Sebbar, 1999:91). (I attended the Algerian women's demonstration on the 20th of October). This is Flora talking about the Algerian

women's riot that took place in France during the Algerian war. Flora, Louis' mother, a French woman who supports the Algerians, is also imprisoned during the war with some other Algerian women who rise up for their husbands who are maltreated by the French soldiers. The narrator supports this when he talks about Louis, he says: "Sa mère lui a parlé des prisons des femmes où elle était incarcérée pendant la guerre d'Algérie" (Sebbar, 1999:25). (His mother told him about the women's prison where she was incarcerated during the Algerian war). Mina, Omer's mother, an Algerian who meets Flora in prison, also remembers when she is in prison. She says: "Tu te rappelles? Tu vas dire que j'ai la nostalgie de la prison" (Sebbar, 1999:21). (You remember? You are going to say that I feel nostalgia for prison). The Algerian women's riot is a reality and most of the women are imprisoned because they speak out for their husbands and sons.

French soldiers captured Algerians whom they suppose are working with the FLN and MNA during the last few months of the war, and these months are predominantly painful for the Algerians. The investigations of the French police which become a daily situation, the FLN and MNA fighting each other, the danger of the far-right terrorist faction, the Armed Islamic Groups (Groupes Islamiques Armée, GIA), bombs, women calling for the release of their husbands and sons are captured in the novel:

J'étais avec mon oncle, ce jour-là. C'était pas un militant, mais il voulait défiler à Paris avec les Algériens, pour la levée du couvre-feu. Il avait assisté à des règlements de compte, dans sa banlieue, entre des MNA et des FLN. Ça l'avait écoeuré, c'est là qu'il a décidé que lui, la politique . . . Au lieu de s'unir, ils s'entre-tuent . . ." (Sebbar, 1999:101).

This statement above is made by the Algerian that works in the café where Amel and Omer go to do some research concerning the Algerian war. According to him, he witnessed the fight between



the FLN and MNA. Stora records this war between the FLN and MNA : "Le journal *Le Monde*, daté du 20 mars 1962, publie les chiffres du bilan de l'affrontement entre nationalistes en France (FLN contre MNA): Plus de 12 000 agressions, 4 000 morts et plus de 9 000 blessés." (Stora, 1993:36). (*Le Monde* newspaper dated 20th March 1962, publishes the number for the dispute between the nationalists in France (FLN against MNA): More than 12 000 aggressions, 4 000 deaths and more than 9 000 wounded.). The FLN and MNA are both Algerian organisations who are supposed to be united so that they can fight the French but rather than being united, they fight each other.

## ii) Historical topics

Looking at the table of contents in *La Seine était rouge*, all the topics assigned to all the chapters are historical topics. Examples of these historical topics are the following:

- Chapter One "Nanterre, Amel, October 1996".
- Chapter Two "October 1961: Le patron du café L'Atlas".
- Chapter Three "October 1961: Le harki de Papon".
- Chapter Four: "October 1961: L'Algérien sauvé des eaux".
- Chapter Five: "October 1961: La patronne du café La Goutte d'Or. Barbès".
- Chapter Six "October 1961: L'amant français".
- Chapter Seven "30 October 1961: L'étudiant français".
- Chapter Eight "17 Octobre 1961: Le librairie de la rue Saint-Séverin".
- Chapter Nine " October 1961: Le flic de Clichy".

All these topics are historical because of the dates attached to them. It shows that the historical time of the novel is October 1961 (colonial period), that is, the time the major events in the novel take place, while the time of the story is October 1996 (post-colonial period), that is, the time the novel was written. Chapter Eight is specific, it mentions 17th October 1961, while Chapter One shows October 1996. Sebbar's words could be compared with Stora (1993) concerning the Algerian war and particularly the event of 17th October 1961:

Sebbar: J'ai su plus tard que les tracts étaient signés par le FLN. Ils appelaient à la manifestation du 17 octobre 1961. Une manifestation pacifique pour protester contre le couvre-feu imposé aux seuls Algériens, par le préfet de Paris, Papon . . . (Sebbar, 1999:42).

Stora: Et la répression continue en cette fin d'année 1961, en particulier pour les Algériens vivant en France. A compter du 4 octobre, un couvre-feu leur est imposé à Paris à partir de vingt heures. Le 17, ils sont 30 000 à protester. La répression dirigée par le préfet de police Maurice Papon est sauvage . . . (Stora, 1993:64)

Sebbar narrates a true life event that happened between the Algerians living in France and the French authority, on the 17th of October 1961, in her novel *La Seine était rouge* published in 1999

## iii) The use of real names

Sebbar uses so many real names that exist in reality both in France and Algeria and the Maghreb as a whole. In *La Seine était rouge*, while telling her story, Sebbar mentions names of known individuals such as "Général Charles de Gaulle" (Sebbar, 1999:29). Gaulle is the first president of the fifth republic in France and also the president during the time of the Algerian war. Another real name mentioned is "Maurice Papon" (Sebbar, 1999:42); Papon was the chief of police who imposed the curfew on Algerians in 1961, the curfew that caused the event of the 17th of October 1961. In the short story "La jeune fille au balcon", she deploys names such as Maupassant, Balzac and Zola. These are all French writers/philosophers of the 19th century. The name of Bill Clinton, a former president of the United States of America is mentioned. Mentioning Clinton's name shows that the novel was written after the Algerian independence. In the short story "La photo d'identité", names like La Fontaine, a 19th century French writer is also



mentioned. Marc Garanger is a French photographer and one of the real people mentioned by Sebbar in her works.

Some real organisations that existed and still exist in France and Algeria are also mentioned such as "MNA (Mouvement national algérien) and FLN (Front de libération nationale algérien)" (Sebbar, 1999:43), MNA is a political organisation founded in 1954 by Messali Hadj, an Algerian nationalist, while FLN is also a political organisation that rose up also in 1954 in Algeria against some military objectives (Stora, 1993:33). "Les officiers de la SAS" (Sections administratives spéciales) was created by the municipal reform of 1956; it represents the civil authority of close to 1494 communities in Algeria and there are close to 1200 officers in the section. "Les moudjahidine" is the name given to Algerians who fight against the French army for the independence of their country during the Algerian war. It is also a central organ of the FLN (Stora, 1993:62). Les CRS (Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurités) (Sebbar, 1999:69,114), CRS is a French anti-riot police sent to Algeria by François Mitterrand, the then minister of interior in France. (Stora, 1993:9). Le FFS (Front des forces socialistes) is an opposition political party founded by Hocine Aït Ahmed and Le RCD (Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie) an opposition party in Algeria headed by Saïd Saadi (Sebbar, 1999:101). Le FIS (Front Islamique du Salut, Sebbar, 2012:143) was an association legalised by the Algerian government in September 1989 (Sebbar, 1999:142).

Sebbar also depicts a social group named "Harkis". They are unwanted both in Algeria and in France. The *harkis* is the name given to those Algerians who betray their country by working for the French army during the war. Even though it is not usual for the Algerian francophone authors to write about these people, Chapter Three of *La Seine était rouge* is devoted to them. Sebbar employs the word "Le harki du Papon" to represent them. Likewise, in the short story "L'Enfer", Sebbar gives a narration about a man who betrays his country during the war. His wife refuses to tell their son about the father's betrayal

but the grandmother could not help but tell the young man the truth:

Il m'a dit que mon fils travaillait avec l'armée française, les soldats ennemis. Il était armé, il avait de l'argent, il participait aux embuscades contre les frères. Ils cherchaient à l'abattre et ils le prenaient vivant . . . Il n'a pas dit la suite. Il était venu m'avertir. Ma maison serait surveillée, un fils revient toujours dans la maison de sa mère . . . Je n'ai pas revu ton père jusqu'à la fin de la guerre. Je ne sais pas comment il a échappé au massacre des harkis, ces frères qui ont trahi les frères, il a dit se cacher ou se déguiser. (Sebbar, 1996:139)

Sebbar's novels give specific details on the ambience of the war, in addition to the search for the harkis after independence, a handful of them are murdered. The harkis chose the wrong side; they are marked by the curses of history. Stora records the number of the "Harkis" to be 58 000. According to him, they are asked to leave France at the end of the war but they are afraid to go back because they know that they have lost their dignity among the Algerians:

Une autre directive du même ministre d'Etat, datant du 15 juillet 1962, énonça que "les supplétifs débarqués en métropole en dehors du plan général seront renvoyés en Algérie". Ces officiers diront: "Nous avons perdu notre honneur avec la fin de cette guerre d'Algérie".(Stora, 1993:80).

These auxiliaries referred to by Stora are no other than the Algerian natives who decided to work with the French army against Algeria.

In the four selected narratives used for this study, Sebbar mentions the names of the three known Maghrebian countries: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. She also mentions France, Egypt, Indochina, and many towns such as



Sydney, Los Angeles, Algiers, Paris and Nanterre. France and Algeria are the major countries of interest for Leïla Sebbar as she writes concerning the Algerian colonial days and the aftermath of colonisation.

#### iv) Colonisation

Colonisation is one of the themes explored by Sebbar in her narratives. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are the Maghrebian countries colonised by France, Schöpfel (2007:7) opines that:

La pénétration française à partir de 1830 (l'Algérie devenait département français, la Tunisie et le Maroc étaient mis sous protectorat) a introduit des données nouvelles dans la société du Maghreb et elle a provoqué de graves questions.

The French colonial masters took over the Maghreb starting with Algeria in 1830, then Tunisia in 1881 and Morocco in 1912. Maghrebian writers such as Sebbar have not failed to explore this in their writings.

In the short story "La robe interdite", Sebbar tells the story of a young beautiful woman who is promised fame by a total stranger who comes to their town. The stranger promises to make her the most famous model from Los Angeles to Sydney. The lady accepts the stranger's proposal and leaves with him. The stranger makes so much money with the young lady because she is talented as a model but before she realises what is going on, he leaves her stranded with nothing. The story ends with these words: "Sur l'estrade illuminée, la fille est nue" (Sebbar, 1996:93). (The girl was naked on the lighted stage). This is Sebbar's way of telling her story about colonisation. The Europeans came to Africa in the name of "regenerating Africa", that is, making Africa better but they ended up exploiting Africa. They exploited Africa in so many ways: economically, socially, and politically and so many deaths were recorded during the colonial era (Olayiwola, 2004). An example could be given with the number of people that died during the Algerian war.

Another allusion is made to the colonisation of Algeria in the short story "La jeune fille au balcon". One of the consequences of colonisation is that the colonised people imbibed in them the culture of the colonisers. Melissa's aunt who attends the French school during the colonial period insists on seeing French movies. The narrator also mentions independence, he says: "C'était l'indépendance, on fêtait la libération du pays" (Sebbar, 1996:12). (It was independence; we were celebrating the country's freedom). France used so many degrading and oppressive methods while colonising her colonies. There was the indigenous legal code which made the indigenes to become subjects in their own land. So, for every Algerian, independence is a freedom well deserved.

Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge* thematises the issue of colonisation. Sebbar tells the story of the injustice meted out on the Algerians by France, which, of course, is the country which colonised them. *Fatima ou les algériennes au square* is another of Sebbar's novel where, even though it is the story of Algerian immigrants in France during the post-colonial period, has elements of colonisation in it. The women usually come together to discuss the happenings in France and in Algeria. According to Sebbar, these are married women who were born during the colonial period in Algeria but relocate to France with their parents or husbands as the case may be.

#### Leïla Sebbar as a postcolonial writer

Leïla Sebbar was born during the colonial era in 1941, but she started writing in 1976 when she and her friends founded the feminist journal *Histoires d'elles*, which lasted for three years, 1976-80. However, her first full length novel *Fatima ou les algériennes au square* was first published in 1981. This shows that Sebbar is a writer of the post colonial era. Nevertheless, being a writer of the post colonial era does not make one a postcolonial writer. If postcolonialism in literature includes the study of theory and literature as it relates to the coloniser-colonised experience, then we can boldly ascertain that Sebbar is a postcolonial writer because all the narratives used relate to the coloniser-colonised experience.



Sebbar in the four selected narratives for this study shows elements of postcolonialism. *La Seine était rouge* is the story of the Algerian war and the event of 17th October 1961, the day many Algerians come out to protest against the curfew imposed on them alone by the Chief of police in Paris. The story is a fiction with elements of reality in it. A fiction written during the post-colonial era, precisely in October 1996. However this fiction tells the real life story that took place during the colonial era, 17th October, 1961. *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square* tells the story of Algerian immigrants living in France with their families after the independence of Algeria.

These immigrants, mostly women, who are all born in Algeria during the colonial era gather at the town square to discuss the Algerian past and present, also the relationship between Algeria and France and the condition of the Algerian immigrants in France. They also discuss their children who are born in France and how much these children have lost the Algerian identity. *Mon cher fils* narrates the story of an Algerian man who spends most of his days in France with his family as an immigrant. He comes back to Algeria but his only son refuses to come with him. In Algeria, he tries reaching out to him but he would not reply his letters.

The novel focuses on themes of loss and search for identity, colonisation, war, oppression and injustice. The collection of short stories *La Jeune fille au balcon* which has six short stories in it tells the passionate story about the link between France and Algeria, conflict of identity and generational conflicts. The old generation, born before the colonial period and the new generation born after the colonial period could

not understand each other because of the aftermaths of colonisation. It could, therefore, be submitted that the postcolonial perspective is concerned with the ways in which the legacies of colonialism (understood as a set of ideas and practices) have affected people previously under colonial rule; thus Leïla Sebbar is a postcolonial writer.

### Conclusion

Sebbar is one of the authors whose narratives deal with the colonial legacies as on-going processes that impact many aspects of the political, socio-cultural, and economic environments of previously colonised regions. She also perceives colonialism as a mutual process that has affected both 'colonisers' and the 'colonised', however, in various degrees. She is specifically interested in the psychological dimensions of such violent encounters where the colonisers and the colonised were killing each other, even though the colonisers killed more of the colonised.

The event of 17th October 1961 in Paris is a true example of the *Us-Other* mentality of the colonisers and dehumanisation of colonised people. A curfew was imposed only on the colonised and when they complained, the colonisers started killing and arresting them. Sebbar's works are interesting because they explore beyond the hard materiality of such violent legacies (which is something that should not be forgotten), and expose certain codes of fantasies and desires, certain emotions and affective responses that speak as much about the violence of colonialism, as about impossibilities, resistances, and transcendences.

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