OF ALGERIAN AND AMERICAN LITERARY CONNECTIONS

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C. ostanzo Di Girolamo (1981: 66) provides an insight into literature and criticism, which will constitute the starting point of our discussion of Algerian and American literary connections. We shall deal with these connections with reference to the themes of freedom, literary imagination, and literary tradition in Algerian literature in French, and with particular reference to Mohamed Dib’s novels. He writes that a “text is not literary but becomes so; this means that a reader’s function is fundamental. Before his intervention the text is only a text; the literary object begins to exist only with him and thanks to his attention.” This point is significant enough for our purpose and warrants further amplification in connection with Algerian literature in French and its criticism. The Algerian literature in French has been saddled with the deadweight of two basic fallacies, the anthropological and sociological, that have denied its literary value and have reduced it, to what Roland Barthes (1991) calls “writing degree zero.” Because of its initial “enabling conditions” (cf. Bakhtin Mikhail, 1974), i.e., colonialism, the Algerian writers’ use of a conqueror’s tongue, their “scenes of instruction” (cf. Bloom Harold, 1980) that is their schooling in French educational institutions, the Algerian War of Independence, post-independence disillusionment and so on, very often western critics have approached this literature A) with the postulate that its texts are so many archeological sites on which any number of anthropological and sociocultural data can be excavated and B) with a literal mindedness, whose end result is the confusion of the real and facts with fiction and imagination.

As evidence for what is advanced above, mention can be made of such significant titles as that of Jean Dejeux’s critical book *The Religions Feeling in Maghrebian Literature in French* (1986), wherein the major texts analyzed are Algerian. Such titles by French critics confirm the pertinence of the outrage of the Nigerian poet and dramatist J.P. Clark (1962: 80) when he writes that “Euro-American critics have not been so much concerned with what our [African/ Algerian] writers have done to their derived form as with the amount of traditional ritual and modern rottenness and rheum that is found in them.”

One way of breaking away from the literal-mindedness of French critics towards Algerian literature in French is to read it as close to “correctly” as the nature of imaginative literature, and to look at it in its intertextual relationship with some classics of English literature. This comparative approach can be justified on both pragmatic and psychopoetic grounds. First, just like any “minor literature… that is a literature written by a minority in a major language (here French)” (Deleuze Gilles and Guattari Felix, 1975: 
33), Algerian literature in French cannot respond positively to French literature by adopting its models without being co-opted by the French literary tradition; second, in their quest for a literary identity of their own, the Algerian authors have suffered from an “anxiety of influence” (cf. Bloom Harold, 1985) that have moved them away from their French predecessors to adopt both American and British writers as literary ancestors.

True, the first stage in Algerian literature in French is marked off by Algerian writers following the lead of the French authors of the time such as Louis Bertrand and Jean Pommier by writing exotic novels with suggestive titles like The Female Dancer of Ouled Nail and Myriem in the Palm Trees (1930) by Slimane Ould Cheikh. The publication of such folkloric novels in the 1930’s corresponded with the centenary celebration of the French colonization of Algeria. That an Algerian author could write novels in French was exhibited at that time as evidence for the success of the French policy of assimilation in the country. The advent of Algerian literature in French can also be explained by the shift in the European episteme that gave an important dimension to aesthetics as a way of salvaging western civilization (McDiarmid Lucy, 1984) and muffling the sirens of the Bolshevist revolution by allowing the colonized to express their cultural traits, which the Communist International denies because of its interest in a world revolution. However, even if the advent of Algerian literature was timely, and could not, therefore, be killed in the bud, the French book industry with the complicity of hegemonic forces in French Algeria directed its first impulses towards the satisfaction of the expectations of the French audience, which did not accept anything not smacking of ethnography from Algerian writers.

However, the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in 1954 ushered in a new phase in Algerian literature in French. The reverberation of the revolution was translated in the tipping over of this literature towards modernism. Because of the revolution, the conqueror’s language assumed a totally different status for the Algerian writer. From a token of assimilation, it became a “booty of war” (cf. Fanon Frantz, 1965) that permitted the Algerian struggle for independence to reach wider audiences in the West. At the level of theme, one of the effects of the war was the shaking of the French readers’ literary expectations as concerns Algerian literature. All of a sudden, they became aware that the Algeria of pacified and peaceful “tribes” to which they were accustomed in the previous ethnographic literature was a lie. Hence, they became ready to accept other themes from what they had, for a long time, considered as their “indigenes” i.e., the Algerian indigenous population.

The liberating reverberations of the Algerian War of Independence could not have reached their full effect without the tremendous reshuffling of the French literary establishment in the 1950’s and the 1960’s as a consequence of the coming of age of American literature that started with the “Fugitives” and “The Lost Generation” in the Paris of the 1930’s. Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir contributed a great deal to the importance that American literature in French translation came to assume in French
letters. The translation of American classics proceeded from the realization of the similarities between the imaginative world of William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and John Steinbeck, and the socio-cultural, economic and political conditions in the France of the 1940’s and the 1950’s. When some American writers like Baldwin and Wright publicly announced their support for the Algerian war of independence, the Algerian authors evidently felt a sense of literary kinship with their American counterparts, translated in the borrowing of major American works as models for emulation. This propensity to draw on American literature was also reinforced by the realization that the “Greenback” novel had a wide literary currency with the French readership, and as such it could be utilized by the Algerian writers themselves to circulate the idea of freedom and the claim for political independence among the French.

The intertextual relationship between the American and Algerian writers shows in works authored by writers as various as Kateb Yacine, Nabil Fares, and Assia Djebar. But it is particularly prominent in Mohamed Dib’s novels. Many titles of his oeuvre echo similar ones from American literature. For example, his trilogy Algeria (composed of The Big House (1952), The Fire (1954), and The Loom (1957) recalls John Dos Passos’s trilogy U.S.A. (consisting of The 42nd Parallel (1936) The Big Money (1933) Nineteen Nineteen (1932). His African Summer (1959) reminds us of the story about the Indian summer in William Faulkner’s Light in August. The affinity between Dib’s novels and the American ones does not stop at the level of their titles. Their contents and forms, too, invite comparison, and this will be corroborated by taking Dib’s novel The Fire and John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939) as samples for a comparative analysis.

John Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath was translated into French as Les raisins de la colère in 1947. Soon after its publication in a French translation it became a literary myth in France. If it achieved fame in France, it is because it was read as an interface between the American reality of the 1930’s and that of France of the 1940’s and 1950’s, It has to be observed that the America of the 1930’s witnessed an unprecedented social and economic instability that contributed to the rise of a new social class consciousness and sympathy to the leftist cause. Beginning with the stock market crash of October 1929, people lost their savings, homes, and even jobs. By 1933, the value of stock in New York Stock Exchange was less than the fifth of what it had been in 1929.

Among all the American population, the small farmers of the Middle West were the most affected by the economic crisis. Alongside the economic slump, violent storms ravaged the Great Plains, which led to one of the greatest ecological catastrophes in American history known as the Dust Bowl. Weakened by the economic crisis and the change in climatic conditions, the Midwestern farmers fell an easy prey to the American capitalist class. Hence rose one of the greatest hypocrisies of American history. While American capitalism was denouncing the expropriation of the small and big farmers by the Russian socialists, it was busy doing the same thing with the American farmers of the Middle West, who heavily indebted to the banks were obliged to cede their mortgaged
It is this period of American history that John Steinbeck translated into fiction in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) to expose the paradox of the American domestic policy and his disillusionment with the American Dream. He fleshed out his story through the representation of a family of sharecroppers, the Joads, who dispossessed of their farms by the banks, were obliged to move westward in their vain quest for a new beginning in California. The Joads, as representatives of other sharecroppers ended being called “Okies”, a derogatory term applied to the Midwestern farmers who are in search of jobs in the Californian agro-business farms.

Similar socio-economic conditions prevailed in France when *The Grapes of Wrath* was translated in 1947. The World War II, which came after the Great Depression of the 1930’s, put France in a precarious position. The material losses, for example, represented more than a quarter of the French national fortune. In his report of March 1946, Sir Monnet spoke about 700 billion Francs of loss in capital (Fauvet Jacques, 1968: 139). In addition, the bad harvest of 1947 led to a lack of provisions and food supplies. Statistics claimed that the bread rations introduced since 1940 had reached their lowest level. Hence, the prices of food increased more than twice whereas the wages were in continuous decrease. In the same year as the translation of Steinback’s novel, General Marshall proposed a plan for the reconstruction of France and the containment of the Soviet Bloc. This containment policy was perceived by the French communists and the workers as a bid of the “men of the American Party” meaning the French capitalist to dispossess the French of their property and their national sovereignty. If *The Grapes of Wrath* had therefore won both critical and popular acclaim in French translation, it is due mainly to its capacity to reflect issues raised by more or less similar economic and social conditions as the ones that had enabled its writing initially.

In his introduction to John Steinbeck’s novel, Robert Delimit (1992: viii) writes that “whenever human beings dream of a dignified and free society in which they can harvest the fruit of their own labour, *The Grapes of Wrath*’s radical voice of protest can still be heard”.

Dib’s *The Fire* corroborates the truth of Delimit’s words because it sends echoes both to the American and French versions of the *Grapes of Wrath* in its treatment of the theme of protest against dispossession in the French Algeria of the 1930’s. Originally, *The Fire* was inspired from a news article that Dib wrote for one of the French weeklies of the time, *Alger Républicain*, about the strike of the peasants in Ain Taya, a locality west of Algiers, in 1951. However, if the idea of farmer strikes remain central to both John Steinbeck’s and Mohamed Dib’s works, their similarity is not limited solely to this level. For example, the two writers have placed the setting of their respective stories in the western parts of their countries: the Middle West and the Far West for Steinbeck and Tlemcen in the West of Algeria for Dib. The America and the Algeria of the 1930’s share much in common in terms of politics and economy. As Jacques Berque (1962) writes the 1930’s witnessed a second dispossession of the Algerian peasants as a consequence of the mechanization of
agriculture, which permitted to the French settlers to cultivate the land on both extensive and intensive bases. The historical parallel between the dispossessed peasants of *The Grapes of Wrath* and the Algerian ones could not have escaped Dib’s attention.

The affinity between Dib and Steinbeck can be explained away by their shared communist ideology. It has to be reminded here that Dib was a member of the Algerian communist Party created at the end of the 1930’s, and as such could have decided to model his novel on that of his ideological kin Steinbeck. But ideology alone is not enough to justify his quest for Steinbeck’s influence, for the simple reason that in “literature, the writers’ conscious world is not as important as the world seen in their vision [i.e., their political unconscious]” (Luckas Georg, 1978: 12). In our view, it is the world seen in Steinbeck’s novel that led Dib to pattern *The Fire* on *The Grapes of Wrath*, a patterning that allowed Dib both to liberate his art from circumstance and to defend Algeria’s claim for self-determination. The intertexts of *The Fire* (Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and its French version *Les raisins de la colère*) are the palimpsests that put the Algerian struggle for political freedom on a par with the American and French counterparts. By affirming the Algerian experience in universal rather than ethnic terms Dib had an international audience in mind. The inclusion of ethnographic elements in Dib’s early novels, therefore, are there for the local colour they bestow on his fictions.

A second degree of liberation from circumstance is reached in Dib’s novel *Who Remembers the Sea?* published in 1961, just a year before the Algerian independence. In this novel, Dib turns to another Anglo-Saxon writer Virginia Wolf for a model. Dib could have patterned his fiction on the French New Novel whose best representative at that time is Alain Rob Grillet, just as he could have chosen the classical historical novel to represent what is meant to be a fictionalized battle of Algiers. Yet he preferred not to, for psychopoetic, ideological and aesthetic reasons. To have followed on the footsteps of the French New Novelists would have meant the abjuration of commitment to the Algerian War of Independence by indulging in mere aesthetic experimentation with the form of the novel; the second alternative would have meant finding a “middle-of-the-road” hero in a life-and-death struggle which admitted no “third way” as advocated by writers like Albert camus.

In the post-face to his novel, Dib explains that he has resorted to the experimentation with the novel form out of his awareness that there is a strong parallel between the “horror” of the Algerian War of Independence and that of the Spanish Civil War of the 1930’s as represented by Pablo Picasso in his tableau “Guernica”. For the author, the aesthetization of the violence and cruelty of the war is necessary since it saves them from the erosion of time and the anesthetic effect of repetition. By eschewing the “realist illusion”, Dib have thought of coming close to a painterly text through the spatialisation of the temporal art form of the novel and the collage of scenes rendered in the archetypal language of dreams and nightmares.
The second source of Dib’s inspiration in *Who Remembers the Sea?* is Virginia Wolf. The comparison of Dib with his English counterpart might at first sight appear far-fetched. This impression ceases to be relevant when we are aware of the parallel between the misogynist and colonialist discourses. Indeed, ever since the Enlightenment the colonized have been positioned as women and in this conferred status deserve to be controlled and disciplined in much the same way as women in male-headed households. If Dib, therefore, has resorted to Wolf for the literary inspiration of his novel, it is due to his awareness that Wolf’s version of feminism could be used to denounce the exploitation and oppression of the Algerian population by the French colonizers. Wolf’s novels were also very popular in French translation. Dib could have thought of using them as a medium for reaching the female part of the French population.

Echoes from Virginia Worlf’s novels like *The Waves*, *A Room of One’s Own*, and *Mrs Dalloway* can be detected in Dib’s novel. For example, at the level of characterization, the name of the central character, Nafissa, in *Who Remembers the Sea?* rhymes with Wolf’s female protagonist Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*. Both Nafissa and Clarissa are associated with roses; both of them are represented as some sort of “mermaids”; both of them decide to “fear no more” the rule of men, and to commit the burden of existence to the sea, which in both novels, “sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects and lets fall its waves to batter against walls”; both novels explore the stream of consciousness as it is influenced by the streams of events, the tragic events of the Algerian war of independence in Dib, and those of the postwar period in Wolf. Finally Dorothy Brewster (1960: 111) offers a critical insight into Mrs. Dalloway that strangely recalls Dib’s comparison of his own book to Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*. She writes that Critics have laid bare a structure susceptible of geometrical diagramming; and a symbolism so precisely worked out as to seem almost mechanical; since what happens in the novel does not hold the reader in great suspense, he may well especially on a second reading – enjoy studying the diagrams and search for relevant images.

In *Who remembers the Sea?*, Dib takes liberty with the realism/ representationalism he had adopted for his first trilogy *Algeria*. Instead of the traditional, linear plot, he uses a pattern of images where the French soldiers are imagined as minatory monsters keeping the Algerian population imprisoned in a labyrinthine city walled out from their nourishing *Alma Mater* the sea, whose “waves” keep pounding against stony ramparts just as in Wolf’s *The Waves*. The terrorised Algerians of the underground city, just like their English counterparts during the German attacks on London are figured “as lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet (German Spitfires in Wolf’s *Diary* and French Spyrovars in Dib’s novel) which may at any moment sting you to death “(Wolf, V. *Diary*) It should be observed here that Dib’s imagining of an underground city is not far from reality because in the author’s town Benboublen in Tlemcen it is the living who live underground in caves and the dead who are buried above them. The upperground city populated by the colonisers in *Who Remembers the Sea?* should be seen as belonging to the forces of death and evil.
The third writer of the English literary tradition to whom Dib could be compared is the Irish author James Joyce. The similarities between them are very close. Both writers, for example, use the conqueror’s tongue for literary expression; and even if both of them have not remained unmoved by the nationalist struggle in their respective countries, they have gone on a self-imposed exile to Paris because of what they have considered as the betrayal of revolution; both of them have showed interest in socialism until the end of the War (World War I for Joyce and the Algerian war of independence for Dib) and then dismissed all types of ideology in their adoption of an uncompromising attitude to their arts.

Joyce’s and Dib’s connection finds its best expression in their choice of parallel mythic figures to flesh out their exilic sensibility. Dib, unlike Joyce, has not written a novel bearing the suggestive title of *Ulysses*, but all through his works Sindbad hovers as a shadowy figure over his major characters. Hence, Ahmed Saradj in Dib’s trilogy *Algeria* is represented as an exile whose father had escaped the French conscription in 1905. He keeps moving not only between the banks of the Mediterranean, from Algeria to Turkey, and from Turkey to Algeria, but from one Algerian region to another, bringing like Sindbad other ways of looking at things, and other political experiences to bear on the circumstances of the towns where he lands in. As if to underline the nomadic tendency of his imagination, Dib has one of his characters Ocacha in *The Loom* (1954) complain about his sedentary existence to the protagonist Omar: “I was on the road for a long time. I have not managed to get accustomed to a motionless existence.” Ocacha can be considered as Dib’s mouthpiece and his words can well be read as a prefiguration of the author’s self-imposed exile. Dib confirms our reading when he has another of his characters in *The African Summer* (1958) queries why “men are night and day on the road” and answers with “clever is the one who can explain this.” To write this does not mean that Dib is interested solely in routes and not in his cultural roots. In Dib’s novels, it has to be underlined, the concepts of routes and roots are collapsed on each other; the evidence of the paradox is indicated by the following questioning of the central character in *Habel* (1972). “I have emigrated, but have I left you brother or quitted our home and those who will always constitute its soul”?

The highest degree of “deterriorialisation” is reached by Dib in his *Nordic Tragedy* published in the 1990’s. Behind this literary impulse is probably the socio-political situation that has made of Algeria a place of sensational news rather a setting for serious fictions. Serious fictions set in Algeria have practically no chance to meet the satisfaction of the readership if they do not include scandalous and bloody scenes like the ones we find in Habib Souaidia’s *Dirty War* (2001). The literary success of works from Algerian writers is measured by the degree of horror they show in their representation of the recent Algerian tragedy.

So far we have shown that Dib has rebelled against the French precursors by adopting both English and oriental literary models. If this intertextuality has helped him to break away from the French literary tradition and to integrate himself to world literature, it is not
enough to make of him an Algerian writer. For this, Dib has involved himself in another
dialogue, this time with Algerian/ Maghrebian writers. T.S. Eliot speaks of the “historical
sense… indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth
year” meaning that a writer cannot come of age if he does not measure his individual talent
against his literary kith and kin. Dib does not try to escape this generational conflict
because he remains, like many other Algerian writers, motivated by the ambition to create
an Algerian literary tradition.

One of the Algerian precursors with whom Mohamed Dib holds a dialogue is Fadhma
Ait Mansour Amrouche, a Kabyle writer who published The Story of My Life in 1946. The
latter deals with the life of a Kabyle woman around the 1860’s when the French had nearly
completed their occupation of the Kabyle region in Algeria. Its protagonist Aini is
widowed very young, and because she refuses to join her parental home and get remarried
as tradition wants it, she is ostracised by her family and village. The narrator, who is no
other than the grand-daughter of the author herself goes on to tell us how her great grand-
mother’s fate is complicated when she has given birth to an illegitimate child, whom she is
obliged to leave in the hands of the Christian White Sisters; how she is forced to quit her
own village for the neighbouring village of Ait Mansour after her marriage with one of
their kins, and how she leaves Algeria for Tunisia with her husband and children because
of socio-economic problems.

Fadhma Ait Mansour Amrouche’s The Story of My Life becomes one of the Algerian
intertexts in Dib’s The Big House. Just like the former, the latter has a central character
who bears the name of Aini. Dib’s Aini, like her namesake in Fadhma Ait Mansour
Amrouche’s novel, is widowed very young with three orphaned children; she does not go
back to her parents’ home after her widowhood; she remains in the “big house”, a
tenement house as a leaseholder and supports her three children by spinning wool for a
Spanish Blackfoot (a name given for the colonial settlers in Algeria). However, Dib plays
a variation on his Algerian precursor in several ways. For example, his Aini is a
townswoman; what she suffers from are not the old traditions and customs but the
capitalist / colonialist exploitation. Aini is busy working to satisfy the hunger of her
children, whom she often lulls to sleep by making them believe that something is being
cooked in the cauldron.

Mohamed Dib enters into a dialogic relationship even with his epigones. A case in
point is the intertextuality between his (Dib’s) The Moor Infante (1992) and The Island of
the Winds (1994) by the Beur writer Azoug Begag (Beur is the name given to the second-
generation Algerian immigrants in France). The affinities between Dib the precursor and
Begag the epigone are many. For example, both of them have children as protagonists, a
formal characteristic common to all “emerging literatures”. The use of a child as a central
character is a technique that has shed on Begag because Dib has used children as
protagonists since the beginning of his literary career with his Trilogy Algeria wherein the
child Omar is the protagonist. Secondly, Begag and Dib are involved in a similar “deterritorialisation” of their fictions, Dib from Algeria to “Terre d’Orsol”, in English “The Land of Nowhere”, and Begag from the immigrants’ suburbia to “the Island of the Winds”. Thus doing, they have managed to escape the literary ghetto to which French literary critics have wanted to confine them.

The Islands of the Winds and The Moon Infante share many traits in common. One) Dib’s central character Lyyli Belle bears a name which sounds like that of Begag’s protagonist Silo Bali; and the name of Lyyli Belle’s mother Maroussia rhymes with that of Silo Bali’s mother Massouda. Two) both novels narrate their protagonists’ quest for their genealogical trees. Three) climbing up and down trees develops as a leitmotif in both stories, which play puns on the words “arbres” (trees in English) and “arbi” (meaning Arab in the Algerian vernacular. Yet Begag distances himself from Dib in that Silo’s quest for his origins ends with “his boarding a boat” to escape assassination at the hands of a French suburban racist psychiatrist, bearing the significant name of Bugeaud, the founder of “French Algeria”, who had arrested and then exiled Emir Abdelkader, the freedomfighter and father of the first Algerian government in the 1840’s. For Dib, the Algerian identity can be retrieved not by going back to historical events, but down into the self. Lyyli Belle does not board a boat to go on a quest for origins because he has come to realize at the end of his quest that “he has no need to make distant expeditions to find his roots; the links have never been unbound.”

Finally, what conclusions can be drawn from the study of Mohamed Dib’s novels in relation to the three themes of our conference on literature in Arab countries. The first observation to be made is that Algerian literature in French has managed in a very brief period of time to go beyond ethnography to which the French critics have wanted to confine it. Secondly, because this literature is not accompanied in its early stages by an indigenous body of criticism to confer on it a literary value, it has involved itself in an internal criticism that has made its writing predominantly a “misreading” of French precursors; this “misreading” is carried in the case of Mohamed Dib to the extent of making linkages with the English literary tradition. Thirdly, Dib’s inspiration from Anglo-American models is motivated by the factor of freedom from the domination of the French masters and the necessity of circulating the claim for self-determination by capitalizing on the wide currency that American literature enjoys among the French public. Lastly, the initial intertextuality between Dib and Anglo-American writers is gradually displaced by other homely intertexts tapped from oriental literary sources like The Nights and the mystic literature, and Algerian/ Maghrebian writings. This intertextuality arises out of the ambition to build an Algerian/ Maghrebian literary tradition, the sine qua non for the coming of age of literary individual talents in Algerian literature in French.
Bibliography


