

Decolonising Language: Towards a New Feminist Politics of Translation in the Work of Arab Women Writers, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Nawal al Sadawim, and Assia Djebar

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: April 08, 2019

Accepted: June 20, 2019

Published: July 31, 2019

Volume: 7 Issue: 3

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Keywords:

Arab Women Writers,
Eurocentric,
Translation,
Authorship,
Reception,
Feminism Decolonisation,
Post Colonialism

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Anglophone academy's relative lack of appraisal of Ahlam Mosteghanemi as an Arab woman writer is not incidental. I assert that, for many Arab women writers, authorship is strategic engagement; in other words, they develop strategies that bring together formal experimentation with the social effectivity of authorship. In an attempt to present fully the aforementioned complexities at hand, this paper compares Mosteghanemi's work with that of two other eminent women writers from the Arab world: Egyptian women's rights activist and novelist, Nawal al Sadawi, and Algerian writer and historian, Assia Djebar. This comparative analysis is structured into three sections that take up the questions of the politics of literary form, language and decolonisation, and finally, translation. In the critical reception of their work outside their region, Arab women writers all too frequently find themselves caught up in the dynamics of a hegemonic Eurocentric feminism that already constructs them as new representatives of an Orient, one that further stubbornly refuses to dissolve under the action of rigorous critique. I argue that the underwhelming international reception to Mosteghanemi's writing serves as a reminder that colonialism remains real, even in a world of independent nations, while decolonisation remains on the theoretical horizon in the postcolonial world. It is these two interrelated points that map the wide field of effectivity that is brought into play in the reception of Mosteghanemi as a writer.

INTRODUCTION

Since their publication, Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novels, *Memory in the Flesh* (1993) and *Chaos of the Senses* (1997), have been reprinted over thirty times. Literary critics, along with their acknowledgement to Mosteghanemi's path-breaking contribution to Arabic Literature, further applaud her work's popularity among lay readers. In 1998, Mosteghanemi received the prestigious Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature for *Memory in the Flesh*. Over the last decade, her work has been translated into English, and the American University in Cairo published translations of both novels, *Memory in the Flesh* and *Chaos of the Senses* in 2002 and 2007, respectively. Bloomsbury Press also recently published the novels in English in 2013 and 2015, and in 2019, they released the third book in Mosteghanemi's trilogy, *The Dust of Promises*.

As I have previously noted in my book length criticism of her work, *The Kaleidoscope of Gendered Memory in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's Novels*, "Ahlam Mosteghanemi commands an eminent place in the emergence of a new chapter in the history of Algerian literature. As the first Algerian woman writer to publish a novel in the Arabic, her success marks

a pivotal point for both the Arabic language as well as the canon of world literature" (Baaqeel 1). Her first two novels focus on the aftermath of Algeria's War of Independence, wherein her award-winning first novel, *Memory in the Flesh* (1985), tells the story of the complex relationship between a former freedom fighter, Khaled, who has lost an arm in the war, and Ahlam (also called Hayat), the much younger daughter of a fellow soldier who was killed in the war. Mosteghanemi's later novel, *Chaos of the Senses* (1998), continues the story, but while *Memory in the Flesh* is told from the viewpoint of the male narrator, Khaled, in contrast, in *Chaos of the Senses*, the narrator is a female character, Ahlam.

Despite the award-winning critical reception of her work, surprisingly, a keyword search through major academic journal databases, however, reveals a striking dissymmetry. While there is a proliferation of critical articles on Algerian Francophone novelist, Assia Djebar (more than four hundred), and approximately seventy-five on the work of Egyptian writer, Nawal al Sadawi, there are only ten or so English-language articles on Mosteghanemi. The critical reception of her work in the West, then, presents a paradox while the publishing industry presents her as a bestselling author of love in the aftermath of war, academia has thus far

not been cognizant of the important critique of the Algerian present Mosteghanemi offers in her writing.

In this article, I argue that the Anglophone academy's relative lack of appraisal of Mosteghanemi as an Arab woman writer is not incidental. The seemingly innocuous question about this dearth of academic engagement with Ahlam Mosteghanemi's work must be approached in two distinct, yet related, ways. First, one must take up the question of literary form. Implicated in this is a choice of themes, literary voice, and a specific deployment of authorial voice. Arguing against Roland Barthes' modernist emphasis on the death of the author, I assert that, for many Arab women writers, authorship is strategic engagement; in other words, they develop strategies that bring together formal experimentation with the social effectivity of authorship. Second, the relationship between this politics of form and its reception in the Anglophone academia is mediated by a politics of language implicit in the process of translation. In the critical reception of their work outside their region, Arab women writers all too frequently find themselves caught up in the dynamics of a hegemonic Eurocentric feminism that already constructs them as new representatives of an Orient, one that further stubbornly refuses to dissolve under the action of rigorous critique. The underwhelming international reception to Mosteghanemi's writing serves as a reminder that colonialism remains real, even in a world of independent nations, while decolonisation remains on the theoretical horizon in the postcolonial world. It is these two interrelated points that map the wide field of effectivity that is brought into play in the reception of Mosteghanemi as a writer.

In an attempt to present fully the aforementioned complexities at hand, this article compares Mosteghanemi's work with that of two other eminent women writers from the Arab world: Egyptian women's rights activist and novelist, Nawal al Sadawi, and Algerian writer and historian, Assia Djebar. This comparative analysis is structured into three sections that take up the questions of the politics of literary form, language and decolonisation, and finally, translation. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of Mosteghanemi's poetics, politics, and her place in the historical specificity of the present moment. It is only then that one is better placed to untangle two further important aspects of Mosteghanemi's appraisal in the Anglophone world: 1) the "popularity" of her romantic themes, and 2) the reluctance towards her mode of feminist practice.

The Politics of Literary Form

First, I take up three novels, Nawal al Sadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1990), Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1992), and Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* (2003), to reveal how Arab women's writing has engaged with the problem of literary form and representation. This textual analysis is further supplemented with published interviews by the authors that situate their literary practice within their broader understanding of feminist practice.

Representing three distinct feminist projects emerging at specific historical junctures, the work of Sadawi, Djebar, and Mosteghanemi each presents with its own demands, limits,

and possibilities. Each writer attempts to develop an aesthetic form that can answer to the demands of her politics, creating a work of negotiation and re-negotiation that is inscribed in their work as a back and forth between literary convention and experimentation. In this section, I argue that the work of each of these writers gravitates around the question of a finding a suitable "voice" through which they may articulate their concerns as women in societies that are unable to come to terms with their inheritance of a postcolonial modernity.

For instance, within the field of literary studies, in her authoritative study of women's writing in the Maghreb, Winifred Woodhull finds academic engagement in the field to be structured around a paradigm of aesthetic merit that reinforces Orientalist assumptions about the suitability of Arab women's writings as "true literature." In an exercise of studied disdain, she states that "their writing is considered to be trite and to serve, at best, to demonstrate pre-given ideologies, especially anti-colonial, democratic, and feminist ideologies" (Woodhull, *Transfiguration of the Maghreb*, 78). Amal Amireh echoes this sentiment, calling for an engagement that would "go beyond appreciative criticism that condescendingly praises Arab women writers for daring to put pen to paper" ("Publishing in the West").

As a consequence of such Western hegemonic feminist views, critical practice routinely reads the work of Arab women writers as amateur, impressionistic accounts by native informants from the so-called Arab world. However, when reading Arab women's writing as (more or less) authentic presentations of life in an oppressive traditional society, the question of "representation is often left by the wayside" (Valassopoulos 3). Woodhull thus calls for a new engagement with Algerian women's writing, one that distances itself from the "text" enough to look at its production as a mode of cultural practice, and one which must further be situated within its historical specificity. This implies a reading that is sensitive to the struggles that are at stake in the very practice of writing—an attentiveness towards the differences of what writing means to men and women, as well as those of different classes, races, and nationalities. Woodhull's concern for historical specificity leads her to caution against poststructuralist readings of postcolonial literature, such as those attempted by Abdelkadir Khatibi, arguing that the tendency to privilege unproblematically "the power of the word" has the effect of reproducing a Continental philosophical project, its Eurocentric blind spots included (Woodhull *Transfigurations of the Maghreb* xi-xii).

This theoretical exercise, however, is not merely sociology of the text, or an enumeration of the variable contexts that determine the construction of the text. Rather, as Woodhull argues, the problematic of the "text" is really a matter of "the texts' staging of the social processes by which human subjects are constituted as women in particular cultural and historical circumstances" ("Rereading *Nedjma*," 46). This has two implications. First, as Judith Butler (2006) has theorized, identities are socially constructed and performed, rather than fixed identifications that pre-exist the text in question. In addition, the identities at work in the text themselves come to be constructed and displaced through the formal elaboration

of the text. Literary form, in this sense, is a performative mode, rather than simply artistic technique. The text does not reflect its context; it is instead a constitutive element within it. In this manner, the perceived peculiarities of Algerian women's writing are the articulation of a historically specific performative disposition, rather than a symptom of their lack of a properly "modern" aesthetic sensibility.

To understand writing as a performative cultural practice is to go beyond the circumscribed oscillation between silence and liberation that is made possible by the thesis of Oriental patriarchy as a regime of repression. In addition to arriving at a more nuanced understanding of the writers in their present, the performative also opens up many possible futures. While the narrative of repression/liberation is built on the expectation of a future that is free of the unequal relations of power, performative practice proceeds "as if dissymmetries were capable of producing what Butler calls 'an open future of cultural possibilities' in which no repressive paternal law need prevail" (Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb*, xxii).

Echoing this, Lindsey Moore proposes the notion of a "poetics of the threshold." According to her, the politics of a feminist text is not restricted to the content of its critique of patriarchy. As the "literary" is itself constructed around a disavowal of its patriarchal assumptions, feminist writers must also look to open up new discursive spaces through an exploration of new styles and genres. Such "new modes of speaking, looking and being, [and] thought...can emerge through an oppositional tracing of existing modes of representation" (Moore 16). Thus, critical analysis cannot assume a simplistic standpoint that looks at the "depiction of Algerian women" in novels; instead, it must look closely at the creative formal experiments put forth by women writers in order to occupy an enunciatory position of woman.

Having thus framed the idea of women's writing as a mode of cultural practice, I now turn to the works of Sadawi, Djebar, and Mosteghanemi. In what follows, I argue that a key striving for each of them is to discover a literary form that may approximate to a "women's voice." In addition to a critique of literary form, each of these writers attempts to rethink the work of authorship as cultural practice. These concerns, however, as aforementioned, result in three very distinct feminist projects. This heterogeneity of Arab women's writing is thus a symptom of the wide field of engagement with feminism in Algeria. At work are multiple strategies of resistance, and critiques of fundamentalist patriarchy that do not return to the privileged figure of Western feminism.

Nawal al Sadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

Sadawi's novel, *Woman at Point Zero*, is written as the account of a woman who is in prison awaiting execution on charges of murder. Narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, Firdaus, the narrative is an account of her life, a confessional of sorts. Firdaus is a victim of sustained abuse. This begins at the hands of her father, who also subjected her mother to similar violence. This violence of traditional patriarchal norms is symbolised on her body as Firdaus is subjected to a clitoridectomy in her childhood by her mother as

a punishment for Firdaus' romantic escapades with a young boy her age.

This traumatic bodily violence paves the way for Firdaus being further repeatedly subjected to a loss of her agency. Without having any say in the matter, she is betrothed to Sheik Mahmoud, an ugly, deformed man who is also physically abusive (Sadawi 37). When she runs to her uncle for assistance, he informs her that "all husbands beat their wives," with her aunt adding that "her husband often beat her" (Sadawi 44). Religion, too, is included as an aspect of this oppressive traditional patriarchy: "it was precisely men well-versed in their religion who beat their wives...A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (Sadawi 44).

Firdaus eventually becomes a prostitute, and readers ultimately learn that she is not guilty of homicide, but instead she only slapped a particular customer, who gave her money in exchange for sex (Sadawi 98-100). Therefore, while she is absolved of the charge of murder for the readers of her account, she is nevertheless facing death.

Inspired by Sadawi's true experience of interacting closely with women in Egyptian prisons, *Woman at Point Zero* reveals her study of neurosis in the prisoners due to the trauma of gendered violence they had been forced to suffer (Sadawi 1-7). Firdaus's choices are a result of a long, difficult series of events that leads to her both revolting against patriarchal authority and taking control of her body—an act that eventually leads to her being accused of murder. In the novel Sadawi tries to construct an autonomous position from where the oppressed woman may speak; the text itself is presented as the protagonist's *own* voice, along with a justification of her actions.

This claim to credibility and authenticity by both author and protagonist is a significant gesture, in two ways: First, it grants legitimacy to a position that claims to speak for an oppressed subject. Second, it constructs a legitimacy of the author as representative of such a voice of oppression. At the same time, as Lindsey Moore argues, this relation of voices in *Woman at Point Zero* "reminds us that efforts to transmit 'the other woman's story' are always both contingent and transformative acts" (Moore 22).

Thus Sadawi's novel articulates a feminist position that reads the many forms of oppression suffered by Egyptian women as the violence of traditional patriarchal society. She additionally portrays a holistic patriarchy, one not pinned closely to the specificities of time and place (Moore 22). For Sadawi, liberation from such oppression is premised on the establishment of a modern society that respects a subject's right to their own body, privacy, and free choice, while guaranteeing their civil rights as citizens. However, critics such as Amireh, have found Sadawi's work as representing one-dimensional character 'types' and individualist philosophy (Amireh, "Framing Nawal al Sadawi," 57-58).

Nevertheless, love, in Sadawi's work, marks the possibility of a consenting relationship between two individuals in spite of patriarchal control. However, the impossibility of love in traditional Egyptian society is symbolized by Firdaus' clitoridectomy, the result of her being caught with a young

boy. This violence symbolised through the clitoridectomy operates as a “normative criterion of brutality” (Van Der Kwaak 777-787). Drawing on a feminist tradition that emphasises the right to one’s body and its pleasures, Sadawi views these as an integral part to any liberation of women. The violence of clitoridectomy, after all, is forced upon Firdaus because she tried to assert her right to her own sexual pleasure with her companion. Moreover, in the narrative, the violence of this moment is registered in excess. It is, in fact, through the trauma of the clitoridectomy that the protagonist comes to relate to her body at all:

He was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing even more, but I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though it were a part of me, of my being, was gone, and would never return. (Sadawi 15)

By way of this painful revelation of absence, the possibility of a full existence for Firdaus is constructed as already past. And this is the void that only grows wider as the narrative progresses.

Among all this violence and trauma, the representation of female autonomy is reduced to brief moments of resistance, such as when Firdaus slaps her would-be suitor as well as her decision to narrate her life experience on the eve of her death by execution. By constructing through her novel this enunciatory position of the “oppressed woman,” giving “her” an authentic voice, Sadawi deploys this figure in a strongly activist sense. The voice of the novel’s character is heard as they cry of the silenced women of Egypt, while the work of the writer is to give it an authentic, militant expression that demands the redress of inequalities. The work of writing, in this sense, moves the tyrannies of such occurrences from out of the hushed secrecy of a culture that conceals its injustice. In so doing, Sadawi’s work claims to be revolutionary (Cooke 31).

In its explicitness the novel adopts a mode of grotesque realism, characterised by excess. Grotesque realism is a representational technique that generates moments where the author deliberately expresses—that is, *sublimates*—the presence of violence (Bakhtin 303). In the work of Sadawi, the choice of grotesque realism itself works as a complex mediation that makes it possible to speak about such oppressive social realities; however, only at a remove.

Assia Djébar’s *Women of Algiers in their Apartments*

Assia Djébar’s *Femmes D’Alger dans leur appartement* was published in 1980 and comprises a collection of short stories that unfold as vignettes and historical reflections (Vogl 692). Dealing with themes of female trauma and subjugation, Djébar focuses on the aftermath of the Algerian War of Independence. In ways similar to Sadawi, Djébar seeks to grant woman her voice (“Women of Algiers in Their Apartment,” 50).

Djébar, too, draws on metaphors of oppression as she explicitly reflects on the concept of ‘the cult of silence’ into

which the young Arabic girl is traditionally socialised and indoctrinated (“Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound,” 145). The symbol of the harem is prominent in the novel and represents female captivity, wherein she is segregated on the grounds of her membership in the normative category of “woman.” In *The Colonial Harem*, Malek Alloula argues that the harem is not only a physical, spatial zone that houses that which is female, but also a metaphorical representation of the attribution of specific values by an historical process of gender differentiation (7). The harem, like the veil, represents the concept of enclosure and works in both an overt sense—where she is confined to the harem—but also in a covert sense, where she has internalised the cultural values associated with it. For Djébar, the latter mode of power of internalization is particularly insidious, articulated through pernicious representational modes framing perception. Consequently, Djébar’s critique of patriarchy devotes serious attention to questions of language and representation.

The novel draws its title from the Orientalist painting, *Women of Algiers* (1834), by French artist, Eugène Delacroix. With respect to the politics of representation, Djébar’s decision to appeal to this particular title is a provocative one. The painting represents the work of “an emissary of colonial conquest... and the women whom he painted are victims of the patriarchal domination that preceded, then accompanied, and now postdates the French conquest of Algeria” (Mortimer 860). In contrast, Djébar’s novel is the creation of an experience of the harems themselves, however, notably stripped of Delacroix’s Romantic Orientalism.

Nevertheless, Hafid Gafaiti points out that the “I” is absent in *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (814). The author’s abstaining from narration in the first person, however, is her attempt to depict the universal situation of Algerian women—and not simply that which is drawn from subjective experience (Gafaiti 814-5). As Vogl argues, Djébar’s technique looks to define the self as a gaze, as a way of looking upon one’s own space (692). In this sense, Djébar goes beyond the problematically naturalised definition of an “authentic” woman’s perspective that is found in the work of Sadawi.

Through the use of French poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory, Djébar further uses the notion of female gaze to delineate the structure of interpellation through which it becomes a threat to the patriarchal ordering of the look. She writes,

Forbidden gaze: for it is surely forbidden to look at the female body one keeps incarcerated, from the age of ten until forty or forty-five, within walls, or better within veils. But there’s also the danger that the feminine glance, liberated to circulation outside, runs the risk at any moment of exposing the other glances of the moving body. As if all of a sudden the whole body were to begin to look around, to “defy,” or so men translate it ... Is a woman—who moves around and therefore is “naked”—who looks, not also a new threat to their exclusive right to stare, to that male prerogative? (Djébar, “Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound,” 139).

Despite this detour, Djébar’s project converges with Sadawi in their understanding of the literal and symbolic casting

off of the veil, a loaded act which represents female autonomy against traditional patriarchy. As Djebar writes:

Colloquial Arabic describes the experience [of the casting off of the veil] in a significant way: “I no longer go out *protected* (that is to say, veiled, covered up)” the woman who casts off her sheet will say, “I go out *undressed*, or even *denuded*.” The Veil that shielded her from the looks of strangers is in fact experienced as a “piece of clothing in itself,” and to no longer have it means to be totally exposed. (Djebar, “Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound,” 139).

At the same time, Djebar takes into account the historical complicity of indigenous patriarchy with colonialism. For her, the undressed woman in her apartment is analogous to Algeria itself, exposed and penetrated with the gaze of the foreign colonial power. The female body finds itself in the midst of a “straying multiplicity of eyes in and on that body” (Djebar, “Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound,” 140).

Djebar’s project, therefore, seeks to overturn in language the effects of French imperialism. Woodhull finds this to be operative in two ways: 1) it enables in French the expression of experiences that have been historically repressed in Algerian society and literature, and 2) it de-territorialises the language of colonialism (*Transfigurations of the Maghreb*, 50). As Anastasia Valassopoulos argues, Djebar looks to “interrogate the discourse from within whilst simultaneously immersing herself in it” (6).

In keeping with the influence of French poststructuralism, Djebar also thinks of the notion of authorship very differently from Sadawi. Whereas Sadawi foregrounds her activist politics and personal engagement with women in prison, Djebar instead dis-identifies with the author, as well as the excess of autobiography over authorship in the critical reception of women writers in the Arab world. In an interview with Clarisse Zimra, Djebar states, “what interests me is the relationship between writing and autobiography because, unlike the usual schema of female writing in the Western tradition, which is all subjective, I started writing as a wager, almost a dare, to keep as far away from my real self as possible” (168). She also voices her vehement objection to the act of being probed on her autobiography, in that “all through my first three novels, my writing consisted in systematically turning back on my own life—in short, in refusing the autobiographical dimensions of writing” (Zimra 169). At the same time, Djebar argues, her work is also autobiographical, in that it is indicative of the progressive development of her “political consciousness” and its “awakening” (Zimra 170).

However, writing, for Djebar, is as much narrative as it is history (Zimra 171). In this sense, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* is marked by autobiographical influences, such as the deaths of her grandmother and her former mother-in-law that showed her “a woman’s memory spans centuries” (Zimra 170). In a discussion on the notion of history in Djebar’s novels, Woodhull argues that “one significant effect of Djebar’s textual strategy is to enable literate Algerian women to reclaim their buried histories, often available only through the accounts of the enemy that Djebar critically resignifies” (*Transfigurations of the Maghreb*, 82). Djebar

is able to inscribe within her text different textualities, such as police records, maps, personal accounts, and literature, etc. In doing so, she attempts to foreground the work of interpreting historical traces, through which a woman’s voice may be recovered as a properly theoretical object. Djebar, on one level, uses these resurgent traces to create links between the women of the past and those of the present, thus evoking a shared sisterhood that transcends apparent divergences (Hiddleston 94).

Ahlam Mosteghanemi’s *Memory in the Flesh*

Ahlam Mosteghanemi’s *Memory in the Flesh* takes up questions familiar in Algerian literature told through the narration of Khalid as he recounts his lost love in the aftermath of his involvement with the fight for Algerian independence. This narrative unfolds and emerges amidst a series of ellipses and temporal switches between past and present, where Khalid recounts both his time in the war and his sojourn as a painter in Paris. From the outset, the text is premised on romance and sublimity, tinged with a deep sense of tragic melancholia. Khalid’s tone is embittered and wretched as he remembers the romance with Ahlam (referred to as Hayat) into which he poured his very being. In this manner, Mosteghanemi’s choice of theme and writing style are very different from both Sadawi and Djebar. Contrary to their recoveries of submerged women’s voices, Mosteghanemi only accesses the figure of the woman through the haze of male recollection. Therefore, one may reasonably ask where does this place her vis-à-vis the other authors’ feminist projects?

The narrator, Khalid, who is a “one-woman man,” attempts to dissociate himself from the kinds of men who objectify women, while simultaneously envying those who “shift to a new woman without seeing the previous one of” (Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, 2). At the outset, Khalid is monogamous, and not quite prone to commit the kinds of brutality that Sadawi describes in such detail in her novels. Mosteghanemi also consciously tries to avoid the one-dimensional characters that Sadawi has been criticised for. Mosteghanemi instead constructs the male narrator as conforming to a narcissistic male ideal and embeds him in a literary tradition that establishes the artist as suffering, sensitive, and introspective. Thus, readers are provided ample description of Khalid’s moments of nostalgic wistfulness in his attempt to recollect the past and his relationship with Ahlam, while sipping coffee and writing his reflections.

Khaled’s introspections, however, blame Ahlam for having captured his affections: “You are the woman who cloaked my nostalgia with madness” (Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, 5). The male voice and interpretative apparatus is established as being normative, and where questions of romantic and sexual love have been historically delineated from this normative perspective, woman is regarded as being to blame for the male loss of self. That which is decidedly masculine, in this case, is a distinctive absorption in self, which simultaneously bears a particular grandiosity and impulse to the realisation of ambitions. This is evidenced in Khalid’s recollection of his drive to attain his aspirations as a painter—a drive that was ultimately sabotaged by the siren song

of a woman (or so he recollects). The appeal to the language of a siren song is relevant here, for it regards the feminine ideal as one that seduces, which is to the detriment of masculinity. And thus, the text opens with the impression of a woman who served as a destructive presence in the life of the narrator solely on the ground that he became enamoured with her.

Moreover, Ahlam's existence is contingent to the narration of Khalid: it is only through his revelation that she is permitted to be in the world. He reflects on "where I should place your love. Is it in the storehouse of ordinary things that may happen to any of us any day, like falling ill or tripping up or going insane?" (Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, 5). Therefore, it is Khalid who is in a position to categorise her, to define her very existence. The novel thus describes woman from the perspective of a male narrator. The nature of the subject and his subjective gaze influences that which is the object of his gaze. What this means is that Ahlam is not truly Ahlam, but rather that which Khalid deems her to be. And this is all readers are permitted to know of her.

Reflecting on the manner by which Ahlam's voice attempts to penetrate Khalid's narration, McLarney notes a "female resistance against the dominance of the male voice," (25). Thus, while Ahlam is, as described, only Ahlam as according to Khalid, there is, nevertheless, in the text, the sense of her desire to emerge on her own accord. This dynamic plays out most clearly in Mosteghanemi's use of questions in an interrogative mode. It is by way of this method that readers are faced with the distinctive ambiguity that surrounds Ahlam. In this manner, a real existence is not really conferred upon her, other than that which is allowed through Khalid's venturing into the recesses of his memory. Khalid presents readers with a stream of questions, simultaneously directed at the Ahlam of his memory, whilst also serving as the sole means by which readers are acquainted with her. Ahlam's own assertion of her existence appears only by way of isolated replies.

At the same time, there is interdependency between protagonists. While, as aforementioned, Khalid has surrendered his agency over to the siren song of sexual love, his psychological health is also dependent on Ahlam. Thus, while Ahlam's existence is permitted by way of Khalid's reflections, his mental lucidity is sustained through the cathartic sublimation of her memory into the narrative. This sublimation is, in addition, an echo of that dependency which is revealed throughout the course of the text, where his agency has been surrendered to the object of his affective investment. As Khaled writes, "how big and cold was that universe on whose wall I hung waiting for you. With you being away, I was sliding down slopes of simultaneous psychological and emotional disappointment" (Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, 117). It is in this moment that a notion of female agency is asserted—albeit framed through the gaze of Khaled, as an unstable aspect of his precarious sense of self.

Khalid's romantic intentions are accompanied by his also narcissistic temperament. He complains:

The biggest mistake I was committing was you. With my lips I was painting the outline of your body. With my masculinity I was painting the outline of your femi-

ninity. With my fingers I was painting all that the brush could not reach. With my one hand I was possessing you, planting you, harvesting you, dressing and undressing you, and changing the curves of your body to make them fit mine. Woman! You became my homeland. Give me another chance to be a hero. Let me, with one hand, change your concept of measuring masculinity, love, pleasure... You are my secret pleasure, my secret folly, and my secret attempt to overthrow all reason. Your defenses collapse in my hands every night, and surrender to me. (Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, 120-121).

While Mosteghanemi's eroticism is strained and literary, it does well to capture the essence of the bond between the lovers. The attempt is to produce a distancing effect in the reader, in ways different from the evocative prose of the other parts of the novel. It is as if Mosteghanemi produces a subtle critique of the self-aggrandisement implicit in these chauvinistic gestures of love. Her stilted prose thus marks the impossibility of such a love as existing on the same affective level as the other experiences described in the novel.

In *Memory in the Flesh*, readers learn of an impassioned romance that has passed—an end that is subsequently revealed to be the cause of the narrator's malaise. Ahlam, here, is the instrument that sustains as well as threatens the fantasy of Khaled's "sublime" love. Mosteghanemi's novel thus attempts to represent the "woman" without, however, trying to recover some notion of authenticity. She does not try to recover a silenced, or buried, woman's authentic voice. Instead, her novels depict in detail the complex workings of the patriarchal fantasy of sublime love—its ecstatic moments, its narcissistic pretensions, as well as the anxieties that underpin every gesture of romantic idealisation or sacrifice. While Sadawi and Djébar also undertake such a critique, Mosteghanemi's work is distinctive in that it does not succumb to the temptation of constructing in the process a position of female counter-authority that may be accessed unproblematically by the writer. Mosteghanemi instead puts into question the stable enunciatory position from where both Sadawi and Djébar claim to speak in the name of "woman."

At the same time, this does not mean abandoning the question of history. As she Mosteghanemi states in an interview, "the aim is to present a historical epic... the novels are also intended as beautiful love stories and reflections on life" ("An Interview with Ahlam Mosteghanemi," 148). Mosteghanemi wishes to convey an account of the historical, namely, "the entire history of the Arabs over the past half century, with their disappointments, complexity, victories, poetic power, and naivety" ("An Interview with Ahlam Mosteghanemi," 148). Critics such as Aida Bamia have sought to separate the questions of national history from those of gender—the latter being "not the issue but serv[ing] mainly the romantic structure of the novel" ("A New Outlook on Old Themes," 86). On the contrary, as I have argued, *Memory in the Flesh* takes gender to be one of its central concerns. As Valassopoulos argues, Mosteghanemi's work attempts to "enact ways in which the political and social are mediated, lived, performed and experienced through the personal" (5). The "personal"—so much more than the simple interiority of subjects—becomes the nodal point where "the history of the

Arabs” plays out, in its repetition as well as its emergence. In this sense, Mosteghanemi goes beyond Sadawi and Djebar’s concern for a women’s history—with all its incumbent theoretical problems. She instead critiques the idea of history as such by holding up in her novel a representation of its narcissistic pretensions.

The question of history also allows critics to circle back to Mosteghanemi’s formal device of using a male narrator. When pressed on her choice of a male narrator in *The Bridges of Constantine*, she remarks, “history can only be narrated by a man; a woman cannot narrate that episode of history. Writing about the particular experience of the Algerian war gains credibility when the narrator Khaled is a man who experienced and suffered its agonies” (“An Interview with Ahlam Mosteghanemi,” 149). Mosteghanemi, here, is clearly aware of the politics of history and its deeply patriarchal assumption. Therefore, by deliberately connecting her choice of male narrator to the practicalities of writing a “credible” story, she is able to throw light on the patriarchal assumptions of those who enjoy such narratives.

In a comment that closely mirrors Djebar’s thoughts on the issue of the autobiographical content of a woman writer’s novels, Mosteghanemi says, “I chose a male narrator to avoid being accused of writing my autobiography or accused of being a feminist writer, as often first novels appear to be or are read as the personal biography of the writer” (“An Interview with Ahlam Mosteghanemi,” 149). Nevertheless, the two writers are also distinct from Djebar, who dissolves this critical tension between the writer and her text into the density of formal experimentation. Mosteghanemi, however, looks to sustain this experimentation as creative tension by maintaining an ambiguous relationship between the writer and her characters. Asked by her interviewer if she herself is a character in her novels, Mosteghanemi replies, “Khaled, Ziyad, and Hayat all represent me. I am distributed among my heroes because as a writer, in the end I am only writing about myself” (“An Interview with Ahlam Mosteghanemi,” 150). Valassopoulos sums up the true import of Mosteghanemi’s literary politics:

Mosteghanemi, in *Memory in the Flesh*...does not engage in an active retrieval and recuperation of women’s memory, history or literary tradition...she does withhold the presentation of a particular ‘feminine experience’ that can be reclaimed by feminists. In this way, she resists an affiliation to a women’s writing based on presenting positive female characters but, nevertheless, compels us to work harder at enriching our definition of feminine characters. (114)

Whereas Sadawi and Djebar bid readers to listen to the voice of the oppressed Arab woman, Mosteghanemi provocatively offers instead only a charged silence.

Language and Decolonisation

Woodhull’s *Transfigurations of the Maghreb* undoubtedly opens up a new critical perspective that studies women’s writing as culturally meaningful practice, rather than set against some canonised standard of aesthetic merit. In the process, she effectively inaugurates a comprehensive cri-

tique of the politics of literary form. This approach was particularly productive in reading innovations in the novel form with the broader feminist projects of Sadawi, Djebar, and Mosteghanemi. Having thus situated the three writers in a discursive field held together by the name “feminism,” one must also take into account the postcolonial critique of the underlying Eurocentric assumptions of (Western) feminism. In what way does such an imperialist feminist project engage with the claim of each of these writers to be feminists in their own right? Conversely, to what extent is their work marked by an awareness of Western feminism as a neo-imperialist enterprise?

Woodhull’s work further draws attention to new attempts in Algerian Francophone literature to engage with Arabic and Islamic traditions of critical thought. In a political context where the feminist position is being squeezed between an increasingly totalitarian modernist project, on the one hand, and a fundamentalist movement with popular roots on the other, she argues that writers such as Djebar and Mernissi have responded with a new critical approach, that their recent work is geared towards a historical analysis of the meaning and function of Islam in different societies (Woodhull, “Feminism and Islamic Tradition,” 32). Through a critical re-reading of religious as well as cultural text, these writers look to “beat the traditionalists at their own game, perhaps at the price of compromising the secularist, cosmopolitan stance they had adopted in the past” (Woodhull, “Feminism and Islamic Tradition,” 34). At the same time, they resist the homogenizing discourse of Orientalist discourse by refusing to construct the Arab world as an inversion of the West.

This constitutes a significant shift in Algerian women’s writing, but Woodhull nevertheless restricts her analysis to exclusively Francophone texts. Even as she describes the ways in which new writing looks to critique Orientalist assumptions by turning to Arabic-language texts, Woodhull does not fully elaborate on the politics of such a gesture being made in and for the French language itself. At stake is a theoretical question: in so far as Orientalism continues to operate in new forms even after the moment of “decolonisation,” must not such cultural-critical “translations” from Arabic to French also be interrogated as forms of language imperialism?

Before approaching the question of translation, I must, however, take up the significance of language for Sadawi, Djebar, and Mosteghanemi. As demonstrated in an earlier section, Sadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* is an explicit call for the authority of modern law and citizenship to rescue Arab women from the binds of traditional patriarchal social structures. This appeal to the rationality of the state is evidenced in her use of an “objective” narrative language that purports to present an undistorted, authentic version of the protagonist’s account. Her use of modern Arabic must also be placed in this context. The “documentary” quality of her modern Arabic, and its “willingness” to not conceal “true” images of violence behind the decorum of classical literary Arabic is a significant achievement in the history of the novel form in Sadawi’s Egypt.

However, Sadawi’s characterisation of Egyptian society as regulated by ancient misogynies only seems to reproduce

Orientalist sureties about the Arab as the barbaric Other. This is indicative of the fetishisation of postcolonial discourse, in the manner that Graham Huggan examines (155-174). At the same time, Sadawi is very much aware of the implications of her critique of Egyptian society. In response to an interview question about the possibility of her work being used against her country in the international arena to discredit Egyptian culture and national sovereignty, she replies:

Yes, they can use it against us, to say that we are barbaric and need to be colonised to be civilised. But they don't look to themselves—in Europe and America, women are circumcised mentally. The feminists who are aware of the effects of patriarchy realise we are all in the same boat from the dangers of patriarchy, and that the oppression of women is universal.” (Sussman)

Her correct diagnosis of the context is, however, followed by an abiding faith in an idea of a universal woman, struggling against “one” oppression in various situations, in all societies. In ways similar to her politics, Sadawi's fiction is a call for a universal site for female emancipation. As Valassopoulos argues, “much of El Saadawi's work is open to broad interpretation and can be used to demonstrate the potential for a universal feminism that seeks these spaces of experience from which to construct a ‘universal’ or global discourse on women” (4). It is, however, questionable whether such a universal space exists for women of the world to unite on an equal footing, when colonialism itself seems to have “translated” itself into new tongues and vocabularies.

In contrast to Sadawi, Djebbar writes primarily in French. Very much aware of the postcolonial critique of French language imperialism, she takes a nuanced position as a Francophone writer in postcolonial Algeria. Even as Djebbar fully embraced French at her acceptance of her 2005 election to the Academie Francaise, she states that she cannot truly find her place in an Academie that does not acknowledge the history of French colonial domination. She thus situates herself with other Algerian Muslims, who have been “annexed” to French culture even as they are deemed not of it (Tageldin 471).

At the same time, Djebbar's also finds her place as an “Algerian” being put to test in a political context where the colonial violence of French was being matched by a brutal imposition of Arabic monolingualism. The tension of being simultaneously inside/outside both French and Algerian literary culture is eventually resolved through a return to the validity of French as a universal, as a “sought-after refuge” (Tageldin 472). This, according to her, has been possible only because French has today—its colonialist past notwithstanding—finally become ready to embrace the literary productions of the former colonies. Djebbar's critique of the Orientalism of Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* must also be understood in this spirit. She attempts to overturn the paradigms of French colonialist culture from within the French language, forcing it to concede to a redefinition of its boundaries, making space for the “*Francophonie* of the Maghreb.”

Even though she calls for an acknowledgement of the violence of France's colonial past in Algeria, Djebbar's literary project itself is unable to carry forward an idea of decolonisation. This comes to the forefront in her ideas about lan-

guage and women's liberation. Her idea of writing echoes a French poststructuralist ethics of *l'écriture*. It is only by expressing themselves women can achieve a distanciation that allows their traumas to be brought out in the open, so that possibilities of then overcoming them and removing such obstacles may be deliberated upon. She writes:

For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women's quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects. Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside the walls and the prisons!...The Woman as look and the Woman as voice. (Djebbar, “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment,” 50).

Djebbar's relationship with the theoretical signifier does not fully account for the politics of writing in a particular language—French. Djebbar takes back the authority from the male voice, but accepts the legitimacy of the colonial language as capable of expressing within and through itself the particularity of all historical experiences.

These problematic questions notwithstanding, it is important to note that none of her novels has been translated into Arabic in Algeria. This evidences a disavowal of particular orientations of Algerian feminist thought, on the grounds that her feminist books, written in the language of the former coloniser, distort the supposed realities of the women of Algeria.

Writing in Arabic, for Mosteghanemi, however, is an explicitly political act—to write in Arabic was to reject French as the language of empire. Dedicating her honour to the struggles of Arabic writers against the dominance of French, Mosteghanemi declared in her acceptance speech for the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in Cairo in 1998:

Through their [the judges'] tribute to me, they offer moral support to Algerian writers writing in Arabic who confront unarmed the onslaughts of Francophony and its diverse temptations, while they stand patriotically against the dubious and devious tendencies to which Algeria is exposed... (“To Colleagues of the Pen”).

She went on to end her speech with a tribute to the great Naguib Mahfouz, himself a fervent advocate of modern Arabic as the only language suitable to the Algerian novel. Mahfouz, as mentor, flags one of Mosteghanemi's major literary concerns as an Arabic-language novelist—to contest the Orientalist assumption that Arabic is a language not quite fit for modern novel. For Mosteghanemi, “Arabic is not to be recovered in the flesh of French; rather it must be recovered in its own skin and fleshed out more fully therein” (Tageldin 491). This decisive choice in favour of Arabic is nevertheless fraught with its complexities.

Through the 1990s, Algeria cultural life was torn between a failing post-revolutionary FLN and the rise of a new Islamist movement, Front Islamique du Salut (FIS). The ascendant Islamists launched attacks on scores of Algerian writers and intellectuals, ostensibly for choosing to write in French. Others, writing in Tamazight (“Berber”), or even dialectal Algerian Arabic, were not spared. In this charged political context, Mosteghanemi supported the use of Arabic but at the same time “refused to oppose Algerian who wrote

in Arabic to their felled Francophone and Tamazight-speaking compatriots" (Tageldin 468).

However, beyond a refusal to "take sides" in a culture war, Mosteghanemi's work embodies a far-reaching critique of Arabic literature and literary language itself. She both joins and challenges the male-dominated canon of Algerian Arabic literature. She uses Arabic not only to reinscribe Algerian nationhood outside the French language, but also to call for a new expressivity of Arabic that could admit to gendered experience and articulation. Working against both colonial patriarchal French as well as patriarchal Arabic, Mosteghanemi uses the language to evoke new expressive registers in novels such as *Memory in the Flesh*. In the process, she calls for an Arabic that could give full space to female bodies alongside male ones.

In contrast to writers such as Djebar, she acknowledges the impact of French gender norms on Arabic-language literature in Algeria, but at the same time also challenges assumptions of any inherent link between the French language and Algerian women's liberation (Tageldin 480). Mosteghanemi thus refuses both the Orientalist patriarchy of French as well as the traditionalist patriarchy of Arabic. Her writing is instead an attempt to find an Arabic that is consonant with the demands, desires, and aspirations of Algerian women. Her critique of language colonialism as well as patriarchy is resolved through a strategy of critique from within the Arabic language, as opposed to Djebar's attempt to do so from the outside in French.

This understanding of the language question in Mosteghanemi's writing renders the protagonist of *Memory in the Flesh*, Khaled, with even greater complexity. Khaled must therefore be further understood as a metaphor of Mosteghanemi's fusing of decolonisation with feminism—her suffering male narrator's deeply patriarchal perceptions of women are connected to the emergence of a masculinity that is itself scarred by the violence of both colonialism as well as a failed nationalist revolution.

The Politics of Translation

As I have argued, language functions as one of the key sites where Orientalist assumptions appear in reconstituted form to delegitimise the attempts to imagine alternative possibilities, attempts that are in process in formerly colonial countries today. Moreover, translation becomes one of the practices through which this new imperialism operates to make invisible this multiplicity of engagements, under a generalised, universalised notion of "feminism," devoid of its historical specificity.

Each of the three writers, Sadawi, Djebar, and Mosteghanemi demonstrates a different awareness of the question of language and decolonisation. And each writer responds with different concerns as well as resolutions—both literary and political—of the twin challenges of articulating a position that is neither Eurocentric nor anti-feminist. Sadawi, in ways similar to many other postcolonial writers of the time, is firmly entrenched in a traditional modern binary. Similarly, Egyptian social life, in her work, is painted in stark shades of Manichean black and white, good and evil, exploitation

and liberation. Her novels, as well as her activism, affirm the rule of law as bulwark and refuge against the tyrannies of traditional patriarchies. Sadawi's construction of Arab life is thus deeply entrenched in a developmentalist paradigm, where the not-yet-modern Third World must catch up to the West. Her belief in the universality of women's oppression and resistance must thus be read through the faith reposed in the promise of the citizen-subject by many intellectuals such as Sadawi in the recently liberated nation-states across Asia and Africa. Despite its shortcomings, her work represents a difficult and courageous position in its contemporary political context and stands as an important contribution among many others in a broad field of women's writing in Arabic. However, with a body of work produced primarily in Arabic, with access to the English-speaking world principally only in translation, her writing—which is deeply engaged in the complex realities of Egyptian social life—has, over the years, been instrumentally reduced to a "native observer's" account of "oppressed Oriental women" in the process of confirming the truth of Western feminism.

Djebar's work is remarkable in that it acknowledges the impossible closure of meaning, and critically defers the temptation to "arrive" at an answer to the question of women's liberation. Thus it is a gesture towards re-energizing critique, towards a re-engagement with the discursive and political realities of contemporary Algeria. In their enthusiasm to embrace Djebar as a postmodern Francophone writer, however, French literary circles have failed to acknowledge her deep misgivings about language and politics alike. In doing so, they have chosen to arrest the critical force of her work by fixing her identity as a "postmodern" writer. As Cooke (142) argues, Djebar's work has the paradoxical effect of "re-exoticising" the Orient, by opening up for the French language cultural milieus and social spaces that it had hitherto been unable to access. Even as her entry into the Academy marks a widening of the notion of "Francophone," it is also the beginning of a new regime of language imperialism that "fixes" her place as a representative of "the Maghreb" in the Francophone world. And even as she may be critiqued for her inability to account for this moment, the disavowal of her postcoloniality is symptomatic of the persisting Eurocentric bias of Francophone critical discourse.

Mosteghanemi's trajectory as a translated writer is somewhat different from Djebar's. Where Djebar was contending directly with the language of the former colonisers—French—Mosteghanemi has been translated first into English, before other languages. As Tania Stampfl (129) writes:

[The] journey [of *Memory in the Flesh*] is indicative of its overall ambiguity. That the novel was disseminated to a wider audience through the medium of English before it was rendered into French is not an accident. Most Algerians still feel alienated when it comes to writing in French—the language of their colonizers [*sic*] for more than 130 years. That Ahlam Mosteghanemi, who comes from a French-speaking family, deliberately chose to write in Arabic instead of French (her mother tongue) is also quite telling insofar as she wanted to reclaim a legacy, and more importantly perhaps, a *turath* (heritage). (129)

Mosteghanemi's works is a complex deliberation on questions of national memory, language, and gender. Her subtle abstinence from a more overt critique of the woman situation in the Arab world, her disguising of Ahlam's existence behind that of Khalid, and indeed, her accomplishing all of this in the Arabic language, all differentiate her markedly from Djebbar and Al Sadawi. At the same time, her discursive strategies serve to alienate her from the Western audience. Mosteghanemi's texts therefore do not readily support a conception of Arabic woman as being oppressed and subservient, thereby not appeasing any prevalent discourses on the nature of the non-Western woman that has not yet experienced the fruits of Western feminist thought.

Only Mosteghanemi offers a literary politics that confronts the questions of decolonisation as well as feminism with equal urgency. While Sadawi and Djebbar's faith in the universalist promise of feminism defers indefinitely the project of decolonisation, Mosteghanemi is instead able to resist patriarchy—in its universalist, nationalist, and traditionalist variants—even as she uphold the demand to end language- and cultural-imperialism in a world “after” colonialism.

It is not surprising, then, that a Western audience can engage with her only as a writer of Oriental romance and nostalgia, set in the contemporary. A look at the titles of her translations, first by the American University of Cairo Press (AUCP), and then Bloomsbury, give a glimpse of the dynamics at work. The first book of Mosteghanemi's trilogy was translated by the AUCP as *Memory in the Flesh*, while Bloomsbury chose the more nostalgic-romantic, *The Bridges of Constantine*. While AUCP has not translated the third book in the trilogy, the Bloomsbury edition is entitled in a similar vein, as *The Dust of Promises*.

This attempt to render what is Mosteghanemi's perspective on Algeria's postcolonial history as nostalgic romance, I argue, is not just a fleeting marketing strategy. Rather, it is an attempt to depoliticise the most critical aspects of her work. The translation, as such is a negation of her political choice to write in Arabic. At the same time, her construction in Anglophone literary circles as a romantic writer forecloses any critical engagement with the most difficult political questions raised by her with regard to colonialism and gender.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have sought to situate Mosteghanemi in the field of women's writing in Algeria as well as the broader Arab world. In doing so, I affirmed the indispensable need for analysis of literary form in any reading of literary “content.” Following Woodhull in asserting the significance of women's writing as modes of cultural practice, I related the writing of these Arab writers, Sadawi, Djebbar, and Mosteghanemi with their conceptions of what it means to be a writer. In doing so, I located a resonance between their affirmed political positions as feminists in a postcolonial context, on the one hand, and their formal innovations as writers, on the other. Importantly, Mosteghanemi's work occupies what Edward Soja names Thirdspace. While Mosteghanemi

shares many of Djebbar's poststructuralist premises, she further brings into focus the intersection of Eurocentric feminism and the politics of language that Djebbar, for various aforementioned reasons, cannot.

While this was a productive way to map the multiplicity of articulated positions in the domain of women's writing, I also identified the need to extend Woodhull's theorisation to the question of the writers' choice of language itself. By taking up the question of decolonisation and language, I sought to demonstrate the ways in which these writers' engagements with feminism come to be implicated in a politics of cultural decolonisation. As the politics of translation makes abundantly clear, the question of empire is still very much alive. It continues to work today through an intersection and overlap of a politics of language choice and feminism in the question of translation. The multinational publishing conglomerates and the practice of translation therefore become the sites where global cultural transmissions may be better managed and redirected.

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