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Literature re-members History: the Algerian war in *Un regard blessé* of Rabah Belamri and *La Malédiction* of Rachid Mimouni

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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. Before the Independence war, the use of French language was imposed by the colons whereas many Algerians saw the French school system as the devil system. It is a kind of paradox that after the Independence of 1962, the use of French language spread in Algeria, but it means that afterwards the use of French language became free in Algeria as well as in other countries of Maghreb (Geys, 2009, 24). When we deal with francophone literature of Maghreb, we point out the fact that French language is neither homogenous nor the cultural property of the French State. The word “francophonie” was used for the first time in 1885 by Onésime Reclus to qualify the zone of influence of the French language in Africa after the share of the colonies made in the Congress of Berlin (Geys, 2009, 25). Then, the word became popular in the sixties after the decolonization and meant thus the free use of French language in Literature.

Those authors use French in a multilingual way: Belamri and Mimouni are two francophone writers who lived at the same time (both of them died in 1995). Their narrations focus on the complex relation between political events and collective consciousness. Literature is seized as a way of feeling the quest of collective identity of Algeria and we would like to show it by comparing two novels, *Un regard blessé* (Shattered vision) from Rabah Belamri and *La Malédiction* from Rachid Mimouni (the Malediction). In those novels, Literature re-members history, which means that the narratives are ways of re-collecting pieces of history (objective discourse on political events) and memory (subjective feelings). Whereas the text of Belamri dates back to the last months of the Algerian war (1962), the text of Mimouni deals with the elections of 1991 won by the Islamic Front (*FIS*). The core question is the following one: is it possible to see in the francophone Literature a tendency to de-structure the text in order to make it

possible for a new plurality to emerge? As a matter of fact, the Francophone culture would be a way of struggling against every form of domination (colonialist attitude, unique party, religious hegemony...).

The novel of Rabah Belamri is written as a diary which refers both to the evolution of the war and the blindness of the main character (reflecting the intimacy of the writer) whereas the novel of Mimouni focuses on the post-colonial period. Both of them use dialectics in a particular way between territories and history, illustrating thus the identity of a Mediterranean culture according to Fernand Braudel. Fernand Braudel means that the Mediterranean Sea can be taken as the central actor of History: several periods and times are mixed (Braudel, 1949, XIII), the level of geological transformation of landscapes, the level of history of wars and political institutions and then the human / individual level as actor, bystander, victim. In both novels, the authors question the complexity of the Mediterranean culture by referring to the three levels defined by Fernand Braudel. Recollecting pieces of memory helps the reader to build an image of the Algerian identity. In the first part of our contribution, we will present the historical context of the novels as well as the compared production of Belamri and Mimouni, then we will examine the relation between the style and the quest of collective identity. Last but not least, we will show that Literature helps to re-member history and a culture through a process of resilience (reparation of social link).

1) The historical context of the novels

Both novels deal with the historical and political background of Algeria. *Regard Blessé* follows the evolution of 1962 which led to the agreements of Evian and the independency of Algeria. Some chapters add the month of the year as the action is reduced to a six months period (Belamri, 1987, 13, 29, 41, 64, 123). Other chapters are without any date indication, which gives the feeling of a fragmented narration. The war is about to cease and the attention is drawn on the new face of Algeria.

« La guerre allait peut-être cesser. Les gens qui savaient lire achetaient le journal et le montraient à ceux qui ne savaient pas lire en énumérant les noms des représentants algériens présents sur les photos, bien vêtus, en bonne santé, souriants » (Belamri, 1987, 41).

The last months of the war were particularly painful as many French soldiers arrested people who were suspected of acting with the National Liberation Front (FLN). The day-life situation (investigations of the French police, struggle against the FLN, the danger of the far-right terrorist fraction OAS, bombs) is dealt with in the novel. Like in *La Malédiction*, the political context is prevailing. Some of the events are even written with a sense of humor like the description of the headmaster of Hassan's high school who is presented as close to the ideology of OAS.

«On le disait sympathisant de l'OAS pour la bonne raison que l'une des distractions préférées de son fils était de parcourir subrepticement les couloirs de l'établissement, le soir ou le matin de bonne heure, et de tracer sur les murs, au crayon rouge, les trois lettres de la peur ; lettres qui, aussitôt repérées par les Algériens, tombaient dans la dérision : l'Organisation de l'Armée Secrète se métamorphosait en "Organisation des Animaux Sauvages" » (Belamri, 1987, 75).

The nickname of the OAS is Organization of Wild Animals as it refers to the extreme violence of this organization which never accepted the decolonization.

In Mimouni's novel, the political situation of 1991-1992 is prevailing as it reflects the whole history of Algeria since its independence. The Islamist vague is a consequence of the failure of the country to create a national unity. Kader, the doctor, had the President Chadli as a patient. The medicine could not cause any miracle as it is ironically pointed out in the following paragraph:

«On avait réuni autour du dirigeant la plus fine équipe de médecins algériens, pour le rassurer, même si la spécialité de nombre d'entre eux n'avait aucun rapport avec le mal dont il souffrait. L'omnipotent colonel qui, durant treize ans, avait régi le pays au doigt et à l'œil, avait dû finir par se croire invulnérable. À tant prétendre à l'universalité, il se considérait comme immortel. Balayant d'un revers de main méprisant les propos des ses détracteurs, il en appelait au jugement de l'Histoire. Il fut sans doute offusqué de découvrir que son corps, comme ceux de tous les autres, était soumis aux lois de la biologie. Quelle injustice ! » (Mimouni, 1993, 101).

The political power is criticized in a direct way as the elites do not see themselves as normal human beings but rather as gods ("*omnipotent*", "*immortel*"...). The gap between the head of the country and the body (the people) is also something which characterizes the Algerian situation. In his political essay, Mimouni, by explaining the reasons of the Islamist threat, shows that the Intellectuals never understood the dynamics of the society. They rallied the FLN at a late period (in 1956, two years after its creation) and were always close to the power without any critical sense. In other words, the Intellectuals were like opportunists (Mimouni, 1992, 92-94).

« À l'indépendance, les intellectuels furent enrôlés et requis de chanter les louanges du maître. Ils se trouvèrent aussi chargés de riposter aux attaques de la presse étrangère dont les felleux journalistes furent taxés de nostalgiques de la période coloniale. Fascinés par les oripeaux du pouvoir ou attirés par le fumet de la soupe, la plupart répondront à l'appel, à l'exception notable et heureuse des intellectuels proches de la mouvance communiste » (Mimouni, 1992, 95).

The Intellectuals never had a critical opinion on the political power except the Communist ones. The country was not enlightened with an avant-garde which would have been useful to perceive a new identity. The country missed a commitment of Intellectuals. Mimouni reminds us the two upheavals of the Algerian society, in 1988 when the country faced a general strike while President Chadli was on vacation. The Army helped him to maintain his power but got involved in the elaboration of the Constitution of 1989. The Intellectuals were thus divided between the far-left parties, the Democrats and the Islamists. In 1991, the Army prevented the Islamists from acceding to power. The tragedy of Algeria is due to clear

reasons: the absence of plurality, the lack of criticism from the Intellectuals and a kind of vacant power which does not have any directions. The political elites are like marionettes who reflect a cruel absence of political vision. Mimouni regrets that the destiny of the country evolved in a strong indifference as if there were no collective projects. The French Intellectuals as well as the researchers have not produced much work on Algeria between 1962 and 1991 (Stora, 1997, 492). Some leftist Intellectuals engaged themselves in the defense of the Algerian Independency such as the radical left group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Lyotard, 1989, 33) which wrote on the Independency war (Raflin, 2005, 927-928). The main idea of Mimouni is that there is no real political representation of the country as a symbolic unity. This is why Literature can rebuild something and try to seize a collective identity without being determined by politics.

2) Narratives and Identity

The novel of Mimouni is guided by a political thought: the Islamic Front is the bastard of the NLF (National Liberation Front). If a form of plurality had been possible after the Independence War, the country would not have known the Islamic wave at the end of the eighties. The characters deal with pieces of memory in order to confront the present and the coming of the Radical Islamists. There is a deep shift in the country illustrated by the opposition represented by one character, Doctor Kader eventually killed by his brother Hocine who became a fanatic. From 1991 until 1997, the Algerian upheavals caused the death of 100 000 people (Stora, 1997, 487). The Algerian conflicts illustrate the quest of identity from a nation which found it difficult to build up a collective consciousness. There was an authoritarian centralization after the Independence which did not take this quest of identity into account. The upheavals of the nineties illustrate that the country is still in front of its destiny just like in 1962. The problem is rooted in the history of the country: in 1830, the Colons created borders and an administrative apparatus and the idea of a Nation-State was dealt with by some Algerian Nationalists in the early thirties such as Messali Hadj, Ferhat Abbas and the religious chief Abdelhamid Ben Badis (Stora, 1997, 495). Messali Hadj wrote his memories in the 1970 with more than 5 000 pages on his political engagement and his personal biography (Stora, 1983, 75-101). His idea was to fight French colonialism by creating a strong national feeling among Algerians.

If the Islamists were a strong political force in 1991, there was no other imaginary significance able to produce a unity in the nation. The former figures of nationalism were erased as if there is a form of amnesia in the Algerian history. The assassination of Mohamed Boudiaf, the founding father of FLN Movement, is the starting point of the conflict of 1992 (Stora, 1997, 493). Both novels deal with the ideas of amnesia and loss of roots. In both texts of Belamri and Mimouni, the narration is clear but some

fragments need to be recollected. The style is classical, there is no post-modern effect in the narration, some characters' stories still need to be relocated in the text. In Mimouni's text, there is a character called Si Morice who is an ancient soldier of the Independence war. Si Morice tells many stories which date back to that period: his function is to confront pieces of Algerian Independence war with the current situation of 1991. Some of his stories are simply invented with the help of alcohol.

« J'adore ces ambiances, précisa Si Morice. Je retrouve mon génie narratif dès le troisième verre. Il n'avait pas compris, notre très sagace prophète, que nous ne buvons que pour nous retrouver tels qu'en nous-mêmes, lucides et désabusés. J'ai toujours bu plus que de raison. Si je n'ai pas d'excuse, cela m'évite de me justifier. Il se trouve que l'alcool me met en verve. Je n'ai pas résisté à l'envie de conter à ces nouveaux auditeurs quelques-unes de mes aventures ».

Si Morice invents different stories in the novel linked to the historical past of Algeria. He introduces some pieces of free speech which remind the reader of the oral tradition of story-telling.

In the novel of Mimouni, some characters have a symbolic role as they serve the political denunciation of the author. The political thesis of the novel is clear: the Islamic Front is the bastard of the National Liberation Front. It is made possible due to the system of the unique party. The diverse faces of Algeria could not be expressed in their multiplicity after the Independence war. For instance, the character of El Msili embodies the way some former militants of NLF adopted the thesis of Islamists.

« Il se mit à militer au Parti, convaincu qu'il s'engageait dans une voie royale. Grâce à son assiduité et à ses diatribes lors des assemblées générales, il fut élu au bureau de la section, il obtint même un appartement, brûlant la politesse à des dizaines de médecins qui attendaient depuis plusieurs années d'être logés. Il se sut désormais intouchable et prenait plaisir à tenir la dragée haute aux professeurs et jusqu'au directeur de l'hôpital dont il ne cessait de dénoncer le népotisme.

Quelques années plus tard, sentant tourner le vent, il se laissa pousser la barbe et se lança dans un nouveau prosélytisme. Abandonnant la cause des prolétaires, il épousa celle d'Allah. Il échangea son pantalon contre un qamis. Il renia ses rudiments de la vulgate marxiste pour entonner les versets divins. La mosquée devint son port d'attache.

La violence de ses propos faisait frémir ses propres compagnons. El Msili semblait animé par une haine ravageuse qui n'épargnait pas même ses enfants. Il terrorisait sa femme qui devait souvent aller soigner son visage tuméfié. Une furieuse rossée rendit débile sa benjamine. Son fils aîné, âgé de dix-sept ans, pour avoir souvent été agressé durant son sommeil, ne dormait qu'avec un couteau à portée de main ».

The text is a recollection of short biographies which illustrate the evolution of the political context. El Msili is the perfect example of a quick ascension to the power. There is some humor in the description of his career ("he began to work actively for the Party and was sure that he engaged himself onto a royal path"). The expression "voie royale" means the main path; but, in the proximity of the unique socialist Party, the word "royal" (related to the Kings) sounds inappropriate. El Msili is the perfect bureaucratic character; in other words, he is an opportunist that means that he can seize all the political trends and follow the dominant ideology. He is like an "intouchable" from this cast of people who are always next to the powerful persons. The communist ideology can be abandoned for the Islamist

ideology. In the above extract, there is a parallel between his career (use of *passé simple*, description of different steps) and his personal values (use of *imparfait* which is a tense used for the unachieved actions). The word “terrorisait” is very strong and is a metaphor of what was going on at that time in Algeria. The nation does not have a strong unity and a clear political tradition, the nation is about to break and stop the new generation’s desires. The characters do have a metaphoric connotation in the novel of Mimouni. Literature is the means through which all these memories can confront each other, it has the power of questioning the official History and the diverse stories (French ones, Algerian ones) on the history of Algeria. The goal is not to produce an authentic document on the History of Algeria but to create a coherent signification on the Algerian identity.

Literature rebuilds a collective identity, it makes the reader feel in an analytic posture: he has to recollect all the stories to realize the traumatism revealed by the elections of 1991. According to the novel of Mimouni, Algeria missed a step in this quest of identity and took a wrong direction. The historian Benjamin Stora wrote that the historian has to recollect real memories and question the official and political versions without forgetting to criticize the subjective pieces of memories (Stora, 1992, 94). Literature has this advantage to re-build the imaginary significations of a culture and its plurality. We use the concept of imaginary significations developed by the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. The imaginary signification is a complex of representations and values which are specific to a social group (Castoriadis, 1975, 204). The individual grows up with the internalization of such norms and ideas. In a social institution, the individual does not have to accept an idea because it is simply rooted in the political and social tradition, he has to question its value and maybe change it if it is not his appropriate vision of reality (Castoriadis, 1996, 88). There is a passive understanding of the tradition (heritage of ideas and representations of a cultural complex) and a deliberative aspect which aims at selecting the appropriate significations of the culture. The signification of Algeria needs to be developed, Mimouni fights for the autonomy of such a culture which lies in an in-between role (collective frustrations linked to the heritage of colonization and the current difficulties to find out a new political path). Literature re-members a narrative identity through the novels of Belamri and Mimouni. Paul Ricoeur distinguished two types of identities, the sameness and the selfhood (Ricoeur, 1990, 140). The selfhood refers to the construction of the identity through time, the narrative identity is about the selfhood.

In the novel of Belamri, the cities have a special role as they are like characters. The description of Alger is all the more striking as it reflects the feelings of characters such as Hassan.

“Alger. La ville était tout à fait noire [The city was entirely dark]. Elle semblait déserte à Hassan, accroché au bras de son frère. Chaque fois que la lueur d’un phare perçait l’opacité des ténèbres, il avait l’impression que la ville chavirait autour de lui, à la manière d’un vaisseau dont il ne percevait pas les contours [...] Hassan avait peur de la nuit d’Alger [Hassan feared the night of Alger] » (Belamri, 1987, 83).

Alger is the projection of the feelings of its inhabitants, it is the stage for all the political events going on in the country in 1962. At the same time, the dark Alger is the projection of the internal blindness of the narrator. The novel deals with the notion of perspective, the English translation [Shattered vision] reminds the way the characters see their environment. The kid will never be operated because of the current events; to some extent, there is a malediction looming on his case. In this way, the titles of both novels can somewhat be exchanged. The shattered vision could be applied to the novel of Mimouni as the narrations deal with different perspectives on the Algerian History.

« Notre mémoire, sans doute, ressaisit, au fur et à mesure que nous avançons, une bonne partie de ce qui paraissait s'en être écroulé, mais sous une forme nouvelle. Tout se passe comme lorsque un objet est vu sous un angle différent, ou lorsqu'il est autrement éclairé : la distribution nouvelle des ombres et de la lumière change à ce point les valeurs des parties que, tout en les reconnaissant, nous ne pouvons dire qu'elles soient restées ce qu'elles étaient » (Halbwachs, 1994, 84).

The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs points out the fact that memory recollects in a new way things that happened in the past. Everything is remembered as if an object was seen with a new perspective. Memory enlightens different paths as well as other parts are under shadow. The new distribution makes it difficult to say that this is how things happened in the past. There is an ancient word in French called "remembrance" which illustrates that memory is a recollection of ancient pieces. There is a part of narration in the memory which is important in the coherence of past things. Memory cannot exist without any reconstruction. History is another distance with all different subjective memories, it tends to criticize the way things were recollected. The Malediction challenges history as it is linked to a mysterious divine punishment which cannot be cancelled. It deals with the idea of repetition and death. It is mixed with a strong feeling of injustice. The Malediction would suit the novel of Belamri as the narrator will not have any issue for his pain. There is no way back as the disease sounds like an ancestral Malediction. The narration is also guided by this idea of a process which does not any exit.

3) The reconstruction of social links: the concept of resilience

Kader is the doctor who relieves all the different pains in the novel of Mimouni. He is a central character as he has to attend his patients. Literature has a power of resilience, of reparation of links. It remembers history in the way as it endeavors to recollect different links between the generations.

“Durant ces nuits de garde, Kader affectionnait des moments d'avant l'aube, empreints de sérénité. Dans le monde de souffrance où il vivait, il savait que même les malades les plus atteints sentaient refluer leur odeur. Ils pouvaient s'assoupir enfin tandis que cessaient les gémissements. Le pavillon prenait alors l'apparence d'un lieu de paisible retraite, à mille lieues de la fureur du monde ».

« C'est en auscultant le malade que le médecin découvre la source du mal, afin de pouvoir le soigner » (Mimouni, 1992, 157).

There is a kind of fatality in the novel of Belamri as Hassan is condemned, the reader knows that he will not recover his faculties. In this way, the titles of both authors' novels can be exchanged as the malediction of Hassan is dealt with from the beginning. Every medical care is unable to diminish the pain. Whereas in Mimouni's novel, the doctor has the power to give bandages to its patients, the novel of Belamri focuses on the non curable disease. The point of view is Hassan's one who finds it difficult to see: the perception of the outside reality is mediated through other sins.

« On ne lui avait fait qu'une anesthésie locale, et il avait crié durant tout le temps de l'opération. Il avait appelé sa mère, son père, imploré Dieu et le médecin, mais rien n'était venu abrégé ses souffrances. Les médecins et leurs assistants discutaient tranquillement autour de lui [The doctor and his staff were quietly discussing around him]: les dernières bombes, les magasins qui ferment, le Kairouan plein à craquer, Maison-Blanche noire de monde, Pompidou, Rocher-Noir, la condamnation du général Jouhaud, la pendaison d'Eichmann et ses cendres jetées à la mer... » (Belamri, 98).

The phrase above shows a mixture of indirect speech and free indirect speech. The narrator suffered from the operation but did not have any support around him as the medical staff talked about the news and the last political events. It is like a noise in the background, his pain is separated from the quotidian life. In the novel of Mimouni, the word nighttime blindness appears to qualify the difficulty for the characters to find out a path in the Algerian situation.

«Kader soulèvera la nuque de Louisa pour boire à la source de jouvence. Depuis si longtemps l'un à l'autre promis, depuis si longtemps l'un à l'autre interdits, ils souffriront de ne pouvoir s'épuiser et, condamnés à la cécité nocturne, se contenteront de s'épuiser du geste. Leur mutuelle miséricorde les lavera des souillures du passé et du malheur. Ils redeviendront neuf et amnésiques [They will become new and full of amnesia again. Louisa oubliera ses errances et Kader pardonnera, absoudra l'assassin de son père » (Mimouni, 1993, 253).

The use of future is very striking as the characters try to emancipate from the past. Si Morice has a strong secret that he will tell Kader: Si Morice assassinated the father of Kader at the end of the Independency war. This act is symbolic as it is the metaphor of what is going on in Algeria. The figure of the absent father shows that the society cannot live without re-collecting some pieces of the past to build up a future. Hocine, Kader's brother who became a fanatic Islamist, will kill Kader at the end of the novel. As far as Mimouni is concerned, there is no brotherhood in the Islamist wave and no hope. The Algerian society is still young without founding fathers (the fathers of Nationalism are dead, it has to find out its way. Literature helps to re-build an image of the society with all its contradictions, it has a power of resilience. There is no definitive malediction in the novel as malediction is the acceptance of the fatality of the History. The final paragraph of the novel is about a woman, Louisa, who regards the future of Algeria as a challenge.

«Le buste de Louisa oscille au-dessus du vide. Elle est prise de vertige à l'idée du futur béant devant elle [She has some vertigo feelings in front of the open future]. Comment occuper ces jours dont la prévisible succession se profile comme une menace ? Kader, en un rien de temps, avait réussi à emplir

tout son univers et à gommer son passé [Kader had quickly succeeded in filling out his time and erasing his past]. Aurait-elle désormais le courage de recommencer à vivre comme autrefois ? Serait-elle seulement capable d'accomplir les gestes quotidiens les plus banals, se laver, s'habiller, acheter du pain, laver la vaisselle ? Revenue dans la grande maison de son enfance, Louisa se sent de nouveau seule au monde. Aura-t-elle la force de survivre ? [Back to the big house of her childhood, Louisa feels lonesome] » (Mimouni, 1993, 286).

The novel of Belamri deals with social groups which were rejected in Algeria and in France, the *harkis*. The *harkis* refers to all the Algerians who fought with the French soldiers during the Independency war. It is not very common to see the presence of those people in the Algerian francophone Literature.

«Les harkis avaient eu des comportements très variés. Ceux qui avaient été loin dans la collaboration n'avaient pas hésité à suivre l'armée française, laissant souvent derrière eux leurs familles désemparées. Moussa, paralysé depuis des années par une balle F.L.N., avait quitté le village, disait-on, caché dans une malle en osier – l'armée française ne l'avait pas attendu [...] La chasse aux collaborateurs commença à la fin du mois d'août [...] On exécutait au revolver, au couteau, à la hache, dans des grottes secrètes, des ravins perdus » (Belamri, 1987, 150-151).

The novel of Belamri gives concrete details on the war atmosphere as well as on the hunt of the *harkis* after the Independence: some of these people were simply assassinated. The *harkis* chose the wrong side, they are marked by the malediction of history. The writer recollected all the parts of the Algerian Independence to enlighten them and seize the coming up challenges. The novel ends up with the full blindness (Belamri, 1987, 176) with some light points. The internal situation of the narrator is a symbolic illustration of the state of the country. The meaning of the collective identity of the country is all the more important as it helps to re-build the injuries of the past and create a common future.

In a nutshell, there is a progressive loss of vision in both texts, as if the future of Algeria as a new nation-state was not full of hope. The past and the future are linked together: the injuries of the war and the postwar reconstruction partly determine the way the country can rebuild a collective project. Literature re-members culture as it points out the dark side of the Algerian history, it makes the readers understand the current situation and the heritage of the past. By re-membering the events in Belamri's novel though the narrator is more and more blind and by re-membering the characters' stories in Mimouni's novel, Literature gives a vision of the Algerian culture. To some extent, Literature helps to recreate collective meaning as if the History was a *palimpseste* (Genette, 1992) that means a text with holes because of the time erosion. Some pieces of the past cannot be recollected, history is made with a loss of some memories (Lavabre, 2000). Literature takes the advantage of confronting the History with the memories. It has a resilience power that means that it can help to understand and feel the way things

happened. The reconstruction aspect is close to the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida which does not aim at destroying categories; on the contrary, the deconstruction is a movement which erases and adds meaning when a discourse is analyzed (Courtine, 2008, 25). Literature deconstructs the historical discourse as well as the pieces of memory in order to create a steady path for the future.

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