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## **"HISTORY HERSTORY": Djebbar, Winterson, and the Making of Historiographic Metafiction**

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### **Introduction :**

How do the postmodern and the postcolonial relate to one another? Is their relation one of continuity, of contingency, or of redefinition? How may one account for the overlaps between the two posts, either as periodizing terms or as philosophical paradigms, and for the undeniable value in the concerns raised by these overlaps? How may one explain the tendency perceived now in contemporary women literature (to name but one example of the many subcultures that are emerging here and there either within the same culture or across different cultures) to evolve between these two programmes? These are questions that current literary theory finds difficult to discard.

The aim of this paper, however, is not to find answers to these questions; rather, it is to use the common grounds and the differences

between the two posts as critical frameworks for a comparative reading of *l'Amour, la Fantasia* (1985) and *the Passion* (1987). The argument in this comparative reading involves three stages : first, the reaction to the postcolonial as a renaming of the postmodern; secondly, a comparative analysis of the two fictions' deconstructive treatment of historical content; and lastly, Djebbar and Winterson's divergence on the question of agency.

### **I- The Postmodern and the Postcolonial :**

Theorists on postmodernism and on postcolonialism have recently tried to underline the points of affinity or divergence between the two posts. To name a few examples : Gareth Griffiths states how like postcolonial texts, postmodern texts

concern themselves with the accidental, the apparently contingent, the less (or more) than logical, the fact refusing to be contained, the fortuitous occurrence, the "random" event, the unplaceable object (in time or in space). (1991 : 153).

although he is cautious to specify that "the postcolonial critic and author have sought to resist the tendency of the postmodern to incorporate their projet and subsume it into a concern which lays claim to being wider, more pervasive and less provincial" (153) in its roots and its objectives. Linda Hutcheon, on her part, considers that the postcolonial is part and parcel of the postmodern and that while the "inside-outside" position of the postcolonial has made it possible to dig up many postmodern contradictions, yet

the theory and practice of postmodern art has shown ways of making the different, the off-centre, into the vehicle for aesthetic and even political consciousness-raising perhaps the first and necessary step to any radical change. (1988 : 73).

In fact, the inclusion of the postmodern within the postmodern is justifiable on more than one ground : Both pay tribute to the marginal and favour difference; both make use of discursive strategies with high subversive potential such as parody, allegory, magic realism, and discontinuous narrative. In an attempt to crystallize the affinity between the two currents, Elleke Boremer deduces that

postcolonial and postmodern critical approaches cross in their concern with marginality, distintegrating binaries, and all things parodied, piebald, dual, mimicked, borrowed, and second hand. (1995 : 244).

I think, nontheless, that the affinity between the two posts should not be exaggerated. Postmodern notions of meaning as arbitrary, or of identity as provisional are hardly relevant to the postcolonial project; also, the postmoder notion of history as "fiction" finds no echo in postcolonial discourse, for the latter, mistrustful of colonial history, firmly preserves its own. Furthermore, the overlap between postmodernism and postcolonialism unveils the contradictions/ironies contained in the former and the wide political and rhetorical possibilities offered through the latter.

Let me begin with postmodern (is'm) ironies. When evaluated from critical standards outside of it, postmodernism proves fragile and self-contradictory. In "Toward a Feminist Critique of Postmodernism", Valerie Kennedy points (to post) modernism's many contradictions and probes into the reasons behind this state of affairs. First, Kennedy maintains, Postmodernism may be considered as just another in the series of man-made paradigms -Classicism, Romanticism, and Modernism being its obvious predecessors- which relegate women, blacks, and other

minority groups to margins. In fact, instead of inquiring into the possible links that the movement may have with other ex-centric currents contemporarg to it, the postmodern prefers to "expend much time and energy on differentiating between modernism and postmodernism", thus creating a false problem. And the only writers on postmodernim who care/dare to mention contemporary women writers in relation to the movement are women (Hutcheon and Waugh). Secondly, in representing the human subject as definitely male, decentered and problematized as this subject may be, postmodern theorists align themselves "with the perspective of the dominant white middle-class male voice of liberal humanist discourse which they nevertheless all, ironically, claim to undermine".<sup>(1)</sup> whatever the reason, Kennedy affirms, for this omission of womens'-and other minority groups'- texts from discussions on postmodernism, what is beyond doubt is that

the great postmodernist/postructuralist debate looks like a rearguard action, a last-ditch stand by some/Living White Males (and a few coopted White Females) in the academy to keep the domains of philosophy, culture, literature, and politics, male-preserves. (Kennedy, 123).

In a salutary gesture, then, I turn to postcolonialism, and to the rhetorical and political resources intrinsic to discursive features such as deconstruction, or subversion through the use of allegory and parody.

What distinguishes the postcolonial perspective, Homi Bhabha advances, is the prerogative to interpret and reinscribe "the forms and

1- Valerie Kennedy, "Toward a Feminist Critique of Postmodernsim", in Publications de la Faculté des lettres et des Sciences Humaines. Série Colloques et Séminaires N°65 Rabat .p. 123.

effects of an older 'colonial' consciousness from the later experience of the cultural displacement that marks the more recent, postwar histories of the western metropolis" (1994 : 174) and so from the position of subalterneity. In *the Location of Culture*, Bhabha points to the way contemporary theories have drawn attention to the necessity of transforming our critical strategies and engaging with concepts and values differently. Culture for instance, may be perceived as an "uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival". (1994 : 172) This rereading of culture, of its signs, entails a process of cultural transvaluation which involves "the deconstruction of the sign, the emphasis on indeterminism in cultural and political judgement." (1994 : 174) To adopt the postcolonial perspective is, for Bhabha, to rename the postmodern, re-articulate postmodernism's insistence on the cunning of modernity (cf. modernity's historical ironies, its disjunctive temporalities, its paradoxes of progress) from the position of the postcolonial.

It is indeed this deconstruction practice enhanced by the postcolonial perspective which I would like to focus on in my reading of *L'Amour, La Fantasia* (1985) and *the Passion* (1987) as examples of what Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction, fictionalized history with a parodic twist." (1989 : 53) Conceived within the general programme of a contemporary inquiry into the nature of the representation of historical fact in fiction, the two novels yield different treatments of the history / fiction tension. These treatments echo the literary/philosophical currents of thought that Djebbar and Winterson evolve in : maghrebian postcolonial on the one hand; English postmodern on the other.

## II- Djebbar's and Winterson's deconstruction of historical discourse :

For Christopher Norris and Andrew Benjamin, to deconstruct a text means "to draw out conflicting logics of sense and implication, with the object of showing that the text never means exactly what it says or says what it means". (Norris and Benjamin : 1988) Deconstruction is an activity of close reading which resists summary or definition. It is a "reading against the grain" which is meant to "unsettle existing forms of thought. " To transform our sense of concepts and value judgement, to confound the ordering of cultural symbols, to traumatize tradition - these are the very prerogatives that the postcolonial perspective endorses to contest existing paradigms of analysis. It is from this standpoint - that of tracking displacements and ironies, subverting the rationale of the hegemonic meaning of culture, and negotiating meaning as contingent and open - that it becomes possible to read *L'Amour, La Fantasia* as deconstruction art.

Djebbar's eventual objective is to track the displacements and ironies in the French colonial history of the Algerian war as part and parcel of the 19th century European narrative of progress, and to counter this centric discourse with an alternative hybrid discourse made of trails, of traces, of the cries of the fantasia, and of the many voices of the Algerian women who contributed to the war. "Voix" and "Voix de Veuve" allow Djebbar to reinscribe the war story from the position of the ex-European, the ex-centric, using the subaltern history of the margins of progress.

To effect this transvaluation of historical discourse, Djebbar takes up the dialectic imperial/native and attaches to it a number of key thematic, philosophical, and textual segments, where the argument depends in fact on

some crucial opposition of terms (as with colonizer/colonized; centric/excentric). The most evocative segment of transvaluation bears on the question of linguistic representation and is made to depend on the antiphony written/oral. Djebbar does not use the two terms in binary opposition to one another, but relates them in a dialogic/productive relation that gives up deadly dualism in favour of indetermination and openness.

The antiphony oral/written serves to dramatize the love-hate relationship that the narrator/author nurtures for the French language. "Tunic de Nessus" evokes this love-hate relationship more vividly than any other motif in the novel. The gesture of love "don d'amour" that incited the narrator's father to take her to the French school is identified with the other gesture of love that compelled Dejanira -in the myth- to try the love spell recommended by dying Nessus and clothe Hercules, her husband, with the robe imbued in Nessus'blood, which is murderously poisonous. The narrator's painful wrestling with the French language is evoked in the agony with which Hercules tries in vain to wrench the poisonous garment off his flesh.

The narrator loves the French language because it is the gateway to freedom - social, artistic freedom. The hand that she retrieves, figuratively speaking, from Fromentin is the only possible means for Djebbar to verbalize experience, whether this experience is de la Croix's motif of rapt and rape, "les seigneurs de la guerre d' hier", or "les filles rôdeuses qui habitent le silence succédant aux batailles". (Djebbar : 1985,167) she is also infatuated with the musicality of French, which she exploits in those passages in italics, where prose approximates to music.

But French is also an alienating veil, an agent of displacement which prevents the narrator from identifying with her Arab-Berber heritage, and



from writing in the mother tongue :

Mon parler Français...

Mots torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices; d'elles,  
definitivement ils me séparent. Et sur leur poids, je m'expatrie.

(p.165).

This sense of being dispossessed, of being denied subjectivity and self-representation installs in the narrator/author the urge to retrieve the mother tongue by colonizing French. In *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, Dorothy S. Blair points to this transgressive action which the narrator exerts upon the French language to make it bear the burden of her native experience. "In a conscious effort to escape from the shackles of writing in the enemy's language, she seems to be colonizing the language of colonizers. She does violence to it, forcing it to give riches and defying it to hand over its hidden hoard". (Blair : 1993 : IV) Among the discursive forms that this violence takes is syntactic fusion : written French is adapted to the syntax of the Arabic oral vernacular (cf. " Tout) ce qui est passé sur moi!" (p.174) Like code switching or glossing, syntactic fusion is a strategy of appropriation which the postcolonial text uses to install cultural alterity in the writing <sup>(2)</sup>. (Ashcraft, Griffiths, Tiffin : 59-77).

It is worth underlining here that in her deconstructive critique of history, Djébar uses steps that are followed in deconstruction practice. She begins by pointing to the fallacies, paradoxes contained in the binary opposition of speech/writing : French colonial writing is authenticized by the nature of its documents and archives while oral Arabic is muted through

2- This is an aspect of the postcoloniality of a text which, by itself, constitutes a vast subject of research and to which I cannot do justice here.

its association with themes of cloister, silence, and femininity. Secondly, Djebbar shows that this hierarchical relation - oral Arabic is supplementary to written French - could in fact be inverted, thus making peripheral Arabic approximate, "write back to" (Roshdie) centric French without really reaching this centre or being contaminated with the centre's closure and logocentrism. French in *L'Amour, La Fantasia* is wrenched into a more morbid, decentralized language capable of translating the poetry of Arabic and the agony of the subjugated. Sid Ali decides to receive and board the "maquisards" at his aunt's Lla Zohra. when the latter refuses on account of what happened to Mohand Oumous, a previous boarder, Sid Ali says: "Ma tante... Ne dis pas "j'ai" ou c'est "mon bien", dis plutôt "je ne possède pas!" Remets-toi à dieu et laisse, s'il le faut, tout ce feu courir et tout manger. " (p.170) when later she is taken away to be interrogated, she orders her relatives who started weeping : "Ne pleurez pas sur moi!" (p.186).

Finally, Djebbar shows that "the pattern of unstable relationships, thus brought to light, is characteristic of the other constituents of the text, to the last detail of its rhetorical organization." (Norris and Benjamin) To give a further example, the segment bearing on the question of artistic representation depends on the juxtaposition between visual elements (De la Croix's painting, Fromentin's *A Year in the Sahel*) and textual elements (narrative and lyrical prose). This juxtaposition produces not so much "a collage of randomly associated styles as a critical interrogative exchange between them". (Norris and Benjamin).

In *The Passion*, Jeannette Winterson's deconstructive use of history acquires a different character, and is made chiefly through parody. While the narrative of Napoleon's conquest of Europe may be read in terms of

realist standards (Tolstoy, Balzac, Stendhal) as one of progress and heroic ideal, Winterson remakes it into a "petite histoire" of Napoleon's petty obsession with chicken, short servants, and tall horses. The novel in fact starts on a domestic note of neck-Wringing and platter carrying. "It was Napoteon who had such a passion for chicken that he kept his chiefs working around the clock... odd to be governed by an appetite, " (3) says Henri, the narrator of the first fragment of the narrative.

This shift of focus in the representation of historical fact from the public to the private, from the official to the domestic is meant to undermine the authenticity of historical discourse. It is accompanied in the novel by the representation of history as fragments. Discontinuous narration in *the Passion* bumps the reader first into the army position at Boulogne in the winter of 1805; then back to colonized Venice since 1797; forth to "the zero winter" of 1812, when Napolen's army marched on Moscow in their summer overcoats; back to Venice after 1812 and to Henri's self-willed exile in san Servelo, a mad-house for the well-off paranoids and schizophrenics, Henri himself being a lost paranoid self.

Each one of these fragments evokes a theme or motif. The second fragment of Napoleon's invasion of Europe records the impact of colonization upon the Venetian ego. Villanelle, the narrator of this fragment, is a native of Venice, "the city of mazes".

Since Bonaparte captured our city of mazes in 1797, we have  
more or less abandoned ourselves to pleasure. What else is

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3 - Jeanette Winterson, *the Passion*. London : Routledge, 1987. p3. All subsequent quotations are taken from the same edition.

there to do when you've lived a proud and free life and suddenly you are not proud and free anymore? (P.52).

The third fragment depicts with shocking intensity the agony of the French soldiers in the act of surviving "the zero winter". Henri, the narrator of this fragment, writes in his journal between two errands :

watching my comrades die was not the worst thing about the war, it was watching them live... I've seen soldiers, mad with hunger and cold, chop off their own arms and cook them. How long could you go on chopping? (p.82).

This part also records the haphazard meeting of Henri and Villanelle, then a "vivandière" in the army, Henri's desertion of Napoleon, and the return to Venice.

Parody or ironic quotation as well as fragmentation of linearity are some of the rhetorical strategies that postmodernist art uses to subvert historical discourse. Postmoderns and postmodern feminists alike maintain that since history is neither stable nor natural, it is impossible to represent it in its totality. Anti-totalizing representation remains the only adequate response to it. From a postmodern feminist standpoint, Winterson finds historical meaning provisional and contingent, hence its representation necessarily parodic. Linda Hutcheon maintains in this respect :

postmodern parodic strategies are often used by feminist artists to point to the history and historical power of these cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way to deconstruct them. (Hutcheon : 1991,102).

### III- Djebbar, Winterson, and the question of Agency.

The last assertion that I would like to make in this comparative reading is that, despite their common deconstructive critique of historical discourse and of the nature of representation of historical fact in fiction, Djebbar and Winterson are motivated by different objectives. Djebbar foregrounds the tension history/fiction. Representing historical content in fiction paves the way for the unfolding of key postcolonial concerns such as agency. On the other hand, Winterson subdues the representation of history to other current feminist issues such as gender and sexuality. The latter are themselves explored from a postmodern feminist standpoint. An interesting interplay of fantasy and parody allows Winterson to explore new paradigms of the definition of identity. Gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are proposed as potential determinants of identity structures.

To evoke the question of agency and define the form it has in postcolonial theory, I will turn to Roland Barthes' exploration of the cultural space "outside the sentence" and to Homi Bhabha's syncreticist postcolonial reading of it. In *the Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes explores the linguistic cultural space "outside the sentence" to summon those 'new spaces' and 'new times' opened by the language metaphor "where a theoretical discourse is used to move beyond theory". (Bhabha, 1994:179) Barthes himself forwards this space as 'outside' or beyond binary opposition logic, a space that places the terms of opposition (cf. theory vs. practice) in a dialogic, interactive relation. The non-sentence or "outside the sentence" is a writing aloud which resists definition or categorization. Bhabha invokes its salient traits:

1- It is a writing which replaces the hierarchy, the order, and subordinations of sentence with discontinuities of the text.

2- It proposes a discourse of indetermination and incommensurability and proposes agency - cf. the subject of discoure- as it emerges in relation to the indeterminate, the contingent. Agency, as a result, is relocated as subaltern agency, agency that negotiates its own entry/authority in discourse through "a process of iterative 'unpicking' and incommensurable, insurgent relinking". (1994:185).

3- It proposes authorship as enunciative space : the subject as discontinuous, the signifier as libertine, indeterminate. ("like signifer" not "signifier").

I would like here to seize one of the possibilities offered by this non-sentence or "writing aloud" - in fact the second of the above mentioned- for the relocation/rearticulation of agency" as a result of its own splitting in the time-lag - the disjunctive temporality (new times) - of signification". (1994 : 185) The individuation of the subject - as a historical subject of culture, or as the subject discoure, hence as speaking subject - as it emerges as an effect of intersubjectivity, negociation, hence as "a return of the subject as agent". (P.185) In *L'Amour, la Fantasia*, the notion of agency as " a return of the subject as agent" is evoked through movement, indeed negotiation between different narrative spaces (historical/autobiographical) and different narrative mediums (oral, written).

First the negotiation between the historical and the autobiographical stances helps relocate the subject of history (the Algerian natives) in new prefigurative moments of historical meaning. This relocation has the purpose of providing " a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their own history and experience." (178) This relocation of subjectivity is enhanced in the novel by the negotiation - movement to and fro - between two narrative mediums (oral/written). In the process of this negotiation, French is turned into written"Arabic" which converts the Al-

gerian women - traditionally relegated to cloisters and silence - into active participants, hence subjects of their own history. The negotiation between the written and the oral also allows the narrator, as speaking subject, to make her re-entry, her return to discourse as agent.

It is interesting how this re-entry of the subject as agent of discourse is almost physically conjured through the narrator's wrestling with the enemy's language.

Cherifa! je desirais recréer ta course... Ta voix s'est prise au piège; mon parler Français la déguise sans l'habiller. Les mots que j'ai cru te donner s'enveloppent... Mots torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices; d'elles définitivement, ils me séparent. Et sous leur poids je m'expatrie. (165).

Just as the narrator's sense of dispossession alternates in *L'Amour, La Fantasia* with her sense of recovery of the lost sign (reconstitution of the Algerian oral past), so the speaking subject's expatriation is followed by a return, a re-entry that the subject of discourse negotiates through the process of unpicking, relinking, reinscribing.

It is this recovery of the sign of culture, this assertion of agency not as itself (cf. as transcendent, transparent) or in itself (cf. as unitary, organic, autonomous), but as an effect of calculation, negotiation, interrogation (Bhabha) which is lacking in *the Passion*. In privileging questions of gender and sexuality over questions of representation, and in employing the very techniques that postmodern art uses to deconstruct subjectivity, Winterson renames the postmodern from the position of the postmodern, thus falling into the cunning of postmodernity.



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