

Muhammad Dib and Algerian Resistance Literature

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Modern Algerian literature, unique among Arab national literary traditions, features a cultural blend of Arabic, Berber and French influences. The literature reflects their love of Algerian culture and thought, and their revolt against French colonialism. The Algerian-born Arab author Muhammad Dib (1920-2003) wrote in French, mainly about the Algerian struggle for independence. Expelled in 1959 for supporting the Algerian revolution, he settled in Paris. Considered a pioneer of Algerian literature, he was the first Arab Algerian to write Western-style novels. His Algerian trilogy, *La Grande Maison*, *L'Incendie*, and *Le Métier à tisser*, was published between 1952 and 1957. Though autobiographical, the books trace both rural and urban life in pre-revolutionary times. Dib's 1959 thematically driven novel *Un été Africaine* (An African Summer), analyzed here, rather than depicting the Algerian revolution itself, describes its effect on the characters and their lives. Nevertheless, the novel, framed around a cross-section of Algerian society, reflects colonial government abuses and the common people's sacrifices for their dream of independence. Dib also depicts France's colonialist attitudes as a betrayal of the ideals of the French Revolution and claims to humanitarian values.

Keywords: Muhammad Dib, Algerian Revolution, Modern Algerian Arabic literature, Resistance literature, French colonialism

Historical Background

In 1830, France conquered Algeria from the Ottoman Empire. France ruled the entire territory of Algeria, but there was a considerable difference between the rural areas, which remained backward, and the urban areas, where French settlers lived and which were much more modern. During the 132 years of colonial rule, the Algerians suffered arrogant and humiliating treatment at the hands of the French settlers (whose numbers reached about one million) and the French government. The settlers seized most of their lands, undermined the foundations of their traditional society, destroyed entire villages and dispersed their residents, and eliminated the religious leadership.

During World War I various resistance movements emerged, the most prominent of which were the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the Algerian National Movement (MNA). Algeria's blood-soaked war of independence lasted from 1954 until 1962, and on July 3, 1962, France announced Algeria an independent state.

The population of Algeria consists of Arabs and Berbers, the latter being the indigenous tribes of North Africa. The official language is Arabic, but about 14% of Algerians speak one of the Afro-Asian Berber dialects. French is widely used as well. The French occupiers considered the people of North Africa, and of Africa at large, to be savage and uncivilized, and regarded their culture as dead, and therefore allowed

themselves to impose their own culture and language upon them. Prominent post-colonialist philosopher Franz Fanon said that the colonialist rule undermined the culture of the occupied peoples and denied their national identity.

The philosopher Jean Paul Satre played a prominent role in the struggle against French colonialism in Algeria and became one of the staunchest supporters of the Algerian demand for independence. He noted that, while in Europe the most basic expression of nationalism is language, in Algeria the French forbade the Algerians to speak their own tongue.

Modern Algerian Literature

Modern Algerian literature differs from the literature of other Arab nations in several ways. Its most prominent characteristic is the complex blend of three traditions—Arab, Berber and French—which lends it a unique cultural-linguistic character.

Caught between conflicting linguistic and ideological worlds, Algerian literature saw periods of ebb and flow. As mentioned, the French colonial authorities promoted French culture, seeing it as the source of “progress” and “change”. The Berber language, used by the mountain tribes who zealously preserved their oral traditions, lived in the shadow of the two more dominant languages, Arabic and French. The conflict, interaction and mutual influence among these three cultures eventually gave birth to an Algerian literature that was written in French but described an Arabic and Berber reality. The linguistic, ideological, environmental, historical and human elements all came together to form a new, multi-faceted literature whose sources and roots are very diverse. Its authors stress their affiliation with two worlds and the tension between their Arab and Western heritage. Their literature, a combination of the three streams, reflects their affiliation with Algerian culture and thought, but also the Algerian revolution and the struggle against French colonialism (Ghali, 1970, p. 143).

Literary critic Shukri Ghali described the revolution as follows:

This revolution is the melting pot in which the spirit is forged, the furnace in which the conscience is purified, and the blood in which the idea is consolidated. (Ghali, 1970, p. 143)

(“هذه الثورة هي

البوتقة التي انصهرت خلالها “الروح“

وتطهر في اتونها “الوجدان”

وتبلور بدمائها “الفكر”)

Novels written after World War II reflect the tumultuous history of that period in Algeria and celebrate the Algerian citizen who speaks the language of the colonialists yet fights for his independence.

Suaad Muhammad Khidr writes in her book *Modern Algerian Literature*:

The ferocity of the struggle that waged in Algeria after World War II, as the national liberation movement gained strength, facilitated the emergence of modern fiction in the country. Fiction is the most developed of the literary genres in Algeria and is best suited to describing Algerian reality, for it presents a variety of answers to the questions facing the Algerian people and lights the way to the future. (Khidr, 1976, p. 148).

(“لقد ساعدت حدة ذلك الصراع نفسه في الجزائر في فترة ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية وفي فترة تعاظم حركة التحرر الوطنية على ظهور القصة الجزائرية الحديثة. والقصة الجزائرية، من أكثر الأنواع تطورا في الادب الجزائري واقدرها على توضيح الحقيقة

الجزائرية امام القارئ، بتقديمها مختلف الاجابات على مختلف المشاكل التي تبرز امام الشعب الجزائري وبتوضيحها طريق المستقبل”)

Thus, the struggle against colonialism was the main catalyst for the emergence of modern Algerian prose. This is why there was no distinct genre of “resistance literature” in Algeria at the time. All Algerian literature from this period was resistance literature.

Abu al-Qasim Saad Allah writes in his book *Studies in Modern Algerian Literature*:

The hero of the Algerian novel is an ordinary person through which the author conveys the feelings of the Algerian citizen. He is not an ideal or extraordinary figure that symbolizes some concept or principle. He is a realistic character that reflects the tragic Algerian reality and is characterized by warmth and honesty, a figure without any unusual skills. (Saad Allah, 1966, p. 53).

(“البطل في الرواية الجزائرية ليس الا شخصا عاديا ركز الكاتب فيه وعليه كل مشاعر المواطن. انه ليس مثلا اعلى ولا نموذجا خارقا تتجسد فيه فكرة او مبدأ عام، وانما هو انسان واقعي فيه كل ما في الواقع من مأساة وحرارة وصرخة وليست له مؤهلات خاصة ولا استعدادات خارقة”).

The Algerian writers based their novels on their daily experiences, and hence most of their works are to some extent autobiographical. Their works reflect the conflict between the Arab heritage and the new French culture, their affiliation with both worlds but also their frustration at failing to be perfectly comfortable in either.

Some Algerian novels in French were written by Frenchmen who settled in Algeria or were born there, and who began writing in the late 19th century, The 1930s saw the emergence of a new school of Franco-Algerian writers, the *École d’Alger*, whose most renowned member was Albert Camus.

However, there were also native Algerians, either Arab, Berber or Jewish, who wrote in French in her book *Politics, Poetics and the Algerian Novel*, literary critic Salhi Zahia notes that the first Francophone novels by native Algerians were written in the early 20th century. At first these novels imitated literature written in France and aimed to assimilate into the culture of “the motherland” (*mère patrie*), but after World War II they started expressing rebellion and protest against the patronizing French attitude (though most Algerians remained loyal to France and even fought in the French army during the war). The post-war period saw the development of a new national-realistic style, and of novels depicting the suffering of Algerians under the French occupation and their struggle for independence.

Among the earlier representatives of this new national realism were Mouloud Feraoun, Muhammad Dib, Mouloud Mammeri, Kateb Yacine, and Asia Jabbar—all of them Arabs who wrote in French. Having received French education, these intellectuals were disinclined—and perhaps even unable to write in Arabic. Their attitude towards French was ambivalent, for they felt both affiliation with it and antagonism towards it.

Contrary to the predictions of scholars, who assessed that after the independence this Francophone literature would gradually decline, it continued to flourish throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Hence, the debate on the validity of writing in French, the language of the Other, continues to this day.

As for literature in Arabic, it was very slow to develop. This stemmed from several reasons, political, historical, cultural and social, including the following:

- The low status of Arabic;
- The lack of contact between the Maghreb and the Mashreq, which resulted from a deliberate French policy of preventing such contact;
- The disinterest of the Algerian press in matters of Arabic literature;

- The large percentage of illiterates among the Arab Algerians (on the eve of the World War II, 81 percent of the men and 95 percent of the women were illiterate);
- The centrality of oral folklore;

The first Arabic novels were therefore written in Algeria only in the 1970s. Among the pioneers of Arabic Algerian literature were Abdelhamid Ben Hadouga, who wrote the novel *Rih Al-Janoub (South Wind)* in 1971, and Tahar Ouettar, whose novel *Al-Laz (The Ace)* was published in 1974.

Muhammad Dib

The Arab author Muhammad Dib was born in Algeria in 1920. He wrote novels, poems, and short stories in French, reflecting the history of Algeria in the 20th century and focusing on the struggle against colonialism. After being expelled from the country by the French authorities in 1959 for supporting Algerian independence, he settled in Paris, where he continued to write. He is considered a pioneer of Algerian literature and the first Arab Algerian novelist to adopt the genre of the modern Western novel.

His Algerian Trilogy (*La Grande Maison, L'Incendie, and Le Métier à tisser*) was published in 1952-1957. Telling the story of one Algerian family, it is a seminal work of Algerian literature and places Dib in the first row of Algerian authors. It is often described as an autobiography, but at the same time it is a memoir of the Algerian people, depicting life in the country in the pre-revolution period, both in the village and in the city. In many ways it accurately predicted the future of the Algerian state.

This article is devoted to Dib's novel *Un été Africaine (African Summer)*, which came out in 1959, and whose deeply human themes are more universal than those addressed in the Algerian Trilogy. In this novel, Dib follows the Algerian revolution while providing a very broad and comprehensive picture of his country. The characters are a cross-section of Algerian society, representing different social sectors and occupations: a merchant, a peasant, a teacher, a student, a revolutionary, etc. Dib also addresses France and its colonialist attitudes, which are presented as a betrayal of the values of the French Revolution. He draws a bold portrait of France as deriding all values and lacking any moral principles.

The novel is not based on a suspenseful plot with growing complications that are eventually resolved. Instead, its artistic structure is based on a string of characters, whose nature is gradually revealed through their interactions with others. The first of these characters is Zakia, a young high school graduate who wishes to work as a teacher. Her father does not oppose her wish, but her grandmother does, because she thinks that a young girl ought to marry and that her working outside the home could disgrace the family and also make it difficult for her to find a husband. The mother, too, fears for her daughter's future and is therefore reluctant to support her ambition. Zakia, feeling trapped, says: "In this world friendship itself turns to bitterness. Who is to blame for this? No-one, or perhaps everyone"¹.

(“في هذا العالم يتقلب الود نفسه الى مرارة. من المسؤول عن ذلك؟ لا احد. وقد يكون الناس جميعاً”)

Later she is expected to marry her cousin. Zakia says sorrowfully: "We must submit and accept everything" (علينا ان نُذعن وان نقبل كل شي) (Dib, 1961, p. 50).

Next to be presented is the peasant Marhoum, who is hurrying to town on his donkey to bake his loaves of bread at the bakery. Marhoum saw the rebels blowing up the railway, after which the soldiers sowed

¹ All quotes hereafter are taken from the Arabic translations of Muhammad Dib's works.

destruction throughout the town, and he is afraid that the soldiers will suspect him of involvement in the act. At the entrance to the town the soldiers stop him and thoroughly search him and his belongings. Stopping by the shop of Ahmad the grocer, he learns from a stranger that Ahmad has been arrested along with his nephew. Marhoum, in turn, tells the stranger how two of his fellow villagers were murdered in the fields and three others were arrested after the French broke into their houses and robbed them. Sitting at a coffee shop, he remembers how his son left home to join the rebels in the mountains.

Riding home on his donkey, Marhoum thinks back to the days when he used to bring supplies to the rebels in the mountains, looked after the families of fallen rebels, and also served as a judge for people who refused to appeal to the courts of the occupiers.

Heartbroken over Ahmad's arrest, he mutters again and again: "What is this plague that is destroying the world?" (Dib, 1961, p. 32).

(" ما هذا الوباء الذي يجتاح العالم؟)

In the following chapter, Marhoum is sitting outside his home with three other peasants when a French military convoy arrives. The soldiers spread in every direction and enter the homes. Gunshots are heard and people fall, along with animals whose blood mingles with that of the slain. Some of the animals manage to flee to the surrounding mountains. Marhoum and his friends are arrested as silence descends all around them, a strange silence, as though the people, animals and even the plants are listening to the pulse of the night: "Listening to the giant heart of the night as it grew gentle, while only the singing of the deaf wind, carrying soft, indistinct sounds that the ear could not catch, interrupted the all-pervading silence" (Dib, 1961, p. 153).

("يصغون الى قلب الليل الضخم وهو يرق ولم يكن يعكر هذا الهدوء المترامي الاطراف غير غناء الريح الاصم الذي ينقل من الاماكن المنزوية اصواتا خفية كانت من الخفوت والابهام بحيث لا تستطيع الاذن ان تتركها)

Two other characters, a father and son who are fleeing the French authorities, knock on the door of a peasant who informed on some rebels to the French. When the peasant opens the door, the father says to him:

It was because of you that my two children were killed. Do you dare deny this? And what happened today, those people who were led away and who will no doubt be killed! Proclaim your innocence! Did you not have mercy upon your brother? You sold us out. Why? What did I ever do to you? You shall answer to Allah. (Dib, 1961, p. 160)

("بسببك لقد قتل ولداي. هل تجرؤ ان تنكر ذلك؟ وما حدث اليوم : هؤلاء الرجال الذين اقتيدوا والذين سيقتلون لا شك ! قل انك بريء! لم تاخذك الشفقة على اخوانك؟ لقد بعنا! لماذا؟ ماذا فعلت لك؟ ستجيب عن ذلك امام الله)

The father then strikes the peasant with an axe and he falls. Another character, Baba 'Allal, also has a son who has joined the rebels and whom he has not seen for six months. When his son went away he was very angry with him and refused to hear his name mentioned. Early one morning Baba 'Allal is woken by a man who comes to assure him that his son is well. The man tells him to go talk to Silka the Smith, who provides further information about the son. Silka tells Baba 'Allal that no power in the world can persuade his son to give up the rebel cause and that he is willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of the homeland:

Silka: Do not be sad. You lose nothing by having a son there (among the rebels).

Baba 'Allal: True, but the end will no doubt be tragic and bitter! And what if he dies?

Silka: If that happens, he will not have lived in vain. (Dib, 1961, p. 26)

“سيلكا : لا تبتئس! لا في الخسارة من شيء ان يوجد شاب كابنك هناك.

بابا علال : هذا صحيح ولكن ما لا شك فيه ان كل ذلك سينتهي نهاية سيئة! [...]

وماذا لو مات؟

سيلكا: في هذه الحالة لن يكون عاش سدى”

This transforms Baba ‘Allal’s perspective. He walks around town, completely ignoring the foreign soldiers and policemen, and announces loud and clear:

I hate you and despise you! I hate you and hope that you see it. I too have a son there [among the rebels]! Why do you wait and not kill me? Why are you afraid? But then, you have always been cowards. All the armies of the world will not be able to save you. My son and all the people of this land shall bury you. (Dib, 1961, p. 97)

(انني اكرهكم وازدريكم وأمل ان تروا ذلك على وجهي”! انني اكرهكم وازدريكم.

ان لي انا الاخر ابنا هناك. فماذا تنتظرون لكي تقتلونني؟ انكم لا تملتون خوفا هكذا الا لانكم كنتم دائما جبناء. ولن تستطيع جيوش العالم كله ان تنفذكم. سيدفنكم ابني وجميع ابناء هذه البلاد“).

Also described is a man named Jamal, who leads a life of isolation and loss. Formerly a civil servant, he left his job after witnessing the authorities’ exploitation of the poor and oppression of the innocent. Now unemployed, he is without ambition and cannot find any meaning in his life. Loss is a fate shared by many others, who become shadows of their former selves. Jamal thinks not only of the state of his homeland but of life in general and its meaning. He says:

Most of us live like people who have forgotten something, yet who, within the abyss of their muddled thoughts, continue to seek it. Stumbling, they cry out or curse. We all need action and nobody can exist on the sidelines of life [...] Life is the wonder of wonders... It is a dream... which leaves nothing behind it but fleeting traces when we awaken. (Dib, 1961, p. 130)

“ان معظمنا يعيش عيشة اناس نسوا شيئا ما ولكنهم في غمرة حيرتهم الفكرية يتابعون البحث عن هذا الشيء وهم يتعثرون صارخين مرات ولا عنين. اننا جميعا بحاجة الى فعالية مهما تكن وليس من يستطيع ان يعيش على هامش الحياة [...] ما اعجب الحياة ... انها حلم... حلم لا يبقى منه بعد اليقظة الا اثار عابرة”

Eventually, however, Jamal shakes off his apathy and decides to work for a living and to fight evil with all his might by helping the poor.

Yet another character is Mustafa Wali, who visits his older brother Ahmad every week. During one of these visits, Ahmad shows him a government notice in the paper, which claims that Mustafa’s son has joined an “illegal gang”. Shortly later, soldiers attack Mustafa and arrest him.

The novel ends by returning to its starting point, to Zakia’s mother, who mumbles: “The curse pursues us, and that is our life” (Dib, 1961, p. 170).

(ان اللعنة تلاحقنا وتلك حياتنا”)

In sum, the novel, which follows the Algerian revolution, has deep human dimensions and champions the uprising against French imperialism. The drama is not explicit and tangible, but presented obliquely through a tapestry of characters who are all affected by the struggle against colonialism. Instead of depicting the rebellion itself, Dib chose to describe its effect on the characters and their daily lives. The brutality of the colonial regime is depicted through the stories of representative figures such as:

- Marhoum the peasant, whose son is missing. His rebellion is secret, but eventually he is exposed and arrested.
- Zakia, who hopes for a better future.
- Jamal, who moves from indifference to positive action.
- Baba 'Allal, who moves from anger at the rebels to anger at the occupiers.

Dib presents the struggle between good and evil and between life and death, and the victory of the ancient Algerian heritage over French culture. His message is that the stage of destruction is a necessary prelude to the stage of building a new Algeria. Though written in French, the novel is quintessentially Algerian and forms part of the Algerian uprising. It too champions the words that appear in *L'Incendie*, the second part of the Algerian Trilogy:

the fire has broken out, and it shall never stop
It will continue burning, slowly and blindly
until its blood-red tongues drown the entire land in their destructive heat. (Dib, 1954, p. 133)

“ان النار قد بدأت. لن تتوقف ابدا.

انها سوف تستمر مشتعلة ببطء وبعماء ،

الى ان تعم السننها الدموية البلاد كلها

بحرارته المدمرة”

Conclusion

Even as the French colonialist occupiers of Algeria considered the culture and lifestyle of the indigenous peoples uncivilized and unworthy of perpetuating, by imposing their European language and ways, they sowed the seeds of rebellion and ultimately session and independence. Ironically, the imposition of French as a *lingua franca* united Berbers and Arabs. Algerian poetry, novels and short stories written in French became “resistance literature”, a *cri de cœur* and a *cri de guerre*.

Muhammad Dib’s novel *Un été Africaine* does not any way veil the brutal effects of a righteous war on ordinary people. Accusations of fear and cowardice, of collaboration and back-stabbing riddle the Algerian combatants’ families and weaken resolve. And yet Dib’s literature came out of France itself and in French. Nevertheless, he wrote with a purely Algerian voice to Algerians about Algerians, and thus he contributed to the French defeat as if he too were a soldier in his homeland, fighting in his nation’s bid for liberation.

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