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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identity, Linguistic Exile, and Silence in Leïla Sebbar's *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* and *l'arabe comme un chant secret*

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| ABSTRACT

This article examines identity, linguistic exile and silence in Leïla Sebbar's autobiographical narratives *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (2003) and *L'arabe comme un chant secret* (2010) (2nd edition), exploring how Sebbar reclaims the silenced memories of displacement and cultural fragmentation experienced by Franco-Algerian identity. Drawing on postcolonial memory and cultural studies frameworks and autobiographical diaries, the analysis engages in close textual readings of the novels. Through narrative strategies that foreground linguistic and cultural hybridity, they articulate the complex negotiations of identity faced by individuals caught between colonial histories and postcolonial realities. The analysis highlights how Sebbar's works challenge monolithic conceptions of belonging by emphasising exile as both a rupture and a site of creative memory reclamation, thereby contributing to broader discourses on diaspora, memory, and identity formation in contemporary Francophone literature.

| KEYWORDS

Identity, linguistic exile, silenced memories, cultural fragmentation, memory, Francophone literature.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction: Exile and the Complexities of Sebbar's Identity

Born in 1941 in Aflou, Algeria, to an Algerian father and a French mother, Leïla Sebbar explores her dual heritage as a central theme in her literary works. Additionally, growing up in a family of educators during the colonial era, she was immersed in both Algerian and French cultures, which profoundly influenced her identity. After Algeria's independence, Sebbar relocated to France to study literature and grapple with the complexities of belonging to two cultures. For Sebbar, writing is a means to conceal the pain of exile and express the complexities of her hybrid identity. However, "little attention has been paid to her lesser-known autobiographical narratives, with the exception of *Lettres Parisiennes*" (Bourget, 2006, p. 121) in which she claims:

> For me, fiction is the stitch that hides the wound, the gap, between the two shores. I am here, at the crossroads, finally at peace, in my rightful place, so to speak, since I am a crossroads seeking a lineage and writing within a lineage, always the same one, connected to history, to memory, to identity, to tradition and to transmission, I mean, in search of ancestry and descendants, of a place in the history of a family, a community, a people, in relation to History and the universe. It is in fiction that I feel a free individual (free from father, mother, clan, dogmas...) and empowered by the burden of exile. It is only there that I find my whole self, body and soul, and that I build a bridge between two shores, upstream and downstream . . . (Sebbar and Huston, 1986, p. 138)

Essentially, Sebbar's autobiographical writings, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* and *l'arabe comme un chant secret*, reflect her quest to reclaim her cultural and linguistic origins, fostering an appreciation for diverse backgrounds in the process. Her exile is primarily linguistic, shaped by her parents' adherence to colonial French norms that excluded Arabic at home. She identified with her French mother and language, which distanced her from the Arab community, while her Arabic name marked her difference among the French. This name made it impossible to erase her paternal heritage, exposing her to racism from French classmates descended from colonists.[1] Her experience highlights the complex relationship between language, naming, and identity (Bourget, 2006, p. 124). In particular, her narrative style, informed by postcolonial memory theories and the nuances of cultural hybridity, offers a multifaceted portrayal of Franco-Algerian identity. Through her exploration of exile, she offers a distinctive viewpoint, asserting that her experience of it is inextricably linked to the loss of her homeland and her father's language, which distinguishes her narrative.[2] Ultimately, this duality complicates her character, reflecting the nuances of being born of a crossing.[3] Leïla Sebbar describes her exile chiefly through the lens of cultural hybridity, shaped by her parents' mixed marriage and her identification with the French language within the Algerian Arab environment of her childhood. Simultaneously, she reveals the psychological aspects of her isolation and sense of difference in relation to her parents, "namely, the didacticism and lack of demonstrativeness of her mother and the silence of her father" (Knutson, 2011, p. 256). This places Sebbar's narratives within the scope of contemporary postcolonial memory studies, highlighting her contributions to discussions on hybridity and the lived experience of exile, ultimately enriching the ongoing discourse on memory and identity.

Therefore, this analysis draws on postcolonial memory and cultural studies frameworks as well as autobiographical diaries. It engages with close textual readings of the novels *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* and *l'arabe comme un chant secret*, situating the discussion within these theoretical and autobiographical contexts. This framework foregrounds the complex intersections of language, memory, and identity, emphasising how linguistic hybridity and autobiographical narrative strategies articulate the fragmented experiences of exile and cultural displacement. Through this lens, Sebbar's novels reveal the tensions between inherited languages and personal histories, illustrating how language operates as both a site of rupture and creative reclamation within postcolonial and diasporic subjectivities.

Through these lenses, Sebbar's exploration of exile transcends mere displacement, becoming a dynamic site of memory reclamation and self-redefinition. Her narratives disrupt reductive or essentialist notions of identity shaped by colonial legacies, emphasising the significance of fractured identities and silenced histories in postcolonial subjectivities. This positioning enriches contemporary discourse on diaspora, cultural hybridity, and the politics of language, underscoring the ongoing negotiation between personal and collective memory in postcolonial contexts.

2. The Politics of Language in Colonial Algeria

The question of Algerian identity during the colonial period was complex. One hundred and thirty-two years of French occupation, during which the Algerian people suffered discrimination and devaluation by the French authorities. To elucidate, radical policies succeeded one another, based on acculturation, reinforcing the boundary between the Algerian, his culture, religion, and language. Later, with the construction of the republic's schools, French was imposed on students to prepare the elite of Algeria according to Jules Ferry's ideology of "liberalism, republicanism, and laicism." Thus, it became a tool for domination. For several Algerian writers and intellectuals, it was a symbol of civilisation and revolution. To illustrate, this educated generation fought through this language and expressed its belonging, tradition, and Algerian identity, following the examples of Kateb Yacine and Mohammed Dib. Nevertheless, for the writer Leïla Sebbar, as Kamecka (2019) posits:

> The concept of fragile and fragmented identity, widely observed in contemporary individuals' experiences, views identity as a fluid and ongoing process that is continually re-examined. The sense of not fully belonging

[1] Sebbar recounts the racism she experienced from her classmates, who were daughters of French colons. In "Si je parle la langue de ma mère," she explains that she disliked her black curly hair because it was perceived as an Arab trait (Sebbar, 1978, pp. 1180, 1183). In "Les jeunes filles de la colonie" (2001a, pp. 194-95), she reflects that she was not fully aware of being described as "bigarree" or 'multicoloured' (2001a, p. 187). Although both texts address the racism Sebbar encountered, they place greater emphasis on her Arabic name and cultural practices, such as not attending church, as indicators of her mixed ethnic background rather than her physical appearance (Bourget, 2006, p. 124).

[2] In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, Sebbar is deeply committed to uncovering her father's past, viewing this historical understanding as essential for reconnecting with her origins and shaping her identity. However, this journey is challenging and prolonged, complicated by the traumatic and violent nature of the history involved, "the attacks, the massacres, the disappearances" (Sebbar, 2003, p. 47), a history that remains obscure and shrouded in silence (Kamecka, 2019, p. 59).

[3] Leïla Sebbar, born of a crossing, searches for her place amid various communities and histories but consistently denies a fixed belonging (Laronde, 1993, p. 166). She inhabits an in-between space that is neither fully French, Maghrebian, nor entirely Beur, a category already defined by hybridity. By gathering stories from communities surrounding her own, Sebbar highlights the isolating and fragmented nature of her identity (Hubbell, 2015, pp. 43-44).

> to a single culture characterises her work and has become a hallmark of modern literature. This last is marked by breaks and crises and deeply engages with both personal and collective experiences. The variety of approaches and perspectives within that literature reflects an openness to otherness and hybridity across identity, themes, and stylistic expression (p. 55).

In France, after independence, Sebbar recounts an Algerian childhood during the colonial era, a happy and separate childhood: why separate? Separated from whom? Of what? Through our study, we will analyse the writings of the daughter of teachers, an Algerian father and a French mother. Fundamentally, her identity is revealed as French through her mother tongue, education, and training at a girls' school in the European district. However, her Arabic name, Leïla, persists as a sign of resistance to French culture and raises questions about oneself and others. Indeed, her childhood in Algeria, her father's country during the colonial period, marked her memory and work. Hence, between a father who was a teacher, faithful to the language and values of the republic, and an imposed separation from the other: her father's people, their culture, their Arabic language, her writings are nourished by the colonial history of both shores, Algeria, and France. In the next section, we will attempt to understand the reasons for this rupture and its consequences.

3. Language and Identity in Sebbar's Personal Memoirs

In two of Leïla Sebbar's novels *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* and *l'arabe comme un chant secret*, language becomes a personal identity. To elaborate, French, the mother tongue is depicted as dominating that of the father (Arabic), an identity crisis created by a romantic relationship between an Algerian father and a French mother, between the dominant and the dominated, her "I" only manifests itself by asking to which clan she belongs; due to a secular neutrality and a hierarchical colonial society composed of French colonists, pieds-noirs settlers, Jews, and at the bottom, the Algerians were then called "Indigenous," "Muslims," or "Arabs." Thus, the mother's superiority is confirmed by social stratification that legitimises it; the father, on the other hand, is enamoured by the lights of a republic reflecting the hopes and dreams of social advancement and the recognition he awaits.[4] In this respect, in his notable book *Langue, corps, société,* Louis-Jean Calvet (1979) posits that "the way we analyse all languages and the relationships they maintain is profoundly determined by the social organisation within which we write and by the conflicts that pit the writer's community against other communities" (p. 240). Likewise, as Danielle Marx-Scouras (1993) suggests, "in describing her relationship to the father tongue, Sebbar speaks of regaining consciousness after fainting" (p. 49).

Besides, Leïla Sebbar (2003) identifies herself through a negation, a loss of "self": "*Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*" (p. 11). The work is classified as a "récit" (narrative), it is described on the back cover as "un travail de mémoire qui s'est imposé à moi, vital" ("a vital work of memory that imposed itself on me") a process initiated by the death of Sebbar's father (Bourget, 2006, p. 125). Bourget (2006) continues:

> It is simultaneously a biographical and autobiographical work in the sense that the narrator (who is clearly identified throughout the text as the author, through mentions, among other things, of her published works) attempts to reconstruct her father's life during the Algerian war by mingling memory and fiction (p.125).

Through expressing the lack of her father's language, whose name she bears, she confronts an unfulfilled identity, aborted as if the language, in Arab cultural territory, were inherent to the affirmation of identity. Considering the following statement by Adonis (1985) in his seminal work *Introduction à la poétique arabe* further enriches the argument above:

> As if, from this perspective, it was the language that had created the Arab man, on a plane of innateness; in *Jahiliyyah*; on the plane of revelation in prophecy; and on the plane of reason in Islam. As if language in the Arab intellectual and cultural consciousness were the science of being rather than the science of language (p. 106).

Małgorzata Kamecka (2019) points out that In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, the Algerian War, or the so-called "events in Algeria" (p. 59), remains a central yet taboo theme, deeply connected to the fractured identity explored in the novel. When Leïla questions her father about the past, he resists revisiting it, saying, "Why are you stirring all this up? What's the point? Forget it, go on, forget it [...] If you don't know, then don't look for it, it's not worth it" (Sebbar, 2003, p. 28). Despite this, the narrator is driven by an urgent need to uncover the past, believing that understanding history is essential to reclaiming her roots and

[4] In "Le silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe," Sebbar (2001b) describes her childhood perception of Arabic as a "foreign language" (p. 120) and even a "barbaric language" (p. 122), reflecting the colonial context in Algeria where Arabic was officially designated as a foreign tongue (Bourget, 2006, pp. 123-124).

shaping her identity. This pursuit is difficult and prolonged, as the violence, the "attacks, the massacres, the disappearances" (Sebbar, 2003, p. 47) remains enveloped in silence and obscurity:

> He would simply say: "It's a disaster… a disaster…" When I tried to find out how to say 'disaster' in Arabic, I had to ask an Algerian friend, who wrote it down, spelled it out and pronounced it for me, just as my father would have done (Sebbar, 2003, p. 47).

Moreover, at that time, assimilation was perfect, and the terms "Arab" and "Algerian" were interchangeable. With this in mind, Sebbar (2010) in *L'arabe comme un chant secret* states:

> I was not really a Muslim, we said 'the Muslims' to avoid saying 'the Arabs', just as we later said, 'the events' instead of 'the Algerian War', or rather as I heard it said outside my home. I listened and spoke very little. I was not French because I had an Arabic name (pp. 14-15).

In addition, in *L'arabe comme un chant secret*, Sebbar gathered texts that were previously published in collective works or journals. Theoretically speaking, according to Philippe Lejeune (1989), autobiographical writing is the one where the author assumes their "I," following a chronological order of events from childhood or adulthood, what he calls "The Autobiographical Pact." Therefore, Sebbar's "I" is non-existent; she does not tell her story in the traditional way. Admittedly, the writer fails to meet the challenge of autobiographical writing. She admits:

> I do not consider myself an autobiographical writer. I'm not interested. I do not think (as I have often heard others say) that my life is a novel. What would I have to write that could be read? Nothing. I do not know if I wrote what I do not say (that clandestine part I would never talk about), the story would be read. If I were to write, this is not what I would write. Therefore, I do not write (Sebbar, 2010, p. 74).

In the same context, and in his seminal work *Writing and Difference*, according to Jacques Derrida (1967), it is indeed the impossible autobiography in the sense that the subject who is not thought of as narrating does not correspond to the identity of the speaking subject: "and if the indication, for example writing in the common sense, necessarily has to 'add' itself to the thought identity of the object, it is because the 'presence' of meaning, and speech had already begun to miss itself" (p. 97). Furthermore, the front cover mentions "narrative" without further specification. As such, the chronological order of the texts retraces the desire to give readers an idea through possible narratives about the "self." An amnesiac person is guided by the letter they follow. Her "I" gets lost in unfinished sentences, as expressed in the titles of the first two texts related to language, telling the misfortune of being different: "Si je parle la langue de ma mère" and "Si je ne parle pas la langue de mon père." Arguably, the cause of this assertion is in the text; it is a reality that has its origin, era, and place. To illuminate, a childhood disturbed by the absence of the other unknown entity of personal identity, that is, the father. Thus, it is introversion, a subject dispossessed of itself, and an unpronounceable body. Sebbar (2010) states in *L'arabe comme un chant secret*:

> Saying and writing "I" is something you learn. And if no one was there for it to come to life, for it to live and prosper, this unknown "I," born of an unknown father and mother? Orphaned of the maternal "I" and the paternal "I." How, from a double absence, produce presence, produce a "me" deprived of one and the other? There is no word in the French language to describe the state of a mother or father who has lost their child. How do we name someone who has lost the "I," or theirs, which necessarily exists? However, not knowing if he is dead, one must mourn the worst of all mournings. He would have disappeared; they would have made him disappear; he is so frightening; he is so demonic (p. 72).

For Sebbar, her Arabic name is far from her true French identity, her upbringing, and her mother tongue.[5] To clarify, she is not Arab; she does not resemble the women of her father's people. With this in mind, according to Moroccan literary critic Fatima Ahnouch (2004) on *Abdelkebir Khatibi's La langue, la mémoire et le corps*, "the proper name is the identity reference; it sometimes becomes a 'socio-religious institution' that confines the bearer in the illusion of inalterability, a 'nominal tear'" (p. 230). The plot structure of *L' arabe comme un chant secret* is confusing; it is subject to the results of an erasure deemed incomprehensible by the writer. Hence, Sebbar resolved that no one would come to her aid and she preferred to remain silent. She claims:

[5] However, Sebbar seeks affiliation through creative writing which helps reclaim aspects of her heritage by legitimising her Arab lineage, even as her lack of proficiency in the language challenges it. Additionally, this process attempts to address the loss of the paternal mother tongue (Bourget, 2006, p. 131).

> I lost myself. To not respond. Not saying what they would have disapproved of. Also keeping silent about what they expected me to say. Who could recognise me? My father. My mother. Where was I at risk of being recognised? Inside the courtyard fence, in the protected house, with my brother, my sisters, in the courtyard, in the protected house, with my brother, my sisters, in the courtyard, the covered area, the garden, on the terrace, and the veranda (Sebbar, 2010, p. 14).

More importantly, Leïla Sebbar was a student at the girls' school in the European quarter of Hennaya in Tlemcen; she did not attend her father's Indigenous school, unlike Assia Djebar. This paradox leads her to reject everything that comes from her father, which she deems incompatible with her French education. However, from her father's world, the grandmother, aunts, and neighbours with whom her family will have no contact (the house and school were in the Arab neighbourhood) stand out. As such, the maids, Fatima and Aïcha, were the girls she saw playing in front of the school gate, like Safia, the wild girl. In comparison to the French, this other Arab is ignorant, subjected to unjust laws, and deprived of modern metropolitan life; it is dominated by tradition and obeys tribal and religious authority. In addition, a so-called Muslim society closed in on itself, which in turn rejected the other French and infidels. Therefore, this foreigner, who has taken the land of our ancestors, forges laws of assimilation, a kind of palimpsest.

Supporting this, the narrator chose not to learn Arabic, her father's language; a decision she justifies by stating that her father chose to keep her away from him, his tribe, and his language: "responding to my father's desire, I did not learn his language and I say, I write that I will not learn it" (Sebbar, 2010, p. 85). As a result, she prefers to keep herself a prisoner of silence so she can unlock all the mysterious, forbidden doors:

> If my father had passed on his language, Arabic, as an inheritance, I would have written in Arabic, but I would not have written my father in his language. I assert this with certainty. What I write about my father in French, the foreign language to his sisters and mother that forbids them this story where they are alive in the jasmine courtyard in old Ténès, I would not have written in Arabic because my father would not have been, then, this stranger in my books: the imaginary Arab (Sebbar, 2010, p. 109).

Similarly, Franz Kafka (1910-1923) experienced the feeling of alienation caused by the mother tongue, linking it to the identity oppressed under German colonialism, as expressed in his *Diaries*:

> Yesterday, it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, solely because the German language prevented me from doing so. The Jewish mother is not a "murmur"; calling her "murmuring" makes her a bit ridiculous ("Mutter" is not silly in itself, since we are in Germany). We give a Jewish woman the name of a German mother, but we forget the contradiction that sinks even deeper into emotions: "Mutter" is essentially German for the Jew it unconsciously contains, along with Christian splendour and Christian coldness. Therefore, the Jewish woman called "Mutter" is not only ridiculous but also strange. Mom would be a better name if only one did not imagine "mutter" behind it (p. 230).

Additionally, the father's motivation for choosing the language is rooted in the law governing the school of the republic, as enacted by Jules Ferry in Algeria. It is worth mentioning that the education of children in Algeria during the colonial era became compulsory only after the Second World War. The writer's father, Mohammed Sebbar, was among the first graduates of the Normal School of Bouzaréah, known as the "black hussars." Therefore, to be the bearers of the values of the republic, classes were conducted exclusively in French, and Arabic was not even taught as a secondary language. Henceforth, the French policy advocated by Jules Ferry gave rise to the orphans of the ancestral language, sidelined and marginalised, which caused a constant feeling of inferiority compared to other civilised and educated Frenchmen. However, this Algerian intellectual had no real choice. Thus, the loss of one's identity begins with this choice: the French Republic offers its children an idealised model imposed by a policy of assimilation and secularism, promising equality while hiding behind the desire to civilise the Indigenous population. A well-theorised destructive ideology begins to choose those who meet the desired criteria; consequently, they will obtain nationality and be able to perform their duties, acquire their rights as citizens, and be naturalised.

The consequences of this rupture are merely an echo of an imbalance felt as a lack and inability to create one's memory and identity. From this monolingualism, the erasure of all personal authenticity has occurred. To say the least, Leïla Sebbar follows in her father's footsteps; she recounts how he was taken from his mother to his homeland towards a republican, secular, and ideal utopia, to which he would give his children: "my father voluntarily placed me on my mother's side, on the side of the victor, the dominant, on the side of France in Algeria, of French Algeria in his language and his books, obstinately" (Sebbar, 2010, p. 85). No tribe, no ancestor, and no religion, this void created by the values of the republic is irreplaceable: "how many lives, books, words to believe they are my ancestors?" (Sebbar, 2010, p. 43) Indeed, secularism has destroyed the cultural universe of teachers' parents: "silence on the Catholic maternal tradition, silence on the Algerian Muslim paternal tradition. The secular republic, with its rules, is the primary, privileged, ideal, absolute place of every act and every word" (Sebbar, 2010, p. 44). To

rebuild and understand herself, she returns to this colonial childhood; the unspoken aspects of collective and personal history give a certain legitimacy to her existence: "private history is obliterated at the same time as public history. It is the Algerian War of Liberation that, for me, will make history. I emerge from nothingness with the war" (Sebbar, 2010, p. 78). Above all, she considers herself a product of this era, of this politics: "I am a citizen of a spontaneous generation; I am not alone. I have a political tribe and a utopia. I will become like other orphans of the revolution" (Sebbar, 2010, p. 78).

4. Sebbar's Engagement with Colonial History and Silence

Leïla Sebbar perceives that it is the absence of an appropriate language that hinders her comprehension of Algerian history and obscures the colonial past because the colonisers' language is incapable of articulating the experiences and the violence suffered by the colonised (Kamecka, 2019, p. 59). For instance, Dana Catherine (2003), in an interview with Sebbar on *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* reveals:

> My father often said that in his schools, he had trained just as many agents of the colonial regime as he had future members of the resistance and future leaders of independent Algeria. That is true. I believe he was aware of his contradictions and that perhaps his silences were linked to this lucidity, which he was unable to put into words for us, children (p. 181).

The narrative of *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* opens with a page listing significant dates from Sebbar's father's life. This compilation, though not exhaustive, includes only those events the narrator is certain of and has personally encountered. Due to her father's unwillingness to share details about his past, Sebbar must fill in the gaps through imagination and reconstruction. This concise and formal biographical outline "[allows] one not to get lost in the meanderings of memory" (Sebbar, 2003, p. 9). The memory in question is one that emerges from Sebbar's literary creation, particularly as the novelist acknowledges that the absence of her father's language and country motivated her to write (Sebbar, 1986, p. 28). Her creative drive originates from a lack of familiarity with her father's culture and the inability to communicate with her paternal family. Within the narrative, Sebbar constructs stories reminiscent of those her father might have experienced, aiming to address the gaps in her father's and his family's history. For instance, she introduces the two stepsons of Fatima, the Sebbar family's maid. The narrator realistically imagines that her father was nearly killed by one of the sons, who had become a radical Islamist. In developing this narrative, Sebbar situates her father, depicted as an agent of the colonial system, and the would-be assassin in the same prison, thereby creating circumstances that bring them into direct confrontation:

> This episode involving my father in prison served as a reminder that my father, a French-language schoolteacher during the war, could have been a colonial agent and could have been a target for FLN militants. I didn't know if he had been threatened from that quarter; I never found out; perhaps he never was, but he could have been (Dana, 2003, p. 182).

Additionally, faced with the consented silence, it is the right to know, this desire to uncover all these secrets is translated into an endless curiosity:

> The silence of her tongue, her silence within her tongue, after a long amnesia, caused an abundance of words in the other language, obsessive to the point of madness, a patient desire to know, the curiosity of a child to whom a secret is obstinately hidden and who searches for the key to the black cabinet with its surprises, the void or the blood (Sebbar, 2010, p. 109).

Admittedly, talking about collective trauma requires deep work and a return to the gaps in the history of both Algeria and France. Far from the official history, which merely erases through the factor of time and misleading terminology, such as saying "events in Algeria" instead of war, to speak of soldiers who died for France, this opacity of the official discourse actually only submerges another hidden voice, that of the people. Therefore, polyphony is important to fight against oblivion, a crucial path to discover "the self" while knocking on the doors of the forbidden. To say the least, the colonial policy sowed the ideas of equality and peace in the minds of the two Indigenous communities, things that do not exist. Which means, the border is there; it is as clear as beyond Sebbar's house; the perfect model does not exist, a comparison based on a phrase used by the writer "the schoolhouse" model of a small republic founded by her father, and on the other side are the neighbourhoods of the "sons of the poor."

Leïla Sebbar's experience of discrimination because of her name at school with the daughters of the colonists plunges her into an inner conflict. In other words, it is no longer just an Arabic name but a discrimination between the communities living in Algeria at that time; a stigmatisation of the other, of their identity. Consequently, this society depends on political practices

from which no one can escape, and racism that has only silence as a response. In this matter, Sebbar (2010) claims in *L'arabe comme un chant secret*:

> We do not ask questions; it is never the right time to do so. I am protected from the words of the sons of my father's people in the fortress of books and knowledge, and from what the young girls of the colony say to me in my mother's distorted language, I remain silent. The insidious questions, whose treachery I do not immediately grasp (I have already written in another text about the daily words of the inquisition of French Algeria), she repeats, varying the theme. My very name, first name, and surname announce that I am my father's daughter, an Arab, an enemy of France, a killer of good, true Frenchmen, industrious owners of this country saved from wasteland and ignorance, in a salutary break from uncultured language, obscurantist religion, and obsolete customs (p. 67).

Discovering her father's country was not easy. Faced with the silence of speech, she frequented the noise of words, which would become her means of revolt against the unsaid. For example, in *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, a dialogue is established between the father and his daughter through phone conversations during which she vainly tries to get him to talk and the search for the true story from her father's mouth. However, he keeps repeating that they cannot discuss such topics over the phone and invites her to come with her children to talk more about it. However, Sebbar knows very well that her father, true to his principles, will tell her nothing. Hence, she conducted investigations by gathering testimonies from Algerians in exile, starting with the magazine *ELLE*, which focuses on immigrants who left Algeria on the eve of independence.

5. Conclusion: Cultural Rupture and Parental Silence

Although Sebbar maintains her mother's linguistic legacy by writing in French, she challenges its association with colonialism by emphasising the intersections of her dual heritage. The themes in her work sustain a connection to the Arab heritage absent from her paternal upbringing, while simultaneously redefining French identity. However, despite Sebbar's efforts to deconstruct cultural stereotypes, certain aspects of her autobiographical narratives reinforce the binary oppositions she seeks to blur. For example, Sebbar's repeated distinction between French as her mother's language and Arabic as her father's, even though her father was fluent in French, inadvertently sustains the colonial dichotomy she critiques (Bourget, 2006, 132). Moreover, tracing the progression from the unfinished title sentence of her 1978 article to the complete title of her 2003 text, the author appears to reconcile with her linguistic heritage. This reconciliation, however, seems to have been catalysed by her father's death, who represented her sole connection to Arabic as Bourget (2006, p. 133) points out. While the final chapter of *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* concludes with her decision not to learn Arabic, suggesting that her father's passing irrevocably ended the transmission of the language, she nonetheless expresses a desire to 'entendre la voix de l'étranger bien-aimé, la voix de la terre et du corps de mon père que j'écris dans la langue de ma mère' "hear the voice of the beloved stranger, the voice of the land and the body of my father which I write in my mother's language" (Sebbar, 2003, p. 124).

As such, in *L'arabe comme un chant secret*, Sebbar reflects the act of translating and bridging cultural and linguistic divides between her father's Arabic heritage and her mother's French language. By translating her father's identity and story into her mother's language, she symbolically reconstructs a fragmented family history split by colonial and cultural ruptures. This process creates a shared, extended familial connection across both Algerian and French contexts, restoring continuity and offering a reclaimed, unified identity to her father despite the historical and linguistic exile they have experienced:

> I translate Algeria; I translate my father into my mother's language. I create for him, and for myself, a vast family on both sides of the sea. In this way, I believe I am restoring a broken family line. It is this family line that I offer to my father. (Sebbar, 2010, p. 91)

Towards the end of the book, Sebbar expresses that although she would have written in Arabic if her father had passed on his language, she deliberately chooses French to depict him as an "imaginary Arab," emphasising his estrangement and the cultural distance within her family. Writing in French allows her to explore this complex, hybrid identity and the silence surrounding her father's true story, which would be inaccessible or forbidden in Arabic. This reflects the tension between language, memory, and belonging in her postcolonial narrative:

> If my father had transmitted his language to me as a legacy, Arabic, I would have written in Arabic, but I would not have written about my father in his language. I state this with absolute certainty. What I write about my father in French, the foreign language to his sisters and his mother, who forbids them this tale in which they live in the courtyard of fig trees and jasmine in old Tenes, I would not have written in Arabic because my father would not then have been that stranger in my books: the imaginary Arab. (Sebbar, 2010, p. 109)

Consequently, this study has culminated in a nuanced understanding of how Leïla Sebbar's novels *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* and *l'arabe comme un chant secret* articulate the fragmented and hybrid identities forged through linguistic exile and cultural displacement. By situating the analysis within postcolonial memory and cultural studies frameworks, and autobiographical diaries, the study has revealed the intricate ways in which language functions simultaneously as a site of rupture and creative reclamation.

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