



Conflict between two cultures in the novels of *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square* and *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère* by Leila Sebbar

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to explore the inner conflict between tradition and modernity and the survival of beur in the western world in the novel of *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square* and *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère* by Leila Sebbar published in 1981 and 1984 respectively. Leila Sebbar is Franco-Maghrebian who is now settled in France. The author describes in depth the daily life and struggles experienced by Franco-Maghrebian immigrant workers in France and the children of immigrants especially young girls who have conflicts at home and how they are victimized within their beur community. This paper analyzes in depth the issues related to immigration, gender, cultural shock, violence and rupture between two generations. This paper examines how first and second generations are caught between two conflicting cultures and how they suffer in an alien country. This paper also depicts various kinds of problems encountered by Maghrebian immigrant women and how they have been suppressed and oppressed by their traditional values and what are the challenges that the young beur girls in the novel of Sebbar face and how they overcome their problems in the dominant society.

Keywords: - *Beur, Generation gap, Immigration, Women, Violence*

About Author: -

Leila Sebbar is a Franco-Maghrebian women writer currently lives in France, who was born in Algeria in 1941 to an Algerian father and French mother, both School institutor. She grew up in Algeria speaking only French and then moved to France at the age of 17 to pursue her higher studies. Leila Sebbar, whose works deals with the problems of the Beur generation in her novels and narratives, occupies a special place in the context of this beur literature. She writes mainly about the Franco-Maghrebian immigrant population in France. She is the author of several collections of short stories, novels, novels for children and essays. Most of her writings deal with homeland and Maghrebian immigrants in France. In addition, her novels deal extensively about the difficulties faced by the young Beur people who are trapped in between two cultures, North African culture and new dominant European culture. Sebbar, who does not speak Arabe, still lives in Paris and often returns to her homeland through her novels, short stories and autobiographical narratives.



1. Introduction:

Due to immigration to Western country, the first-generation immigrants from North Africa face various issues of adjusting and adapting in the foreign land. In the early 80's a new ethnic group of North African immigrants formed in France who are called "Beur¹" (Beur is name popularly applied to the sons and daughters of North African immigrants.). The beur literature occupies a marginal place in the French literature. In the early 60's, First-generation migrants are those who as adults, themselves made a move from one country to another. First generation women are illiterate. Woman in the Muslim society do not have equal status as men in day to day life. In "Women as other", Simon de Beauvoir depicts exactly how women are seen in the patriarchal society as an object but not as a human being. Second-generation immigrants are the children of immigrants, who were very young at the period of migration or were born in the country during their arrival. They get well into the new culture easily. They live in two cultures in France but they face a great sense of rejection in the society where they are seen as different because of their skin color, language, religion etc.

2. Resume of 2 novels : -

1.2.1. Fatima ou les Algériennes au square :

Fatima ou les Algériennes au square is Leila Sebbar's first novel which deals with issues of immigrants. Sebbar places North African immigrant women at the forefront of her narratives. This novel is about the children of immigrants from Maghreb who live in France during 1980's. Dalila is the protagonist and daughter of Fatima. Fatima belongs to first generation and Dalila belongs to second generation Maghrebians. When Dalila was a child, she often followed her mother to the square where she used to chat with her Algerian friends in a low-class immigrant suburb where their uprooted families were forced to settle in France. They talk about the histories of immigrant families, stories of raped girls, battered children, forced marriages etc. Dalila listens to the story of Ali and Aisha who have a grocery store in suburb of Paris, they have 5 children, they live in one room. When Aisha becomes pregnant, she is forced to stay at home because her husband forbids her to go out, she was too shy, not knowing anybody and did not dare to go out. So, she gets upset on one of her child who urinates often in bed, because she is unable to dry the laundry. She is extremely uncomfortable. It is the isolation and fatigue of pregnancy that result in her beating up her child Mustapha. The child is then placed in foster care by the doctor at the hospital and social worker. They often forget the presence of Dalila, the only child who wasn't going to play with the other children. Today Dalila, remembers tales and memories heard from her mother and her friends talking at the square because she decided to flee from the family where her father beats and screams at her.



Sebbar focuses on immigrant children, especially girls who are beaten, tortured and almost put to death for disobeying their parents. Dalila is beaten by her father for coming home late. Sebbar depicts the life of Algerian women and the family that surrounds them.

1.2.2. Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère : -

Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère is based on the story of a young man who came to visit his mother after a long absence the mother who speaks to him in Arabic and the son replies to her in French. It reminds him of the stories his mother used to tell every night before bed. She transmits stories from the Koran but also tells the folk stories. She has much to say to his son. It is the mother who talks all the time. He merely listens her. He works very little. After living many years living in France, the mother understands French but does not speak or write in French. The mother is very concerned that her son no longer practices the five daily prayers of Islam the way she taught him to do when he was young. The mother is concerned that he will choose to marry a French woman instead of a Maghrebian woman. She describes her son what kind of a girl he should marry. In, *Parle mon fils* the son doesn't talk much, the dialogue with the mother turns into a monologue. Communication is difficult between the two generations. In this novel, her daughter Samira run-away from the home, where the father threatens her with violence and even death for the daughter. Under this harsh rule, the mother and son secretly ally with Samira, the mother wants to understand the generational gap between herself, son and the run-away daughter.

3. Conflict between tradition and modernity of young Maghrebian girls: -

Though we are in modern society, women are still treated as objects and remain suppressed by the male dominant society. They don't have equal status as men in day to day life. In fact, they are being born and brought up in Western society and still discriminated from ages. In *Fatima and Parle mon fils*, Dalila and Samira are trapped between two cultures. On one hand they educate from French school where they follow other values which are completely different, it forces them to adopt new customs. On the other hand, at home parents hustle values on them in the name of tradition.

Algérienne, oui, elle pouvait le dire ou on le disait pour elle, mais musulmane, elle ne pensait pas qu'on pouvait la croire musulmane parce qu'elle était algérienne. Elle ne faisait pas le Ramadan, à cause du collège.²

Algerian, yes, she could say it or it was said for her, but Muslim, she did not think that they could consider her as a Muslim just because she was Algerian. She did not celebrate Ramadan, because of the college [my translation]

Their fathers are very concerned about their daughters and they even face threats, violence and abuse from their fathers. Violence is the only way that men use as a tool in order to control over women. In *Fatima*, Dalila wanted to live like her French friends, she often comes home late at night accompanied with her boyfriends.

Le père risquait de les soupçonner de vol, plutôt que de prostitution, pour lui une fille dans la rue était une putain, un garçon... ça ne lui venait pas à l'esprit.³



The father might suspect them of theft, rather than prostitution, for him a girl on the street was a whore, a boy... it did not come to the mind (my translation)

As a father of traditional Algerian family, he wanted her daughter to be well mannered and discipline. So, he beats and scolds her daughter not to go out or he also threatens that he will send Dalila to Algeria, if she does not obey him.

Il criait lorsqu'il battait, il chantait à ce moment-là, il lui faisait peur, elle pensait plus que cet homme furieux était son père, ses gestes fous, ses hurlements contre elle, ses injures qui faisaient pleurer sa mère. La ceinture sifflait, la boucle l'atteignait au bras, au dos, à la cuisse, elle ne criait pas, ne pleurait pas, elle essayait d'échapper aux coups.⁴

He shouted, when he was beating, he sang at that moment, he frightened her, she no more thought that this furious man was her father, his foolish gestures, his howling, his insults against her that made her mother cry. The belt blew, the loop reached towards her arm, to the back, to the thigh, she did not scream, nor cried, she was trying to escape from the blows. (my translation)

Being in a Muslim orthodox family, women are seen as inferior than men, they are discriminated not only in the society, they face inequality at home where they don't have right for freedom. In *Fatima*, Dalila feels that she needs to escape from her father's violence and she locks herself for eight days and decides to run away from home at any cost in order to emancipate herself.

Elle avait pris la décision de partir suivant les intonations du père, dures, parfois agressive, rarement tendres.

In *Parle mon fils*, Samira run away from home to participate in ' March (of Beurs) for equality and against Racism '. Her father threatens to her mother that if Samira comes back home, he will kill her.

4. Gap between generations of Maghrebian women in France: -

The First generation are the silent generation because of their status of immigrant women from a former French colony. They come to foreign land in the hope of having a better life, but they are trapped within their values and cultures, they are illiterate, they don't speak proper French. They preserve their culture and tend to be orthodox. They don't even go to school. In *Parle mon fils*, mother does not allow to go to school.

Mon fils, j'ai toujours voulu aller à l'école, mais le village était trop loin. Mes frères partaient à pied le matin, je les suivais en pleurant et mon père devait me retrapper à la sortie du village ; parfois je me mettais à courir mais je savais que je serais battue... Même à l'école coranique, je n'avais pas le droit d'y aller... J'ai beaucoup pleuré, pour l'école. Mon père n'a jamais cédé. Je me suis mariée illettrée.⁵

My son, I always wanted to go to school, but the village was too far. My brothers left on foot in the morning, I followed them weeping and my father had to trap me at the exit of the village; Sometimes I started running but I knew I would be beaten... Even at the Koranic school, I had no right to go... I cried a lot to go for school. My father never allowed me to go. I got married illiterate. [my translation]

The second-generation women are quite proactive, they refuse to tolerate injustice passively. They are literate and speaks French fluently. They grow up in different environment and caught between two cultures. Sometimes, they forget to follow the prayers.



Son père lui dit disait souvent « Toi, une musulmane » mais elle ne faisait pas la prière comme son père, elle ne connaissait pas les versets, du Coran que sa mère récitait aux petits le soir, elle n'avait jamais lu le Coran.⁶

Her father often told her 'you, are a Muslim' but she did not pray as her father, she did not know verses, from the Koran that her mother recited to the little ones at night, she had never read the Koran. [my translation]

The mothers from both *Fatima* and *Parle mon fils*, tries to safeguard their daughters. When Dalila is battered by his father, the mother cannot do anything, instead she applies ointments.

Quand son père épuisé avait lâché la ceinture pour s'enfermer dans la salle de bains, sa mère s'était précipitée sur elle, gémissant et puissants. « Ma fille, ma fille », elle ne savait dit autre chose.⁷

When her father had dropped the belt to lock himself in the bathroom, his mother had rushed over her, groaning and powerful. "My daughter, my daughter," she did not know say anything else.

The first-generation women don't go out of their home when their husbands are at home. They wanted their daughter to study, because they were born in Algeria, where their parents don't let them go to school. In *Fatima* and *Parle mon fils*, boys have more freedom to roam around. The boys have the right to go out, not the girls.

Les filles, après une fugue, on les traitait de roulure, putain, salope, les voisins, les flics, les parents eux-mêmes, mais elle n'avait jamais entendu des garçons se faire ainsi insulter. Personne n'en parlait.⁸

The girls, after a runaway, were treated as a prostitute, whore, slut, neighbors, cops, parents themselves, but she had never heard boys get so insulted. Nobody talks about it. [my translation]

Conclusion: -

The author is herself caught between two cultures. She explores the condition of life of franco-maghrebian immigrant workers and women's issues. The children immigrants caught between the French society and the way of life that their maghrebian parents have enforced on them. Thus, they have very tough struggle to find their own identity by taking certain aspects from both these conflicting cultures namely the French and the maghrebain.

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