

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Maïssa Bey and Senja L. Djelouah, *Above All, Don't Look Back*  
(Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2009). pp. 190.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1k8438c9>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 39(2)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Kim, Joshua

**Publication Date**

2016

Peer reviewed

Maïssa Bey and Senja L. Djelouah, *Above All, Don't Look Back* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009). pp. 190.

Joshua Kim

In *Above All, Don't Look Back*, Algerian poet, award-winning novelist, and essayist, Maïssa Bey, constructs a fictional account inspired by the May 21, 2013 earthquake in northern Algeria. Senja L. Djelouah translated the work into English. The novel depicts Amina's, an Algerian woman's, ventures through an earthquake-ravaged Algeria. Bey employs a unique writing style, switching from regular to italicized font in order to distinguish between the protagonist's thoughts and her own. Through this unique form of writing, Bey is able to reveal aspects of not only the culture of that time, but also of Amina's journey to understand her self-identity.

As Amina makes her way around the destroyed city, her various actions and thoughts highlight the significant gender and family values in Algeria. The novel opens up with Amina trying to escape her current situation. She thinks, "Get out. Get away. Run away. As far as possible. As fast as possible."<sup>1</sup> Thus, she boards the bus and ventures to her Aunt's house in Algiers. Subsequently, Bey begins to tackle gender roles in Algiers. In a particular bus passage, Bey describes how "only the men, of course, that goes without saying—inaugurate a remarkably elaborate, eclectic debate."<sup>2</sup> This sentiment underscored gender expectations. Women were expected to remain quiet and allow the men to control discussions.

Bey also unpacks the family dynamic. Amina describes the Algerian family unit as "nothing but a closely woven community, which must be made to appear unified in everyone's eyes, for better and for worse," with a desire "to achieve a common objective: the preservation of material wealth and the honor attached to the family name."<sup>3</sup> In addition, Amina recounts an episode where her brother carried "the fear of scandal knotted in his stomach, more painful than a bout of renal colic. *Kechfa*."<sup>4</sup> Bey's uses *Kechfa* as a motif to reveal the social taboos associated with the sickness—a scandal that shames the whole family—and thus heavily frowned upon in Algerian culture.<sup>5</sup> The importance of an honorable family is noted throughout the text. Amina's journey

is not simply based off what she thinks, but, in fact, is heavily influenced by the existing culture.

Amina constantly questions her self-identity throughout her journey. Moreover, Bey includes the italicized sections throughout the novel to depict the emotions and thoughts inside Amina's head. The protagonist joins a new community and re-focuses her attention on her aunt's family in Algiers after escaping the earthquake. During this process, she renames herself, Wahida. This is a metaphorical attempt to disown her past.<sup>6</sup> She states, "Since then, they call me Wahida . . . I feel new. I am new. Without a story. Without a past. Without a shadow. Without memory."<sup>7</sup> Through Wahida and Amina, Bey explores the challenges and complexities of self-identity.

However, when Wahida's biological mother finds her, Amina has difficulty explaining that she is now Wahida, and "not Amina, and that [she has] no idea why [her mother] is talking to [her] about some other girl named Amina."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the broken relationship between mother and daughter is reconciled as Wahida's mother pours out her heart and finally explains how both reached that point.<sup>9</sup> Now, Amina explains the scene as such: "We looked at each other other. Intensely. As though we had just now discovered one another. Then she took me in her arms. We were two. Mother and daughter. We were reunited for the first time in over twenty years. Really reunited."<sup>10</sup> Through the reflexivity of those closest to the protagonist, Bey depicts how people can better understand themselves. Ultimately, Amina attains self-identity through her family, specifically her mother, releasing her from the self-identity problems that were clouding her thoughts.

The protagonist's journey explores two main themes: gender relations within Algerian culture and questions of self-identity, especially during and through hardship. Bey wonderfully crafts a universal narrative that addresses social, psychological, and internal struggles that arise not only for a victim of an earthquake, but also for any individual. Ultimately, for those interested in gaining insight into Algerian culture around 2003, specifically one affected by the earthquake in northern Algeria, or the struggles behind identifying oneself, this novel is an enlightening and informative read.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maïssa Bey and Senja L. Djelouah, *Above All, Don't Look Back* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.