Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*: The Dismembering of Algeria's "Étoile de Sang"

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As an active participant in the Algerian independence demonstrations of 8 May 1945, sixteen-year old Kateb Yacine found himself in direct confrontation with French colonialism's tactical uses of repression and violence. Arrested and tortured by police and subsequently imprisoned during a period of several months, Kateb witnessed first-hand the oppression of the Algerian nation under the French system of colonialism. With these fresh memories of the Sétif massacre, during which an estimated 6,000–13,000 Algerians were killed,[1] Kateb embarked on the eight-year long process of writing *Nedjma* (1956)—a novel, which, as the preface emphatically states, "bears witness to a people"[2] and despite being "conceived and written in French, [. . .] remains a profoundly Arab work."[3]

This essay will expound upon the central role of literary and figurative violence and "dismemberment" in Kateb's novel.[4] It will provide a nuanced reading of the binary function of the novel's central female protagonist, Nedjma—a recurring object of destabilization throughout the narrative often interpreted as both a relic of French colonial occupation and a symbol for Algerian independence and recognition. The analysis will conclude with a brief inquiry into the correlation between Nedjma and Gustave Flaubert's female protagonist in the 19th century Decadent novel, *Salammbô* (1862), including how this relates to the theme of dismemberment in *Nedjma*.

To clarify, when I use the term *dismemberment*, I am referring to the textual fragmentation of person, time, and place that eliminates the borders between history and memory by dislocating the sequences of events, witnesses, and outcomes. This definition implies that Western literature's traditional, linear border separating history and memory ceases to exist with the constant entry and re-entry of temporally unordered sequences of memory-pictures through the various narratives in *Nedjma*. Thus, historical record is continually pierced within the fragmented series of collective singularities making up the body of the novel. Narration

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begins in 1947; however, the principal events take place from 1929 through 1954 and often move forward and backward in time, place, and voice.

In this context, the violent undertones of Kateb's novel via the symbolic dismemberment of the conventional European literary text (characterized by its realistic, descriptive, and linear composition) must first be looked at in relation to the political situation of Algeria at the time of *Nedjma*'s publication. In "Kateb Yacine and the Ruins of the Present," Seth Graebner attributes the "relation of cause and effect between political struggle and literary style" within Algerian literature post-1945 to the "violent intervention of history."[5] As Graebner points out, 1956—the year of *Nedjma*'s publication—marked a demographic shift in which Muslims outnumbered Europeans in some cities like Algiers and Bône (where the novel is set) and also represented a period of significant urban expansion in Algeria.[6] The structure of *Nedjma* is what Graebner calls an "exploded text," which he defines as "chronological disturbance and structural complications of twentieth-century experimental writing."[7] It is, thus, through the novel's disjointed, fragmented, and often ambiguous testimonials of exploding events and permeating violence that Kateb aspires to symbolically liberate Algeria from the imprisonment of Western domination and influence through this refusal to conform to European literary conventions.

The preoccupation with the dismemberment of the European hegemony must also be examined within the context of the overarching brutality that characterizes several key encounters involving the novel's four main protagonists—Rachid, Mustapha, and half-brothers Lakhdar and Mourad, young day laborers struggling under the imposing French rule. For instance, an intense collective desire to defile and conquer women manifests during the scene when the maid of Monsieur Ricard and Suzy is severely beaten by a crowd of onlookers, which Kateb likens to an orgy of violence:[8] "They seized her [the maid] at once and dragged her into the nuptial chamber. [. . .] He [M. Ricard] grabbed the crop. The first stroke landed across the maid's eyes. [. . .] The second stroke hit her across the eyes again."[9]

The explosion of violence in the above passage is abruptly appropriated by Mourad, who reclaims authority/power by unleashing his own form of violence that results in the death of

Monsieur Ricard and the temporary restoration of order through the figurative expulsion of the European occupier. Interestingly, though Mourad earlier expresses sexual desire for Suzy, Rachid emphatically attributes the murder of Monsieur Ricard to something other than a crime of passion. According to Rachid, the murder is motivated not by Mourad's love for Suzy, but rather by his repressed desires for the elusive figure of Nedjma, whom Mustapha aptly calls "our ruin, the evil star of our clan,"[10] recognizing the debilitating rivalry stemming from the shared desire to capture this femme fatale bound to at least three of them by familial blood, yet still unable to be tamed.

The product of a French woman's kidnapping and rape by four Arab men (including Rachid's father), Nedjma's existence is inherently rooted in both violence and otherness.[11] As Miriam Cooke argues, Nedjma should not be viewed as a transparent symbol for Algeria nor as the ideal woman, as many have read her, but instead, Nedjma is better interpreted as the new woman produced by the Revolution—seductively dangerous, sterile, and fatal[12]—and described by the male protagonists as uncomfortably modern. She is a "star of blood sprung from the murder [of Rachid's father] to obstruct vengeance"[13]—no longer a virgin, but a child of rape, daughter of the enemy, and "the ogress of obscure blood."[14] Her origins are ambiguous and she is inescapably tied to both Algeria and France, a hybrid of each fundamentally opposing domain. As a result of her origins, Nedjma is repeatedly equated with the unraveling and destruction of the collective Algerian male body and the nation as a whole.

The absence of the father figure furthers this imbalance and subversion of masculinity. The father remains faceless and thus denied familial claim, whereas the French mother of Nedjma is permitted ownership; Nedjma is described in the novel as the Andalusian[15] and "the daughter of the Frenchwoman who had set the four suitors against each other"[16] and "had caused the tribe's downfall by seducing [them]."[17] This violence linked to Nedjma's conception cuts into the memories of the male characters and becomes a part of their lives through the succession of events to which each one testifies. As Louis Tremaine explains:

> We see that violence [in *Nedjma*] all but has a force and a life of its own in the book, becoming an inescapable feature of the

> lives of the characters [. . .]. Violence often appears suddenly, occasioning no surprise, requiring no description, and seemingly to act independently [. . .]. The inevitability of violence attaches not only to individuals, but to groups, cities, and whole nations [. . .]. Violence, then, appears to be inescapable, and its inevitable consequence is imprisonment of one form or another.[18]

In this sense, violence and, to a lesser extent, misogyny permeate Kateb's novel and function as repressive tools of the colonizer, which the colonized subjects attempt to capture and subvert in their quest for a restored Algerian collective identity. This struggle for national independence and recognition can be indirectly seen in each narrator's effort to cage and confine the young Nedjma. She remains the focal point of each man's grappling with desire, jealousy, violence, and resistance, but yet a character repeatedly, though not always, denied both written and spoken word. Nedjma is the only principal character to never narrate the events that unfold, and as a result, she is deprived of a proper voice, despite her central role. She participates in the novel to a relatively minimal extent, with direct quotations of her speech and thoughts totaling less than two pages, according to Tremaine's analysis.[19] By figuratively substituting Nedjma for the male "prisoner," by kidnapping her and taking her to the caves against her will, it is as though the Algerian men have assumed the French colonial role of "oppressor" and Nedjma has moved into the position of the oppressed: the representative of the wounded, captive nation of Algeria—physically ruled by another, yet still retaining a certain degree of autonomy.

The past, present, and future of the nation of Algeria—of the "ruined" cities of Bône and Constantine—are what the men often indirectly seek to control through the obsessive need for discovery and domination of Nedjma's territorial body. This ethereal feminine figure, trapped between the two cities, also acts as a symbol for the Algerian nation caught between the ruins of the past and the desire to move forward into a uniquely Algerian future. With the absence of temporality and what Graebner terms "figures of ruins"[20]—like Kateb's reference to Salammbô and Flaubert's classicized Carthage—which reoccur throughout the epic cycle of the narrative, the men struggle to restore a certain sense of order of time, place, and history through their shared pursuit of Nedjma.

While Nedjma can, undoubtedly, be read as a symbol of the new modernizing Algeria in its quest for autonomy, she also represents a relic of Algeria's fresh memories of a nation controlled by the French. Hence, she is in a perpetual state of transition or uncertainty. Nedjma, embodying both the alienated woman and the search for the nation,[21] can be looked upon as the complex construct that Winifred Woodhull describes as "Algeria's 'betweenness' because of her multifaceted, contradictory, and shifting identity encompassing past and future, tribal and national society: she is of culturally mixed and uncertain parentage and has symbolic ties to France."[22]

With the themes of dismemberment and doubling in mind, let us now turn to Kateb's repeated textual insertion of the French nineteenth century literary figure, Salammbô—who also acts as a catalyst for violence premised on desire. One passage that strikes me as particularly interesting is Rachid's comparison of Nedjma to Flaubert's Salammbô—the equally ethereal, yet paradoxically "deflowered" mythic female figure in Flaubert's decadent, classicized novel (*Salammbô*, 1862) set in ancient Carthage. Nedjma personifies the decadent figure of ruin and decay of ancient Carthage (similar to Algeria's Constantine) emphasized further by this comparison to Salammbô; however, she is also the child of the new heterogeneous nation that is forming out of these ruins of the past.

Graebner argues that this connection between the ruined cities to a "mother-city," the connection between Salammbô and Nedjma, may be Kateb's way of inferring that "while a new nation might find it natural or necessary to build on these symbols, there are dangers inherent in basing a new national identity on such slippery signifiers."[23] Nedjma holds the hope of a new nation, of a shift away from the decadence and destruction of the past toward the "promise of cultural renewal and national triumph;"[24] however, she equally embodies the potential risk of failure. In her ability to escape capture, she is the "inaccessible mistress"[25] later in the novel described as the woman "whom no husband could win over."[26] In this sense, the traditional role of the martyr figure is reversed and it is each of the four men, not Nedjma, who become the sacrificial markers for the potential reconstitution of the nation of Algeria. As Rachid says when referencing Flaubert's equally unattainable female, Salammbô:

> I was to relive the obscure martyrology for some Salammbô of my obscure lineage; I too had to accept the same challenge, lost so many times, in order to assume the end of the disaster, to lose my Salammbô and to abandon hope in my turn [. . .]. I didn't know that she [Nedjma] was my evil star, the Salammbô who would give a meaning to the sacrifice [. . .]. She was merely the sign of my ruin, a vain hope of escape. I could neither resign myself to the light of the day, nor recover my star, for it had lost its virginal luster [. . .]. A deflowered Salammbô who had already lived her tragedy [. . .]. I know no one who has approached her without losing her.[27]

Nedjma/Salammbô come to represent the ruins of the past as well as the potential for the rebirth of the nation through the reconfiguration of history. This is propagated vis-à-vis the principal male characters' struggle to capture and possess the core of Nedjma/Salammbô, often resulting in internal violence and fragmentation. Thus, the conflict between past and future—between the past Algeria of the Romans, Turks, Arabs and French and the nation struggling for independence and an identity uniquely Algerian—escalates into rivalry and divisiveness as the men symbolically attempt to, perhaps, "re-write" their multi-faceted past.

Kateb's fragmented narratives often take on a dream-like, mythic quality as the multi-narrated sequences of events jump back and forth from the ancient traditions of the young men's ancestors to the contemporary political turmoil and fight for independence engulfing the nation of Algeria. A similar phenomenon occurs throughout Flaubert's *Salammbô*, a novel that forces the decomposition and defragmentation of the familiar and the unfamiliar as well as reality and dream—perhaps, a symbol of the surfacing of the unconscious and a persisting anxiety over historical change, cultural collapse, and decaying of society. Thus, man's connection to the world breaks down and collapses upon him, just as the unity of the book dissolves with each sentence becoming an individual unit of composition.

Traditionally, this literary device of returning to the past is often associated with a desire to restore order and revert back to an idyllic form of societal equilibrium and structure in the face of a perceived threat or obstacle. To paraphrase David Weir, anxiety over cultural collapse is frequently accompanied by longing

for cultural renewal and the tendency and impulse to turn to the past in order to retrieve some sort of purifying origin.[28] However, *Salammbô* and *Nedjma* both resist this orientation. There is no return to a "pure" society of the past; instead, the reader is confronted with a distorted image of how the ruins of the past have evolved.

Decay, decline, dismemberment, and difference—what does this mean for the doubling of the image and object in relation to obtuse conceptions of culture and truth? For Flaubert, it is history that is placed at the micro-level as a form of dismemberment and mutilation. The disfigured corpses of Barbarians and Carthaginians are interchangeable, emphasizing the absence of historical direction when everything has become history. As Charles Bernheimer writes, "Flaubert's textual documents are like the body parts strewn across the battlefields in his novel: they are the cultural remains that constitute history's resistance to meaning."[29] In this manner, history rests upon one single inescapable plane of verisimilitude; perhaps the amorphous structure of the body is the object, which can facilitate this escape from the homogeneity of cultural models of gender and historical constructs of difference. Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains this archetype as a "heroic, virile, and purposeful manhood understood as active and dominating."[30] Through the articulation of historical trauma projected onto the ancient civilization of the Carthaginians, we can see an intensely stylized process of decomposition of the organic whole. A similar desire for a process of regeneration and renewal of the eroding nation can also be seen in the alienated space of the disjointed narrative structure found within Kateb's *Nedjma*.

Charles Bonn and Richard Bjornson echo this sentiment when they write, "The Katebian text is above all a colossal dismantling of the model inherited from the nineteenth-century French model."[31] They go on to argue that Kateb takes the traditional colonial structure of power that the nineteenth century French novel further embodies and reverses the role of the "native" and "settler" and, thus, subject/object relationship. The European settler is now the "exotic" object imprisoned in a novelistic discourse that is not his own.[32] Bonn and Bjornson characterize *Nedjma* as:

> [. . .] a founding text that defined itself in opposition to the predominantly realistic and descriptive writings which borrowed

> novelistic techniques from the French school to proclaim the dignity and the tragedy of a dominated society [. . .]. Kateb turns on its head the relationship of power [. . .] between the *subject* in the realistic novel [. . .] and the *object* that is interpreted and endowed with meaning in spite of itself by the system of values implicit in the description.[33]

Rewriting the complex history of Algeria and the bodies it produces presents itself as a difficult task, especially for a heterogeneous nation that must be articulated via this foreign linguistic mode of representation. As this analysis has demonstrated, Kateb attempts to convey the singularity of the culture and history of Algeria by taking the European conceptual framework for the novel and consequently dismembering and reconfiguring it. This article has examined the ways in which Kateb skillfully dismembers the chronological sequence of historical events taking place within the narrative in order to reconstitute and reclaim ownership of Algerian history and identity. I have also attempted to elucidate the function of the female protagonist Nedjma through her double role as a relic of French colonial occupation, and as a symbol for the rebirth of an independent nation of Algeria and how Nedjma's binary position relates to the cycle of textual and historical dismemberment conveyed through Kateb's prose. Lastly, with the comparative analysis of *Nedjma* and *Salammbô* in the second part of this essay, it has been my goal to illustrate the correlation between these two mythical female figures and their role as indirect catalysts for violence premised on desire. I have aimed to show how Nedjma functions as both the French decadent figure of ruin, decay and alienation of the past as well as a symbol for the potential renewal and reaffirmation of Algerian identity and ownership of culture and history as the new nation struggles to break free of the literary and political oppression stemming from French colonial rule.

Notes

[1] The large-scale Sétif massacre by the French army and *pieds-noirs* resulted in the deaths of thousands of Algerians. At the time, the French figure given was 1,020 (Tubert Report), whereas Radio Cairo claimed it was 45,000 (Alistaire Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-62,* 1978, 27). According to Horne (1978), the figure eventually settled upon by moderate historians was 6,000 Algerian casualties, but it still remains only a rough estimate (27).

[2] Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma*, trans. Richard Howard (Virginia: UP Virginia, 1991): viii.

[3] Ibid., viii.

[4] *Nedjma* appeared in Paris in 1956—the year when the Moroccans and the Tunisians gained their independence from the French, and when the British and French attacked Egypt over control of the Suez Canal, and two years after the outbreak of the Algerian war. According to Miriam Cooke in *Women and the War Story* (1996), Kateb claimed that it was the war that made French publishers realize that Algerian literature might be written by Algerians and was not restricted to what was written by French *colons*.

[5] Seth Graebner, "Kateb Yacine and the Ruins of the Present." *SubStance* 36, no. 1 (2007): 139, doi: 10.2307/4152858.

[6] Ibid., 147.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Kateb, *Nedjma*, 36.

[9] Ibid., 36-37.

[10] Ibid., 186-188.

[11] Ibid., 176-177.

[12] Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 131.

[13] Kateb, *Nedjma*, 239-240.

[14] Ibid., 240.

[15] Ibid., 238.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Louis Tremaine "The Absence of Itinerary in Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*." *Research in African Literatures* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 29-30.

[19] Ibid., 16.

[20] Graebner, "Kateb Yacine and the Ruins of the Present," 155.

[21] See the summary of Abdelkebir Khatibi's notes in Winifred Woodhull's *Transfiguration of the Maghreb* (1993): 26.

[22] Winifred Woodhull, *Transfiguration of the Maghreb* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 27.

[23] Graebner, "Kateb Yacine and the Ruins of the Present," 126.

[24] Woodhull, *Transfiguration of the Maghreb*, 29.

[25] Kateb, *Nedjma*, 179.

[26] Ibid., 240.
[27] Ibid., 234-236.
[28] David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 28.
[29] Charles Bernheimer, "Unknowing Decadence" in *Perennial Decay*, eds. Liz Constable, Denis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 54-55.
[30] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 26.
[31] Charles Bonn and Richard Bjornson, "Kateb Yacine." *Research in African Literatures* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 65.
[32] Ibid., 65.
[33] Ibid.

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