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TOWARD A MINOR THEATRE: MYRIAM BEN'S ALGERIAN ANTIGONE

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Recommended citation || KELLEY, Caroline E. (2011): "Toward a Minor Theatre: Myriam Ben's Algerian Antigone" [online article], *452°F. Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature*, 5, 74-98, [Consulted on: dd/mm/aa],

< <http://www.452f.com/index.php/en/caroline-kelley.html> >

Illustration || Nadia Sanmartín

Article || Upon request | Published on: 07/2011

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Abstract || In this paper, I read Myriam Ben's *Leïla, poème scénique en deux actes et un prologue* as a reinterpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. I contend that this blend of Algerian theatre, history and Greek tragedy yields a variety of 'minor theatre' that sets out to undermine established dramaturgical structures and prevailing historical narratives about the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962). Working in the outline of a canonical work, the playwright decentres the classic tragedy by way of a thought-provoking technical adaptation while, at the same time, refuting the fictions shrouding the events of the liberation struggle, the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) and, especially, the military overthrow of President Ahmed Ben Bella by his Defence Minister Houari Boumediene in 1965. Despite the specificity of its context, however, the allegorical nature of the play allows for a sense of universality. While its milieu is undoubtedly post-revolution Algeria, the story it communicates might take place in any country past or present –dictatorships not being limited to North Africa.

Keywords || Minor Literature | Deterritorialization | Gilles Deleuze | Algerian Literature in French | Comparative Literature | Antigone.

0. Introduction

The universal quality of the play *Leïla, poème scénique en deux actes et un prologue* opens it up to audiences outside of France and Algeria and invites a plethora of interpretations. Nevertheless, the playwright avoids a male-identified universal by structuring her work around a heroine, Leïla. The centrality of the female character contributes to the political intent of the playwright. In effect, Myriam Ben's reinterpretation of the *Antigone* is conceived and performed as a political act that encourages us to re-assess rigid notions of identity, citizenship, family, and society, for example, from the standpoint of a "minor character": an Algerian *moudjahida*. My reading intends to highlight the continuum between political action and the practice of writing. In order to address these contentions, I shall discuss Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of "minor literature" and "minor theatre" which forms the theoretical fibre of this paper. This discussion is followed by an overview of the French and Algerian historical and theatrical context in which Ben wrote her play. Following from this, the paper includes a close reading of *Leïla, poème scénique en deux actes et un prologue* alongside the praxis of minor theatre.

1. The Minor

In *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (1975), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define a minor literature as a literature that is not of a "minor language" but, rather, that which a minority creates in a "major language" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1975: 29). More importantly, in minor literature the language is shaped by a strong sense of deterritorialization (Ibid.). A second characteristic of minor literature is its political nature: "Tout y est politique," they explain (1975: 30). The individual is fixed to the social; the subject is always associated with the political:

Son espace exigu fait que chaque affaire individuelle est immédiatement branchée sur la politique. L'affaire individuelle devient donc d'autant plus nécessaire, indispensable, grossie au microscope, qu'une tout autre histoire s'agite en elle (1975: 30).

The third element of a minor literature is its collective enunciative value; the author is immediately connected to a communal action and what he or she says or does is necessarily political. The political contaminates all enunciation (1975: 31). And since the collective or national conscience is "souvent inactive dans la vie extérieure, et toujours en voie de désagrégation," it is literature that finds itself positively charged with this role and the function of collective, even revolutionary, enunciation (Ibid.). Minor literature, significantly, contains the possibility to express another potential community, to

forge the means of another conscience and another sensibility (1975: 32). Much like the praxis of *pensée-autre* devised by Abdelkébir Khatibi (1983), a minor literature establishes “les conditions révolutionnaires de toute littérature au sein de celle qu’on appelle grande (ou établie)” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975: 33). It is marked by language in the process of becoming (*devenir-mineur*); a language of varying intensities and vibrations. In this way, a minor literature also possesses elements of polyphony and discordance. In *Pour une littérature mineure*, Deleuze and Guattari are interested in the way Kafka deterritorializes Prague German through his palimpsestic writing to create the possibility “de faire de sa propre langue” (1975: 48). While the contention that minor literature is intrinsically political is relatively straightforward, the concept of “deterritorialization” requires further explanation for the purpose of my arguments in this paper¹.

Deleuze and Guattari explain the concept of deterritorialization in *Mille plateaux* (1980). In this work, they argue that language is a mechanism for action, for making things happen with words. For example, when a judge reads a guilty verdict the words he or she pronounces transform the defendant into a guilty person. In this sense, language is not neutral but rather encodes and enforces a certain social order. Further to this, every language has standards which determine the acceptable and unacceptable enunciation of words—an unacceptable enunciation is a deviation from the “norm” and is not generally encouraged. For example, dialects or the use of ungrammatical sentences and slang are considered departures from standard language. In *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari see the enforcement of such language standards as the imposition of a hierarchy of power. Nevertheless, language manages to stay in constant flux as standards are contested and revised. This is the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. When language norms are subverted, the result is a deterritorialization of language. Language is stripped of its usual codes and removed from the linguistic structure it inhabits. On the other hand, when language norms are enforced, or deterritorialized language reigned in, the result is the territorialization or reterritorialization of language; this process is infinite as language standards are destabilized, negotiated and amended.

While Deleuze and Guattari originally confined their study of the minor to prose writing, Deleuze eventually expanded the notion to encompass theatre and cinema. In the essay “Un manifeste de moins,” he offers the play *Richard 3* by contemporary Italian playwright Carmelo Bene as an exemplar of the minor in theatre. This playwright’s work is a compelling instance of the minor since he radically reconfigures Shakespeare’s plays to change their meaning. Specifically, Bene subtracts key characters and embellishes others

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1 | I am indebted to Ronald Bogue (2003; 2005) and J. Macgregor Wise (2005) for their insight on the concept of the “minor” for my analysis.

of lesser consequence or adds characters not at all present in the original text (i.e., he removes Romeo from his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* and all the male characters save Richard in *Richard 3*). In each of these cases, the deletion of some characters provides the opportunity for the construction of others; it is in this twofold process that Deleuze locates the quintessence of Bene's theatrical critique: "Ce théâtre critique est un théâtre constituant, la Critique est une constitution" (Bene, 1979: 88). This strategic process allows for the possibility of becoming; for a new and different dramaturgy. The notion of a minor theatre thus builds on the idea of minor literature as it not only destabilizes encoded language but conventions of speech and movement too.

It would be remiss, however, to provide an explanation of the minor in literature and theatre without offering examples of the criticism these theories have received. The main points of contention concern the romanticism of the formula and its lack of consideration for real political situations. Samia Mehrez notes:

The formula proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Pour une littérature mineure* stops short at the glories of deterritorialization. It leaves us with a subversive potential in 'minor' literature that does not seek to empower itself beyond the revolutionary conditions which it produces within the heart of the dominant, as if revolutions do not seek legitimacy and territory (1993: 28)².

Likewise, Winifred Woodhull warns of Deleuze's "alternative politics, which mobilizes 'wild' modes of social and cultural analysis in order to elude the politics of representation" (1993: 198). Woodhull is troubled by the poststructuralist shift in 1968 which signalled a view of literature as merely capable of destabilizing meaning. As a result, she alleges an emergent Algerian feminist movement was obscured by poststructural theorists who claimed that language *alone* possesses the power to subvert dominant discourses (Woodhull, 1993: 198).

Despite these concerns, however, feminist and postcolonial scholars like Elizabeth Grosz and Françoise Lionnet have re-examined the work of Deleuze and Guattari, seeking theoretical support that might prove useful in challenging "dominant philosophical paradigms, methods, and assumptions" (in Olkowski, 1999: 54). Grosz concludes that their dynamic (re)conceptualization of systems of thought has the effect of destabilizing power and authority by "sweep[ing] away metaphysical frameworks" that prevent women and other minorities "from devising their own knowledge and accounts of themselves" (1999: 55). Furthermore, Grosz sees an acknowledgment of identity fluidity and multiplicity in Deleuze and Guattari's work; an integral aspect of which is nomadism and deterritorialization whereby difference is configured outside of oppositional constructions, collapsing hierarchies and binary structures. Likewise, Lionnet shapes a useful approach to

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2 | Similar critiques of Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature have been made by Renato Rosaldo (1987) and Caren Kaplan (1987) in a special issue of *Cultural Critique*.

postcolonial women's writing, which she calls *métissage*, derived in large part from Deleuze and Guattari's work on minor literature and deterritorialization³. Her approach allows the reader to see the space created by postcolonial women's writing, marked by the process of *devenir-mineur*, whereby "becoming" is a form of plurality.

With these explanations and criticisms in mind, I situate the play *Leïla, un poème scénique en deux actes et un prologue* uneasily alongside a discussion of minor theatre in order to explore critically the ways political and literary intentions merge and interact⁴. In agreement with Mehrez, I believe it is important to reveal the reterritorialized space that this writing manufactures for the recognition of a militant, feminine experience of the Algerian Revolution mapped through the complex process of life-writing and performance.

2. Historical Context

Myriam Ben wrote *Leïla, poème scénique en deux actes et un prologue* and two other plays *Karim ou jusqu'à la fin de notre vie* and *Prométhée* in 1967. So one might say that her artistic foundation is the theatre⁵. All three plays focus on the events of the Algerian Revolution and two draw heavily on Greek tragedy for inspiration. The choice of Greek tragedy is no coincidence. Before Ben was a student of Russian language and history, she studied the classical languages in Algeria after being denied an education in literary Arabic. So it is likely that she was familiar with canonical Greek tragedies and was aware of their popularity among her European contemporaries in their dramaturgical explorations of the fragility of democracy⁶. However, if she did not read the *Antigone* in its original Greek, she would have read it in translation since the classics figured prominently in the formation of academics in France during this era (Leonard, 2005).

L'Harmattan's online catalogue summarizes *Leïla* as a story of "les faits qui ont conduit au coup d'Etat de 1965 et à l'arrestation de Ben Bella" (*L'Harmattan France*, 2011). The play is also listed on the Radio France website as recommended reading on President Ben Bella following an article advertising a documentary series on his life. Before its publication in 1998, *Leïla* was read at the *Petit T.N.P.* in June 1968 by exiled Algerian actors directed by Mohamed Boudia while he was administrator of the *Théâtre de l'Ouest Parisien* (TOP). The date of the publication of the play, three full decades after its composition, is noteworthy since interest in Algerian women's writing among French publishing houses has increased with the culmination of the Algerian civil crisis in the 1990s (Chaulet-Achour, 2003). In addition, the French actress Jocelyne Carmichael brought special attention to Ben's dramaturgy through the adaptation and

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3 | Lionnet's theoretical approach also relies heavily on *créolité*, a literary praxis developed by Martinican writer, Edouard Glissant, which was accompanied by the eponymous social movement (adherents were called *les créolistes*). See Edouard Glissant (1981) and Catherine Le Pelletier (1998).

4 | By reading Myriam Ben's play alongside (or intertwined with) a discussion of minor literature, I hope to avoid doing violence to the text. That is, I avoid placing the text in a theoretical framework in which it does not altogether fit. In this way, I intend to engage with the "minor" approach that Deleuze and Guattari offer instead of simply applying the theory wholesale.

5 | See Christiane Chaulet Achour and Zineb Ali-Benali (1991 : 273). In fact, she is one of the first women playwrights in Algeria. Assia Djebar published her play *L'Aube rouge* in 1969.

6 | Well-known European adaptations of the *Antigone* include Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1946), Bertolt Brecht, *Antigonemodell* 1948 (Berlin: Gebr. Weiss, 1948).

performance of her short story *Les Enfants du mendiant*, which appears in the same edition as *Leïla*⁷. While this climate of reception undoubtedly played a role in the publication of her plays, it is essential to review the specific historical, cultural and political context in which Ben composed *Leïla* as this context informs the reading.

In an exposé on the influence of the classics on French thought following the Second World War, Miriam Leonard (2005) argues that allusions to the ancient Greeks were relatively common in intellectual and politically-engaged circles as “post-war France’s encounter with the Greeks gave rise to a new interrogation of the political” (Leonard, 2005: 3). Reviewing texts by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, and Claude Lévi-Strauss ranging from 1959 to 1974, she cites the development of French philosophy during this period:

The heroic period of Existentialism corresponded to a moment in which social structures, in France at least, were in effective dissolution. As the German occupation and Vichy government collapsed together they left a void in which for a time there were no rules, so that existing subjects could have the experience of making their own. [...] This historical moment marked the limit of the swing toward existence at the expense of structure (Caws, 1992: 4-5, in Leonard, 2005).

The Second World War, the Algerian Revolution and May 1968 as well as the myriad failures of Communism produced a distinct sea change in French intellectualism.

However, one must return to the period shortly following the Second World War to understand the renewed interest in antiquity as a source of inspiration:

It is problems of political involvement versus political abstinence, individual versus collective responsibility, thrown up in the wake of the German occupation, which lie at the centre of the post-war engagement with classical Athens and its own explorations of democracy and tyranny (Leonard, 2005: 5-6).

Not surprisingly, integral to this fascination with the Greeks was an ongoing debate over the role of history among French theorists:

Sophocles, it would seem, brings the importance of historical distance back into the equation. It is precisely through this negotiation of the historical specificity of antiquity that some of the most interesting political debates in the intellectual history of post-war France have arisen (Leonard, 2005: 7).

Nevertheless, an interrogation of historical discourse and a concomitant challenge to the modern subject –elements that are integral to these works– were viewed by many as a dangerous wager in the context of post-war Europe (2005: 13).

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7 | *Les Enfants du mendiant* was adapted into a play by Carmichael and performed in Montpellier, France in 1995. It was also later performed at the Festival of Avignon. Carmichael has also adapted Maïssa Bey's *Cette fille-là*. See Jocelyne Carmichael (2003).

Individuals involved in debates over the contemporary relevance of Greek tragedy, and the responsibility of the individual to confront the state –beyond the intellectual luminaries listed above– include Greek scholars like Pierre Vidal-Naquet, an outspoken proponent of human rights and of anti-torture legislation⁸. Famous for his criticism of the French government during the Algerian war, Vidal-Naquet joined forces with other leftists and Communists who supported Algerian autonomy including Henri Alleg, Francis Jeanson, and FLN attorneys such as Jacques Vergès to reveal and condemn the French military's use of torture on Algerians (as well as French citizens). He was also active in the 1960s in the run-up to the student protests in France in May 1968, a time when the Greek classics were revisited to reflect on social upheaval. While Ben was not directly involved in heated intellectual debates on the Greeks and the tenuousness of democracy, she was aware of them being a scholar in France and connected with several people at the centre of these discussions in Paris.

The story of thespian Mohamed Boudia and his FLN troupe also deserves attention, seeing as Ben's play relies heavily on this endeavour for its political context. Boudia arrived on the theatrical scene in France in the mid-1950s when the FLN-France made its call to Algerian artists and actors to join the struggle for independence (Cheniki, 2002: 34). He was at the heart of this effort until 1959 when the French were made aware of the didactic pursuits of the FLN-France and Boudia was arrested. Despite his incarceration at Fresnès, he continued to write and perform plays in prison—a significant number of which were adaptations of canonic French plays. While Boudia served his prison sentence, the *troupe artistique du FLN* persisted with Mustapha Kateb at its helm. The primary goal of the troupe was to inform people about the liberation struggle. During the years 1958 through 1962, there were three major productions –each one attempting to illustrate the urgent, collective struggle of the people through its structure and animation (Cheniki, 2002: 35). The FLN's plays were put on in manufacturing cities in France – urban centres with large immigrant populations –as well as in detainment camps, hospitals, and in the *maquis* on the Algerian frontier.

After the liberation of the country, the members of the revolutionary troupe artistique became the heart and soul of the national theatre enterprise *Le Théâtre national algérien* (TNA), housed in the *Opéra d'Alger*. The two men behind the new state-sponsored theatre were FLN veterans Mohammed Boudia and Mustapha Kateb. Not surprisingly, they believed in the ideal of a popular theatre of the people and for the people. Under their direction, the TNA flourished during the early years of independence with the production of more than a dozen original Algerian plays and approximately eight foreign plays.

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8 | Vidal-Naquet's texts on the Second World War, the Algerian Revolution, and Greek tragedy include, in order of publication: Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *L'affaire Audin* (1958), *Torture: cancer of democracy, France and Algeria, 1954-62* (1963), Jacques Vergès, Michel Zavrian, Maurice Courrégé and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les disparus : le cahier vert* (1969), Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Comité Maurice Audin., *La raison d'état : textes publiés par le Comité Maurice Audin* (Minuit, 1962), 'Du bon usage de la trahison', *Flavius Josèphe: La guerre des juifs*, (1975), *Les juifs, la mémoire et le présent* (1981), *Les assassins de la mémoire* (1987), *La démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs: essais d'historiographie ancienne et moderne* (1990), *Mémoires--La brisure et l'attente, 1930-1955* (1995), *Mémoires--Le trouble et la lumière 1955-1998* (1998), Denise Barrat and Robert Barrat, *Algérie, 1956 : livre blanc sur la répression* (2001).

As was the case during the war, the company frequently adapted canonic works by playwrights such as Molière and Shakespeare (Cheniki, 2002: 41). All of this ended in 1965, the year Ben Bella was deposed by Boumediene. Sought by the police, Boudia fled the country. During this time, other intellectuals also chose exile while those who stayed in Algeria risked arrest, imprisonment and torture. These events produced a rupture in the country's intellectual and artistic communities – ending a period of relative cultural fecundity. Boudia's discontent with the military deposal of Ben Bella found succour in the critical attitude expressed in Ben's dramaturgy. Directing the only public reading of the play *Leïla* at the *Petit TNP* in June 1968, he reportedly found it difficult to enact but was fascinated with the *Marchand de jasmin* character (Achour and Ali-Benali, 1991: 276). Prior to realizing a full production of the play, however, his car was blown up by the Israeli *Mossad* for his supposed activities in support of the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP) in 1973. While the play *Leïla* is not the direct offspring of the FLN's *théâtre de l'urgence*, it contains similar elements of exigency in its dialogue and plot and continues the practice of adapting a canonic text.

3. An Algerian Antigone: Crafting a Minor Theatre

In the realm of postcolonial theatre, the Antigone character is a popular figure for discussions of human behaviour, democracy and justice, and the pitfalls of revolution. Her name means “anti-generation,” establishing her as an orphan both timeless and universal (Appel, 2010). Along these lines, Kevin Wetmore (2002) argues that the *Antigone* play is possibly the “most transcultured” and “transculturable” tragedy given “the sheer number and variety of the adaptations [...] of the play” (Wetmore, 2002: 169-170). While the universal qualities of its heroine are partly responsible for the popularity of the play, arguably its most compelling aspect (for postcolonial playwrights at least) is its focus on war's aftermath and the state's concomitant struggle to ensure order. The tragic element is founded in the personal struggle to sustain one's alliances and belief system in such a difficult context: “*Antigone* can be adapted into any situation in which a group is oppressed, or in which, in the aftermath of struggle, the forces of communal and social order come into conflict with the forces of personal liberty” (Wetmore, 2002: 170-171). Due to her inherent qualities, Antigone might stand for an oppressed group or provide moral direction in the aftermath of a struggle, where laws of social order conflict with personal liberties. For these reasons, she is an especially popular figure for postcolonial playwrights. In addition to being the most widely and frequently adapted play in contemporary Africa; the *Antigone* has

been reinterpreted by European, Near Eastern, South American, East Asian and South East Asian playwrights⁹.

Antigone is the animating force behind Myriam Ben's character Leïla, a name that has great significance in the Arabic literary tradition. In Arabic, "Leïla" means "night" or "born at night" and forms the title of one of the most celebrated texts in popular Arabic literature, *Alif laylah wa-laylah* or *One Thousand and One Nights*, a story that attests to the solidarity of two sisters against a tyrant king. *Alif laylah wa-laylah* is a common point of reference for several Algerian women writers; most notably, Assia Djebar who has used the tale as an undercurrent in several of her novels, such as her sequel to *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), *Ombre Sultane* (1987), to describe the solidarity between the two wives of the story's male character¹⁰. Sasson Somekh notes that the legend is not considered a piece of classical literature since it was written in a mixture of *fushā*, or literary Arabic, and *āmmiyya*, or dialectical Arabic; while it gained attention in the West after its translation into European languages in the eighteenth century, it is only in the last few decades that the work has received a measure of respectability in the Arabic literary canon (Somekh, 1991: 4). Since Ben was interested in the destruction of hierarchies –both real and literary– her allusion to this tale of women's resistance, written in a less formal or hybrid form of Arabic, is integral to her deterritorialization of the classic *Antigone*. The meaning of the name is also conspicuous since Sophocles' Creon continually defines his niece as "nowhere" and orders her to "live a buried life" or a life in darkness leading to death while *Leïla* takes place in what might be described as a dark or bleak moment in the history of Algeria.

Like the *Antigone*, *Leïla* features a weak narcissistic king, *le Roi*, whose place at the head of his realm is tenuous. His insecurity is made conspicuous with the announcement of his plan to erect a statue in his own honour complete with fanfare and festivity. As the counterpart to this egocentric ruler, Leïla, our heroine and an *ancienne moudjahida*, is a courageous figure. Reminiscent of Antigone, she is distracted by the death of a brother whose demise is questionable –*le Roi* is suspected of ordering his assassination. In this case, however, he is not her blood brother but rather a brother-in-arms and a husband as well as *le Roi*'s younger brother; Leïla's metaphorical sister is the character Attika with whom she participated in the war of independence¹¹. With the provision of a sister-in-arms, the playwright instantly breaks with the Western trope of positioning women in antagonistic competition and rather, like the tale of *Alif laylah wa-laylah*, arranges them in a union of (militant) solidarity. Their alliance provides a sharp contrast to the men who govern the state and who, moreover, are in internecine conflict with one another; a conflict that will eventually result in the demise of *le Roi*.

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9 | Some notable examples of postcolonial adaptations include Aidan Mathews, *The Antigone* (1984), Sylvain Bamba, 'Noces posthumes de Santigone', *Le Bruit des autres* (1995), Brecht, *Antigonemodell* 1948, Athol Fugard, 'The Island', *Statements* (1986), Seamus Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (2004), Sarah Kane, *Cleansed* (2000), Brendan Kennelly, *Sophocles' Antigone: A New Version* (1996), Conall Morrison, *Antigone* (2003), Femi Osofisan, *Tegonni, an African Antigone* (1999), Tom Paulin, *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (1985).

10 | Leïla Sebbar also alludes to the tale in her novels about a protagonist named Sherazade. See Leïla Sebbar, *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982), *Leïla Sebbar, Les carnets de Shérazade* (1985).

11 | The choice of the name Attika further reinforces elements of Greek tragedy in the play –Attika being a region of Greece that includes the ancient city of Athens as well as a genre of tragedy commonly known as 'Attic tragedy'. See Euben (ed.), *Greek tragedy and political theory* (1986).

With the exception of a handful of roles (*Leïla*, *le Roi*, *Attika*, and *Omar*), the majority of characters offer a symbolic counterpoint to the plotline, particularly *le Marchand de jasmin*. As a jasmine vendor, he is a popular icon in Ben's writing¹². For her, the jasmine flower is a reminder of youth and of the old man who used to sell jasmine collars to her father: "Pour moi, cet homme était un sourcier car il transformait les odeurs horribles de la rue en parfum magique" (Achour, 1989: 71). The figure of the jasmine vendor is a symbol of the people since such work inevitably attracts the poor and disenfranchised. To illustrate this point, Ben recalls when she was a young militant

un paysan d'un certain âge venait de Tixeraïne pour assister aux réunions, le lundi soir. C'était un paysan pauvre; il avait avec lui un petit couffin; il me raccompagnait et sortait de son panier des fleurs de jasmin gardées fraîches entre deux feuilles de figuier, et m'offrait: ce geste était pour moi d'une qualité indicible (Achour, 1989: 71).

As a cultural symbol, *le Marchand de jasmin* underscores and embodies the populist spirit of the play. Boudia was probably drawn to him for these reasons but also because he is a *hakawati* figure, a storyteller in the tradition of Maghrebi *hakaya* (storytelling performance)¹³. As such, he frequently stands alone on stage and speaks directly to the audience much like a Greek chorus but as a solitary figure. Furthermore, in addition to his *hakawati* characteristics, a North African audience would recognize *le Marchand* as *Djeha* or *Djoha*, the most celebrated of Maghrebi folk-heroes¹⁴. As Kamal Salhi explains:

Traditionally *Djeha* was the epitome of the carnivalesque, with an eccentric character, a unique brand of humour, and a kind of gentle madness which runs through his exploits. This playful madness is a common element of North African humour (Salhi 1999: 329).

The Algerian novelist and playwright Kateb Yacine is particularly famous for his manipulations of this stock character and *Djeha* is present in a number of his plays including most notably as *Nuage de Fumée*, the central personality in *La Poudre d'intelligence* (1959). This play, much like *Leïla*, employs irony, humour and allegory to comment on the autocratic direction of the Algerian state. Nevertheless, *le Marchand* (and *Djeha*, in general) is not an unproblematic symbol. He is sexist and expresses other unsavoury characteristics –often alienating or repelling other characters. In this way, he is an amalgam of traits avoiding uncomplicated interpretation.

4. The Source: A Prologue

The prologue operates as a backdrop to the action of the play –which takes place in acts one and two. Dominated entirely by the slight

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12 | The jasmine flower also plays a symbolic role in Ben's *Sabrina, ils t'ont volé ta vie* (1986) and the short story 'Nora' in *Ainsi naquit un homme* (1982).

13 | Other terms for the storytelling performance and its performer include: *gawwal*, *meddah*, *rawi*, *muqallid*, *berrah*, and *fdawi*. See Kamal Salhi (2004: 41).

14 | For a comprehensive cultural, literary and historical background on the *Djeha* figure in the Middle East and North Africa, see Jean Déjeux (1978). While there are several spellings of the name including: *Djoha*, *Djeha*, *Djeh'a*, *Jeh'a*, and *Jh'a*, I will use the first iteration of the name since it is most common to Algeria while *Djeha* is the iteration of the name in Morocco. A contemporary manifestation of the *Djoha* figure is 'Fellag', the Kabyle comedian. See Dominique Caubet (2004).

figure of *le Marchand de jasmin*, who acts as our *hakawati* or one-man Greek chorus, we learn the strange story of his life, which is also the story of Algeria. His solemn and self-reflective soliloquy is accompanied by a series of illustrative actions, periodically inviting a response from the audience; a device commonly employed during a North African *halqa* or story-telling circle (Chakravarty Box, 2005: 45-46). Although a conventional theatrical form, the *halqa* is also dynamic and vibrant, and so qualifies as both traditional and modern, although not in the western sense (Chakravarty Box, 1997). Put simply, the *halqa* is a performance circle, formed by the spectators. Often the spectators are expected to participate in the theatrical piece either superficially through some form of payment to the performer or by direct involvement in the performance. By speaking to and gesturing at the audience, even addressing questions to it, *le Marchand de jasmin* expects a contribution from his listeners. Likewise, by drawing them into the performance circle, he implicates them in the outcome of the story.

After showing the audience the physical scars acquired during his long journey, he slowly leans down to gather water in his hands and repeats the customary action three times to eliminate impurities. Drinking this imaginary water, he pauses as though remembering something—a memory which he shares hesitantly in the form of a poem. During the course of his soliloquy, we learn that *le Marchand* was once a *sorcier* who searched for water in a scorched land:

va... ici pas même le charbon pousse, les torrents ne sont que cendres et, s'il y a des vagues, elles viennent seulement du fond, du fond de la terre, pour la faire craquer sous nos pieds... ici, c'est le grand désert desséché... passe ton chemin... ici, toutes les sources sont taries (1989: 14).

Imbued with magical or divine qualities –much like the oracle or prophet in Greek mythology or the *marabout* in North and West African religious rituals– he finds water in dry and desolate climes. This quest would take him over mountains ravaged by napalm and through forests in flames until he found the “patriarche sans yeux” dead at the side of a spring –an unmistakable reference to Oedipus, the father of Antigone and King of Thebes, who, upon learning of his wife’s (and mother’s) suicide, took a brooch from her dead body and stabbed out his eyes. A patriarch himself, *le Marchand* attests to the importance of knowledge as a form of power: “Oedipus loses throne, dignity, and eyesight, but gains wisdom and knowledge (which are everything)” (Kowsar, 1986: 28).

Discovered by the police at the edge of the toxic spring, *le Marchand* is falsely accused of poisoning it and thrown in jail. For seven years, the approximate length of the Revolution, he moulders in prison

far away. At the end of this sentence, he returns to his village and resumes his search for water: “Et j'en ai trouvé et j'en ai trouvé, dix mille au moins” (1989: 14). However, this precious bounty leads to squabbles among the villagers for ownership. The allegorical struggle for resources mirrors a real battle for power that ensued directly following the independence of Algeria in the summer of 1962. Following successful negotiations with France at the Evian accords, Colonel Boumediene, with the support of several *chefs historiques* including Ben Bella, Rabah Bitat, and Mohammed Khider, entered the country from the frontier and wrested control from the weakened leaders of the *wilayas*¹⁵. The war against a colonial entity became a war between factions of the FLN-ALN. This outcome runs counter to the strategy outlined at the *Congrès de la Soummam* in 1956 where the *chefs historiques* affirmed that the liberation struggle would be led by combatants of the interior –rather than by those stationed abroad¹⁶. However, this plan deteriorated and collapsed in the final years of the war as the regional *maquis* in the *wilayas* were weakened by excessive casualties, a lack of resources and the deaths of strong leaders and proponents of this policy¹⁷. Standing before the jubilant crowds in July 1962, Ben Youssef Ben Khedda, the leader of the *Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne* (GPRA), warned the people that “la volonté populaire constitue le barrage le plus solide contre la dictature militariste dont rêvent certains, contre le pouvoir personnel, contre les ambitieux, les aventuriers, les demagogues et les fascistes de tous poils” (Stora, 1998: 192). Sadly, the proponents of military dictatorship won out and Ben Bella was installed with the backing of the ALN and Colonel Boumediene. Fatefully, Boumediene would later depose Ben Bella and establish himself as the rightful leader of Algeria.

This historical context emerges during the course of a monologue which poetically details the struggles *le Marchand de jasmin* and his countrymen and women have endured. Before his arrival in the city, he returned one last time to his village only to find his property confiscated by a state representative (1989: 15). With this discovery, he picked the remaining jasmine on his land and brought it in a basket to sell during the festivities accompanying the statue's dedication. Abruptly ending his story, he asks his listeners suspiciously why they have come to town: “Pour t'amuser...? Ah oui, tu as raison... on va s'amuser aujourd'hui –Ah! Pour ça oui, on va bien s'amuser... Chez nous, ce qu'il y a de bien, c'est qu'on s'ennuie jamais” (1989: 16). With these words, the audience is left with the question of why we are here, witnessing or reading this performance. Drawn into the play's action at this early juncture, we might ponder this question during the first and second acts while events on stage unfold (or we imagine these events as readers). In this way, we are implicated as participatory members of the *halqa* in how the story of the Revolution and its aftermath are performed (and read and remembered). The

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15 | The *chefs historiques* or the “group of nine” were the original leaders of the FLN armed nationalist movement that began officially in 1954. They include: Mohamed Boudiaf, Hocine Aït Ahmed, Rabah Bitat, Didouche Mourad, Larbi Ben M'Hidi, Mostefa Ben Boulaïd, Ahmed Ben Bella, Mohamed Khider and Krim Belkacem. Of these nine original leaders, six survived the war to see independence and three died on the “field of honour”: Mostefa Ben Boulaïd, Didouche Mourad and Larbi Ben M'Hidi. The *wilayas* were regions demarcated in the early days of the insurrection and served to facilitate the armed struggle which largely took place in the countryside. Each *wilaya* –there were six– was led by a council of four which included the politico-military leader, who had the grade of a colonel, and three commanders responsible for three principal actions: political, military, and information and liaisons. This strict structure was respected throughout the war despite undergoing slight modifications as strategies shifted.

16 | The *Congrès de la Soummam* (August and September 1956) was first pivotal conference of the FLN-ALN since the beginning of the armed insurgency and served to outline and document the goals of the liberation struggle and the overarching policy of its military strategy. The Congress “platform” underscored the organization's commitment to the attainment of independence and created a political arm called the *Conseil national de la Révolution algérienne* (CNRA) as well as an executive council *le Comité de Coordination et d'Exécution* (CCE). The platform also insisted on the primacy of the political over the military and of the combatants of the country's interior over those of the exterior. The Congress also formally demarcated the *wilayas* and zones in which the armed struggle was organized.

prologue quietly concludes with the old man sitting on a rock, counting his jasmine collars. As he counts, his voice gets lower and the light shifts from one side of the stage to the other to rest on the chambers of *le Roi*. As the light moves the audience also perceives the silent *Chiffonnière* rummaging through the garbage.

In the first scene of the play, *le Marchand de jasmin* evokes two recurring symbols: jasmine and water. The significance of jasmine was discussed but water is also important in elucidating the symbolic references in the play. Explaining the theme of water, Ben says: “Cette quête de l’eau, c’est la quête de l’homme du désert qui cherche toujours le puits, la source... L’eau c’est la vie, l’eau c’est la justice, la source, c’est la connaissance” (Achour, 1989: 72). *Le Marchand*’s quest for water –for the source of life, justice, and knowledge– foreshadows Leïla’s quest in the first and second acts of the play. It also alludes to the conceptual trajectory of the audience or reader which –over the course of the performance– formulates an understanding of the Revolution’s betrayal and (hopefully) develops a desire to actively challenge its dissimulation. Ben thus expresses a disappointment that the “truth” of the people’s struggle was so rapidly obfuscated by false notions of unity and the FLN-ALN’s assertion of their rightful leadership. Most significantly, the playwright exposes the complaisance or active participation of her fellow Algerians in this betrayal:

En mettant sous les yeux des lecteurs la logique implacable de la conduite des bourreaux, l’auteur leur montre que la fatalité continue dans ces conduits peut être renversée. Il espère soulever la révolte chez le lecteur et contribuer à développer le sentiment que l’homme est libre de s’engager ou non dans la lutte contre cette fatalité (Achour, 1989: 85).

In the first act, Leïla embodies these disappointments in a speech that conjures up traces of Antigone’s monologue with the King of Thebes.

5. Act One: Conquering Silence

While the prologue provides a poetic backdrop for the main narrative of the play, the first act operates as our introduction to the lead character, Leïla, and to her struggle against a dictatorship and its coherent narrative of war, mirrored in the ‘major discourse’ of the *Antigone*, the play’s palimpsest. In the first scene of this act, as the light slowly moves from the street-side of the wall to the royal chambers, *le Roi* jumps suddenly from his bed, wiping his forehead, face and neck and, breathing heavily, moves towards a window. Nervously opening the window, he leans his elbows on the sill, and turning towards the audience, stares out into the distance: “Quelle fièvre...

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17 | In fact, members of the Cairo delegation, Ben Bella, Boudiaf, and Mahsas had publicly disparaged the platform’s original focus on the interior in 1959 and even envisioned the formation of an antagonistic Congress supported by Presidents Nasar and Bourguiba.

Étranges ces visions qui vous poursuivent et vous agitent au-delà de toute raison” (Ben, 1998: 19). In this dejected position, his sister-in-law finds him. As she enters the room, the playwright’s directions call for *le Roi* to be standing with his head dropped forward, his chin essentially touching his chest, so that the light shining on him creates the illusion of a headless figure. This vision foreshadows events to come, namely his death at the end of the play. However, the stage directions offer us a range of additional interpretations. Besides the obvious suggestion of the headless state, *Le Roi*’s attitude might allude to the execution of Algerian militants during the Revolution. Prisoners sentenced to death were frequently guillotined at dawn in the courtyard of prisons in Oran, Constantine and Algiers¹⁸. Leïla underscores this with a wistful reminiscence about her absent nurse:

Lalla Fatma... où sont les contes de mon enfance? Elle m’en racontait souvent un, qui se terminait toujours ainsi: ‘Et depuis ce temps-là, les rois se réveillent chaque matin avant l’aube, couverts de sueur, glacés par l’épouvante du cauchemar qui les arrache à la nuit: en eux s’est réincarnée l’âme d’un des condamnés à mort, qu’ils ont fait achever à l’aube’ (Ben, 1998: 27).

Confounding a clear meaning, Lalla Fatma’s story provides a supplementary allusion to the king in *Alif laylah wa-laylah* who murdered his lovers at dawn. Finally, Creon’s first words to Antigone following her dawn capture are: “Speak, girl, with head bent low and downcast eyes/ Does thou plead guilty or deny the deed?” (Sophocles, 1912). *Le Roi*’s guilty pose undermines his perceived authority over Leïla and reverses the power dynamic (between monarch and subject) established in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. However, if nothing else, a suspicion that *le Roi*’s regime continues the practice of torture and summary execution, unjust policies that were customary during the French colonial period is established.

Leïla emerges from her silence and speaks at length, expressing her anguish at the disappointing outcome of the war. Significantly, her monologue is a response to a series of questions posed by *le Roi* (Ben, 1999: 27-28). He is disquieted by the sense that he cannot control her movements, thoughts or feelings and this anxiety intensifies when he learns she recently visited her friend, Attika. His attempt to discern why she went to Attika produces an emotional outpouring that flows from Leïla’s distrust of *le Roi* and the dubious explanations given for the death of her young husband; the immoral means, including torture, the regime uses to remain in power; and ends with an affirmation of women’s sacrifices for the liberation struggle:

Ce que je suis allée faire chez elle? [...] Attika et moi, nous avons marché ensemble des nuits et des jours à travers la plaine et la montagne –Une fois, nous avons passé une heure, l’une contre l’autre, un seul corps qui

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18 | Assia Djebar refers to these dawn executions in the title of her only play, *L’Aube rouge*. See Assia Djebar and Walid Carn, *L’Aube rouge: pièce en 4 actes et 10 tableaux* (1969).

ne respirait plus, emmurées vivantes dans une cache prévue pour un seul homme, sous la terre, avec des grilles et des feuillages au-dessus de nos têtes” (1999: 31). Buried alive, the two women became one body in the dark and “des soldats... marchaient sur nous sans le savoir (1999: 31).

Upon leaving their hiding place, she noticed that “j’avais sur mes bras la marque de ses ongles et Attika porte encore sur ses bras la marque des miens” (1999 : 31). The speech underscores the intimacy between the two friends; their bond surpasses the strength of blood ties and endures after the war:

Avant –pendant et après la prison, tout ce que nous nous sommes juré... Tout ce que nous nous sommes juré, Attika et moi... Ah! Nous n’avons pas fait comme nos grands chefs historiques, nous! En sortant de la prison, nous sommes restées des sœurs, des membres d’un même corps (1999: 32).

Indicting the leaders of the Revolution, the heroine contrasts their discord with the solidarity of women militants. Leïla passionately informs *le Roi* that she learned from Attika that the regime uses torture on its dissidents:

Ce sont nos frères qui torturent... Entends-tu? Oui, chez nous... alors chez nous aussi, il y a une police de tortionnaires... Voilà ce que j’ai appris. [...] Les nazis, ils étaient tous responsables de la torture ? Alors... ? Et nous ? Nous sommes aussi... Nous sommes devenus des nazis... ? Des nazis... Des nazis... (1999: 33).

The leaders of the liberation struggle not only betrayed its ideals, they torture their comrades, which constitutes a form of fratricide. In Leïla’s eyes, if the Algerian revolutionaries have stooped to the level of Nazis their anti-colonial project truly failed. Possessing the spirit and venom of Antigone’s condemnation of the King of Thebes, Leïla accuses *le Roi* while re-establishing her commitment to the goals of the liberation struggle and her loyalty to a sister-in-arms. The transferral of devotion from a brother to a sister-in-arms rejects a blind loyalty to patriarchal kinship systems established in the Antigone. This expression of sisterly love also “re-writes” the fraught relationship between *Antigone* and her sister Ismene in Sophocles’ play.

In the following passages, we learn that Leïla is an orphan –her parents and siblings were killed in the war– and her husband, Rachid, died mysteriously in the last days of the Revolution. With the realization that the regime uses torture, she suspects that Rachid was assassinated by *le Roi* and she vows to learn everything she can (1999: 35). Despite *le Roi’s* insistence that she is too young and idealistic to understand, Leïla swears that she will find out who killed her husband. This perseverance is the direct result of her militant

experience in the war; an experience that transformed her just as her husband promised (1999: 36). Interlinking an individual quest with the broader issue of women's rights, Leïla's diatribe culminates with a review of the unfortunate fate of Algerian women following the liberation struggle. She claims that women are caught in a proverbial mirror from which they cannot escape. The mirror she uses as her example is a gift from Rachid:

Oui, c'est maintenant le même miroir que possèdent toutes les femmes de notre pays. Il m'avait dit en riant: 'Pour qu'il te surveille pendant que je ne serai pas là. Je saurai tout en le regardant quand je reviendrai. Fais attention.' 'Et toi? Qui te surveillera?' (1999: 33-34).

A familiar metaphor in autobiographical writing, the mirror might reflect one's reality or life without embellishment¹⁹. In this case, the mirror is a symbol for women's inequality –an inequality which literally restrains their bodies. They are no longer reflected but subsumed by a one-sided mirror that surveys them but neglects to provide the same function for the surveillance of men. Her speech to *le Roi* is a statement of political action from which she will proceed to gather knowledge and understanding against his stated wishes; this rebellious act frees her body figuratively from the mirror her husband gave her. Leïla's speech also inspires *le Roi* to reveal how her husband died and the first act concludes with the dramatic story of Rachid's death in a cave. Like Antigone's lover, Haemon, Rachid expires underground but, significantly, without his lover.

The chain of entreaties, indictments and revelations is articulated in French, affixing another layer of meaning to the exchange. Writing the play in the language of the colonizer, Ben deterritorializes the 'major language' her heroine speaks. Like Bene's critique of Shakespeare, Leïla's monologue "functions as a critique of the power relations represented in [the] original [play], but it also undermines the forms of conventional theatre" (Bogue, 2003: 6). The result is a kind of cognitive dissidence as Leïla and the other characters form a *halqa* with the audience, pronouncing their lines in French rather than colloquial Arabic, the customary language of the *halqa*. The heroine's oral testimonial in the colonial language might be a further entreaty for plurality (and acceptance). Written in a cultural climate marked by *le pouvoir's* attempt to nullify the use of French, and inculcate Modern Standard Arabic as the language of public discourse, Leïla's monologue (and the play in general) could be read as a call for polylingualism and a dismissal of the idea of an authentic Algerian language²⁰. As a woman, a martyr's widow and *ancienne moudjahida*, the main character enters the public arena, quite literally, as a paradox. She is a second-class citizen, an honoured symbol of the liberation struggle and a subversive *hakawati*. As such, Leïla is in a unique position to symbolically undermine some of the constrictive

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19 | See George Gusdorf, for example, who has said autobiography "is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image" (Gusdorf, 1980: 33).

20 | The policy of "arabicization" was implemented shortly after Houari Boumediene's rise to power in 1965; propagated primarily by the Ministry of Education, the policy aimed to replace French with Arabic in schools, businesses, literature and the arts, and in the media. This abrupt and forceful shift placed a considerable burden on adults who had grown up (and in some cases received an education) in the French system –where Arabic was not widely taught and furthermore was considered a foreign language. Many authors, intellectuals, and business-people– as well as those expected to fill these positions after the *pied-noirs* departed in vast numbers –were at an impasse. Some writers like Kateb Yacine sought to write in French and translate his plays into dialectal Arabic; while Malek Haddad abandoned his writing since he was unable to write in literary Arabic; and Assia Djebar took a ten year hiatus from novel-writing, instead making a film in dialectal Arabic, *La Noubia des femmes du Mont-Chenoua* (1977), until the publication of her collections of short stories, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980). Thus, after some time, writing in French became a form of protest against the government –and a necessity for writers unable to write in Arabic and would alternatively be silenced. This was the case especially during the civil crisis (1992-2000) when artists, writers and intellectuals were inordinately targeted for assassination by the *Front islamique du salut* (FIS) and other paramilitary organizations and terrorists. For insight into the history and impact of the arabicization policy in Algeria see Madeleine Dobie (2003) and Gilbert Grandguillaume (1985).

social and linguistic structures that mark the historical context of the play. Her status as a widow and *moudjahida* also establishes her as a moral agent –capable of making entreaties and criticisms– in much the same way that Antigone holds a position of moral authority in Sophocles' Greek tragedy²¹. As an agent of moral authority, Leïla calls for participatory citizenship through a knowledge of the past, equality for women, and an adherence to unwritten laws guided by a belief in a higher moral authority that would condemn acts of torture.

6. Act Two: The People and its Prescient Madness

As symbols of popular culture, the characters in the second act facilitate the tragic progression of events towards their end: “Ce qui a été –a été comme ce devrait être” (Ben, 1998: 25). With the exception of Omar and Attika, these characters are derived from Maghrebi folklore rather than classical Greek myth in contrast to the characters in the first act. The addition and subtraction of characters from different cultures and time periods contribute to the minor critique of the play. Essentially, a minor critique undermines the construction of meaning inherent in conventional narrative: “D’une pensée on fait une doctrine, d’une manière de vivre on fait une culture, d’un événement on fait de l’Histoire. On prétend ainsi reconnaître et admirer, mais en fait on normalise” (Deleuze and Bene, 1979 : 97). The insertion of North African folk heroes in a text inspired by Greek tragedy destabilizes the linearity of the composition. Since the political nature of theatre is defined by the analogy it shares with the dialectic of majority and minority, it relies on the successful identification of the former and its replacement with minority values. In his elucidation of this process, Deleuze explains that the majority is not necessarily the larger aggregate group. For example, in France, women, children, the elderly, and ethnic and racial minorities occupy a marginal position in comparison to white Christian males in the country’s urban centres despite the fact that this latter group is a quantitative minority. Nevertheless, the minority group can form a majority of its own in relation to other minorities, i.e., wealthy women and women of lower socio-economic classes. There is no single line that divides communities, giving us clearly defined opposition; rather, there is criss-crossing and multiple lines that endlessly redefine the majority and the minority: “Minority designates here the potential of a becoming, whereas majority designates the power or the impotence of a state, of a situation” (Kowsar, 1986: 26). In this sense, the second act further reveals the tragedy of the peoples’ revolution –in which an elite dictatorial ruling class grew out of a perceived struggle for minority values.

Myriam Ben manufactures the corresponding ‘minor structure’ of the play through a fragmentation of the plot sequence: Leïla’s idealistic

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21 | In an essay entitled “Antigone as Moral Agent”, Helene Foley investigates the “complex interrelation between female moral capacity and female social roles that conditions, and is articulated in, such choice” (Foley, 1996: 49). As a virgin princess of Thebes, Foley (1996) argues that the original audience would instantly recognize her social status as a significant element of her moral choices.

quest to recapture the compromised ideals of the liberation struggle and prevent a *coup d'état* is intersected by allegorical vignettes that demonstrate the ambivalence of the citizenry. By turning to the people, Leïla re-establishes her tie to the proletariat struggle, recognizing its integral role in her impractical effort to restore 'minor values' to the post-revolution state. These anonymous figures represent the working class, the disenfranchised and identifiable cultural icons and foreshadow the rapidly approaching demise of the regime.

In the penultimate scene thirteen, while *le Jeune homme à la guitare* composes songs for Leïla, *la Mère* appears on the stage and, believing the two young people to be lovers, insults Leïla and implores the young man not to miss his train. *La Mère* is imbued with characteristics of the *mahboula*, or madwoman, a liminal but powerful figure in North African folklore. According to the playwright, the travesty of madness born of struggle is a variety of cognitive dissidence (Achour, 1989: 88). Deleuze and Guattari theorize that the progression from sanity to madness is the quintessence of 'becoming other' also known as the 'war-machine'. The 'war-machine' is any organic or mechanical force that destroys barriers, frontiers and fortresses. Beyond categorization, the war-machine is any force or desire that breaks down territorial organizations, political stratifications or moral and sexual differentiations. The war-machine is a seditious operation and is never as versatile as when it lays siege to notions of culture: the Word, God, Truth, Reason, Capital, History, etc. (Kowsar, 1986: 27). In their explanation of the war-machine, conceived as a means of creative activism against the state, they warn of its dangerous potential for self-destruction, suicide and madness:

Est-ce le destin d'une telle machine, lorsque l'Etat triomphe, de tomber dans l'alternative: ou bien n'être plus que l'organe militaire et discipline de l'appareil d'Etat, *ou bien se retourner contre elle-même*, et devenir une machine de suicide (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 440).

The madness of *la Mère* embodies this dualism; the war-machine is both an instrument of transformation and a source of annihilation. However, the *devenir-mineur* of madness also begets the prescient abilities outlined above by Ben. This strange lucidity permits *la Mère* to presage the precipitous events of the play's conclusion. Turning from Leïla and *le Jeune homme à la guitare*, she focuses her attention on Attika who holds a little boy in her arms: "Tu lui as donné la vie? Oui... nous leur donnons la vie –Tu lui as donné la mort, comme nous toutes. Tu lui as donné la mort" (Ben, 1998: 94). These fateful words are interrupted by the breaking news that *le Roi* has been assassinated. The stage directions call for this information to be dramatically relayed through loud speakers after which a mob engulfs the stage yelling: "On... a assassiné le Roi" (1998: 94). As the stage devolves into chaos, Leïla, Attika, *le Jeune homme à la guitare*, *l'Enfant* and *le Vieillard* stare in frozen silence at *la Mère*.

The final scene of the play unfolds in *le Roi's* chambers where his body lies in state. Beyond the wall, the audience can hear the muffled noises of rioting and gun fire. The return to the royal residence marks the veritable end of Leïla's attempt to prevent the demise of the regime (and its faint potential for democracy). Observing the chaos unfold from the window she cringes at each reverberation of firearms while the other characters in the room remain silent. Only *la Mère* breaks this silence with the recitation of a poem. With the poem's conclusion, the soldier Omar swiftly approaches Leïla and asks why she returned to the royal chambers. Struggling to convince her to leave, he warns of the dangers of lingering. She is unconvinced (1998: 100). When Omar is directed to leave the room by one of his commanders Leïla refuses for the last time to go with him. With the final mournful lines of *la Mère's* song, the curtain falls:

Vois la terre de ton pays...
 Chaude comme une immense pâte qui lève...
 Il fut et il sera toujours aigre le levain qui soulève la pâte–
 Mais elle sait attendre, la mère nourricière qui
 L'a pétrie dans le grand silence des mères–
 Elle sait attendre le temps qu'il faut
 Pour voir lever le pain (1998: 101).

In this verse, the country is equated with the preparation of a loaf of bread by women; the images evoke a Berber poem of loss²². The performance ends not with the words of a chorus but with a mother's sorrowful song, mirroring the commencement of the play which opened with a poem recited by *le Marchand de jasmin*. While Greek tragedy provides the inspiration of the play, it is a marked departure from it since its characters are imbued with the ability to foment change. Describing what he calls the "new Antigone", Bertolt Brecht believes this genre conveys "the opinion that mankind's fate is mankind itself" (in Kuhn and Constantine, 2004: 215-216). In contrast to Greek theatre which invokes the power of the gods over people who are pawns in an almighty game, this maxim describes our capacity to modify an outcome. While the foundation of a democratic state requires careful preparation –like a loaf of bread– it also requires the active participation of women²³. Leïla's refusal to flee the royal chambers leaves us with the awareness that she might be put to death for her propinquity with the previous regime; however, there is a sliver of hope that she survives and continues her struggle for progressive change.

7. Conclusion

When *Leïla, poème scénique en deux actes et un prologue* was published in 1998, three decades following its original composition, Algeria was in the throes of a violent civil crisis. As Myriam Ben

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22 | Interestingly, Brecht, who penned an adaptation of the *Antigone* play (1947) following the Second World War, wrote in his diary: "All that is left for Antigone to do is to help the foe, which is the sum total of her moral contributions; she also had eaten for too long of the bread that is baked in the dark" (Brecht, 2003: 199). For the reference to Kabyle songs see Jean Amrouche and Tassadit Yacine (1988). Fittingly, these poems were often addressed to a loved one and evoked the poet's place of origin.

23 | Aïcha Bouazzar, one of the founders of SOS, *Femmes en détresse and an ancienne moudjahida*, has said virtually the same thing in the documentary film by Parminder Vir. See Parminder Vir, *Algeria, Women at War*, VHS, Formation Films and ENTV Algeria, England and Algeria, 1992.

prophetically implies in her play, history repeats itself tragically. Another Algerian author, drawn to the power of myth, recorded this recent chapter of Algerian history in her *Blanc de l'Algérie* (Djebar, 1996). Calling this novel a “collective testimonial”, Clarisse Zimra observes Assia Djebar “take up the problematic and tangled connection between writing and saying the individual self, writing and expressing the collective self (*parole* versus *écriture*) in a repressive state” (Zimra, 1995: 148). Likewise, Ben restores the “missing woman” to the historical and literary record in the face of dangers posed by a repressive regime –not only restoring her but naming her while the country’s ruler remains anonymous. In this way, Ben resembles her character as well as its inspiration, Antigone, since she embodies the struggle of the individual (writing) against the state; as Ben herself says, “j’étais le héros... de quelque sorte” (Achour, 1989: 81). The political resistance of the individual is a fundamental property of minor literature as Deleuze and Guattari remind us:

La littérature mineure est tout à fait différente: son espace exigu fait que chaque affaire individuelle est immédiatement branchée sur la politique. L’affaire individuelle devient donc d’autant plus nécessaire, indispensable, grossie au microscope, qu’une tout autre histoire s’agite en elle (1975: 30).

Limning the boundaries of genre categories, of textual and real spaces, this *mu’arada* performance in French

produit une solidarité active, malgré le scepticisme; et si l’écrivain est en marge ou à l’écart de sa communauté fragile, cette situation le met d’autant plus en mesure d’exprimer une autre communauté potentielle, de forger les moyens d’une autre conscience et d’une autre sensibilité (1975: 31-32).

In this paper, I demonstrate the multiple ways in which Myriam Ben’s writing blends political and dramaturgical intentions to craft a unique brand of minor theatre. Skilfully linking the fascisms of past and present, the playwright obliquely critiques Sophocles’ *Antigone* in order to challenge hegemonic narratives and, more specifically, to comment on the military dictatorship in Algeria in 1965. It is here that I have sought to focus on the political and poetic strategies of the work, its minor praxis, as the playwright weaves together Greek myth, Algerian popular culture, politics and history to create a powerful dramaturgical fusion. Through her character Leïla, she demonstrates the risks of revolutionary struggle in theatre and in politics where the perceived struggle for minority values is undercut and the minority essentially ‘becomes’ the oppressive majority. Much like the infinite process of deterritorialization where language is alternately deconstructed and reigned in and standards are destabilized, negotiated and amended, the process to assert minority values is never-ending and always in contest. Unwilling to draw a

simple picture of this struggle, however, the playwright positions her main character in the *écarts* between the state and the people; she of neither and sympathetic to both. It is from this liminal position that she can drive the war-machine. However, if we follow the meaning intended by Deleuze and Guattari, Leïla is not a warrior who mounts a war-machine; instead, the process through which Myriam Ben reinterprets Sophocles' play, constitutes a war-machine, making the emergence of Leïla, the warrior, possible.

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