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**Underneath Language and Gender in Ahlam Mosteghanemi
Algerian Postcolonial Novel *Ḍākirat al-ğasad***

Abstract

Despite a strong position of the postcolonial theory in the world, the contemporary Arabic literature has long remained beside the postcolonial critics' interest. Referring to the most recently works in field of postcolonial arabic novel, such as Al-Mūsawī's *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003), Caiani's *Contemporary Arab Fiction* (2007) and Meyer's *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (2001), Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Ḍākirat al-ğasad* has been reviewed in terms of post-Mahfouzian and postcolonial notions. The novel has been particularly analyzed regarding two important issues of postcolonial studies such as language and gender.

Postcolonialism as a trend of literary studies began in the 1980s. The postcolonial turn took place when Said's *Orientalism* has been published (1978). The present shape of this trend has been influenced by the studies *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Spivak (1988), *Imagined Communities* by Anderson (1983), *Nation and Narration* by Bhabha (1990) and many others, difficult to enumerate. As it soon turned out, the postcolonial theory implied reflection on numerous other issues, such as: universality and difference, representation and resistance, nationalism, hybridity, indigeneity, ethnicity, race, feminism, language, body and the performance, history, place, education, production and consumption, diaspora, globalization, environment, the sacred¹. Through two decades, it has become an important trend of literary studies. However, despite such a strong

¹ Certainly, these are not all issues related to postcolonialism. The presented categories come from the anthology *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, London 2006.

position of the postcolonial theory in the world, the Arabic literature has long remained beside the critics' interest. Publications in which the Arabic literature is perceived from the postcolonial perspective are relatively new.

In his *Contemporary Arab Fiction*, Fabio Caiani attempts to explain this state of things:

"Despite their [authors after 1979 – A/N] contribution to the development of contemporary Arabic fiction, these writers remain relatively unknown to non-Arab readers. Some of their most innovative works have not been analyzed in detail, so that even Western students of Arabic fiction are often oblivious of these writers' literary value. They all represent literary tendencies which are innovative as compared to the novelistic form canonized in the influential early works of Naguib Mahfouz. Mahfouz's death (30 August 2006) should serve as an inspiration for literary critics to investigate the new trends in operation within the Arabic novel, the literary form which Mahfouz, more than anybody else, demonstrated to be the most apt at engaging with problems of the contemporary world"².

This phenomenon has been more thoroughly analyzed by Al-Mūsawī who introduced a term 'post-Mahfuzian', very useful in relation to the contemporary Arabic literature:

"They [modern Arabic novels – N/A] indicate a radical change in outlook and perspective that entitle us to speak of a post-Mahfouzian novel in the sense that Naguib Mahfouz is the canonized representative of the novel in its urban, specifically Cairene, milieu. Yet, in this book, I use the post-Mahfouz label to indicate the practice, not the periodization, the collapsing of genres and time dimensions, the attention to ethnic and marginalized groups, and the significant awareness of and sensibility to other realities and prospects"³.

It seems that this term is necessary when thinking of contemporary Arabic literature. Roger Allen wrote of Mahfouz: "The Nobel Laureate in Literature for 1988, he is widely recognised as the founding father of the Arabic novel"⁴.

Mahfouz's contribution to the development of a novel is undeniable. Paradoxically, according to Muḥsin Ġāsim al-Mūsawī⁵, while establishing the literary canon, "the father of the Arabic novel" impeded or, at least, limited the development of experimental forms. Also literary critics, most of all those from the West, contributed to this state of things with their interest in Mahfouz and his urban novel.

To separate from the Mahfouzian tradition and to fill the gap between this tradition and modernistic and postmodernistic authors, in his *Contemporary Arab Fiction* (2007), Fabio Caiani attempts to describe innovative elements. His analytical study is devoted to the works of Muḥammad Barrāda, Idwār al-Ḥarrāṭ, Ilyās Ḥūrī and Fu'ād at-Takarlī. The author finds the following aspects the most important and innovative:

² F. Caiani, *Contemporary Arab Fiction. Innovation from Rama to Yalu*, New York 2007, p. X.

³ M.Ġ. al-Mūsawī, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel. Debating Ambivalence*, Leiden 2003, p. 21.

⁴ A. Roger, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, Cambridge 2000, p. 186.

⁵ Al-Mūsawī, op. cit., pp. 20–23.

1. Narrative fragmentation.
2. Polyphony.
3. Intertextuality.
4. Metafiction⁶.

Stefan G. Meyer has published *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (2001). Doing literary comparative studies, the author researches links and differences of the modernism in the Arabic Levant and of the Western literary modernism.

Muḥsin Ġāsim al-Mūsawī's *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003) remains so far the most important study on the problems of postcolonialism and Arabic literature. Al-Mūsawī refers the postcolonial theory to the literary practice of the Arab countries. In this way, he authorizes the postcolonial method in the research of the Arabic literature and proves that postcolonial issues matter in the Arabic narrative tradition⁷. The author has thoroughly reviewed a number of literary strategies and practices, and on that basis, he has shown their variety and numerosity in the postcolonial discourse. Simultaneously, he has presented the abundance in the contemporary Arabic literature with its variety of forms and techniques.

Therefore, having specified two basic notions – ‘postcolonialism’ as a methodological tool, and ‘post-Mahfouzian’ as a term situating the novel *Dakirat al-ġasad* in the field of Arabic literature, it is worth drawing some cognitive conclusions related to this issue. From the perspective of the postcolonial studies, I perceive the language and gender questions as the most important while reading the above mentioned novel.

Language

A difficult political situation in Algeria has directly influenced development of the literature in this country. In the introduction to the Algerian prose in “New and Contemporary Arabic Literature of XIXth and XXth Century” (*Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska XIX i XX w.*)⁸, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska indicates that the lack of the academic centre educating in the Arabic language is the main reason why the prose has been developed only in French. In the colonial context, this has led to the division of the Algerian literature into two main streams:

1. Algerian literature written in French.
2. Algerian literature written in Arabic⁹.

⁶ Caiani, op. cit., p. 15.

⁷ Al-Mūsawī, op. cit., pp. 21–61.

⁸ J. Bielawski, J. Kozłowska, E. Machut-Mendecka, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska XIX i XX w. Literatura arabskiego Maghrebu*, Warszawa 1989.

⁹ Apart of that, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska distinguishes the Kabyle stream. I think, however, that it should be rather included into the French-language stream (since these works are written in French). Furthermore, it is so formally diverse that it is difficult to separate another group with respect to the authors' ethnicity. M. Stępnia

The division between these two streams is gradually becoming deeper, also because of the – interesting, at any rate – research of the Maghreb literature written in French. One should mention the studies by Jean Déjeux¹⁰ who started the research of the French-language Maghreb literature. His work is continued in Poland by Maria Stępniaak¹¹.

The most renowned authors in this group are: Malek Haddad, Kateb Yacine, Mohammed Dib, Assia Djebar, Mouloud Feraoun, Mouloud Mammeri and Rachid Boudjedra (until 1982).

Ahlam Mosteghanemi (Ahlām Mustāḡānāmī) dedicated her novel *Dākirat al-ḡasad* to Malek Haddad:

“To the memory of Malek Haddad, son of Constantine, who swore after the independence of Algeria not to write in a language that was not his. The blank page assassinated him. He died by the might of his silence to become a martyr of the Arabic language and the first writer ever to die silent, grieving, and passionate on its behalf.”

Mosteghanemi refers to Malek Haddad's novels in many different ways. In the novel *Dākirat al-ḡasad* Hālid, the protagonist, while talking to his lady, makes a reference to Haddad's novel *Je t'offrirai une gazelle* (1959)¹²:

“I've not given you anything. I gave you back a painting that's been ready for you for twenty-five years. I have another present for you that you'll get one day. I think you'll like it”.

“What are you going to give me?”, you asked in a very low voice. It was as if you were afraid you may be overheard or someone might take the painting away from you.

“It's a surprise. Suppose I wanted to give you a gazelle?”.

“That's the title of a book”.

“I know. That's because I'll give you a book. When a man loves a girl, he gives her his name. When he loves a woman, he gives her a baby, and when he loves a writer, he gives her a book. For your sake I'll write a novel¹³”.

In this fragment, there is an evident reference to the title of Malek Haddad's novel. Mosteghanemi refers to this novel also in the plot. The protagonist of *Dākirat al-ḡasad*, similarly to the protagonist of *Je t'offrirai une gazelle*, describes the process of writing his novel. Both characters live in Paris. The real thread interweaves with fantasies, memories of living in Algeria. In exile, they both are engaged in dissatisfying relationships with women from Europe (a Frenchwoman, a German).

also classifies the Kabyle literary works to the French-language stream of the Algerian literature (eadem, *Identité et exil dans le roman maghrébin de langue française depuis les années cinquante*, Warszawa 1998).

¹⁰ Cf. J. Déjeux, *Littérature maghrébine d'expression française*, Paris 1992; idem, *Bibliographie méthodique et critique de la littérature algérienne de langue française 1945–1977*, Algiers 1979; idem, *La littérature algérienne contemporaine*, Paris 1975.

¹¹ M. Stępniaak, op. cit.

¹² M. Haddad, *Je t'offrirai une gazelle*, Paris 1959. I use the Polish title *Podaruję ci gazelę* (*I Will Offer You a Gazelle*) and the summary after K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska. See: J. Bielawski, J. Kozłowska, E. Machut-Mendecka, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, op. cit.

¹³ A. Mosteghanemi, *Dākirat al-ḡasad*, op. cit., p. 375; *Memory in the Flesh*, op. cit., p. 245.

Hālid says to Hayāt that he will give her a novel *Je t'offrirai une gazelle*, while Haddad's character intends to publish in France a novel under such a title. Unfortunately, he takes the accepted typescript back from the editorial office and gives up publishing the book.

Ahlam re-wrote this novel. What is important, she wrote it in Arabic, what Malek Haddad could not have done. Thus, in my opinion, Mosteghanemi proves to continue the work and to exceed the limits of her master and partner in the literary dialogue – Haddad.

Krystyna Skarżyńska-Bocheńska wrote that Haddad's becoming silent remained a great loss for the Algerian literature¹⁴. By taking up the topics of emigration, love to Constantine, war of liberation and country reconstruction, and by writing in a similar style, yet in Arabic, Mosteghanemi ensured for Haddad literary immortality in the Arabic literature written in Arabic.

The same is with another renowned Algerian writer born in Constantine, Kateb Yacine (Kātib Yāsīn). Similarly to Malek Haddad, Kateb made his debut with a novel *Nedjma*, written in French¹⁵, regarded as one of the most important works of the Algerian literature. The title *Nedjma* is the character's love – a femme fatale, older than him, and imaginary motherland at the same time.

In the same allegorical way, Mosteghanemi presents Hālid's relationship with Hayāt who has been identified with mother Constantine. This is not the only reference to Yacine's works. Mosteghanemi introduces the character of Yacine to her novel. Literary Yacine is of the same age as Hālid. In *Dākirat al-ḡasad*, they meet in the prison Al-Kudiya¹⁶:

“As I stood in front of the high prison walls, my memory would wander all over the place, seeking out some face, some name, and some executioner. I wanted to open the doors of other prisons that still had secrets. I wanted to redeem the debts of those who had passed through. I once envied a man with whom I had shared a cell for some weeks. Yacine was the youngest political prisoner, sixteen years old, a few months younger than myself. Although they released me because of my age, they refused to let him go. He dreamed of freedom and was hopelessly in love with a woman ten years older: her name was Najma. Six months later I went back to school. Yacine went on to write a book about his love. The idea for this terrible story was born here in that long night, in bitterness and disappointment, but with great national dreams.

Yacine was always amazing. He was obstinate and had a compulsion to provoke and confront. He shifted his aggressiveness from one prison to another. We were his audience but did not realize then that we were with Algeria's Lorca. We were witnessing the

¹⁴ J. Bielawski, J. Kozłowska, E. Machut-Mendecka, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, op. cit., p. 507.

¹⁵ First edition: K. Yacine, *Nedjma*, Paris 1956. I used the edition: K. Yacine, *Nedjma*, Paris 1996.

¹⁶ Al-Kudiya is the prison in Constantine. Many Algerian intellectuals were imprisoned there along with ordinary criminals. More about people detained there see at the webpages: <http://www.startimes2.com/f.aspx?t=5995668>; <http://www.elmokhtar.net/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=477>.

birth of a poet who would become the most talented man of his country. Years later I met Kateb Yacine in forced exile, in Tunis. His capacity to surprise, I was glad to discover, had not changed. He still spoke with the same enthusiasm, the same aggressive language, declaring war against all who preached submission to France. He was acutely sensitive to cultural humiliation and hostile to those who were by instinct deferential"¹⁷.

It is clear that against other Algerian texts, *Dākirat al-ğasad* does not surprise by the novelty of topics. Quite the contrary – it makes a direct reference to these works. The thing entirely innovative is the transmission of the poetic prose style and of the symbols characteristic for the Algerians writing in French into the Arabic language. To underline Mosteghanemi's innovativeness and deserts in the Algerian literature written in Arabic, it is worth tracing the most recent history of literature.

The pioneer of the Algerian novel traditionally remains Aḥmad Riḍā Ḥ ū ḥ ū who in 1947, published a novel *Ġadat Umm al-Qurā* ("Beauty of Mekka") which is, according to K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, "a naive classical novel"¹⁸. Of course, it is not its literary value that matters, but the fact that as opposed to the creatively mature French-language stream, it has been written in Arabic.

It is the 1970s that remain the actual turning point in the Algerian literature written in Arabic. The year 1971 brought the novel *Rīḥ al-ğanūb* ("Southern Wind") by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ibn Haḍ ū q a, then, in 1974, the novel *Al-Lāz* ("Ace") by Aṭ-Ṭāhir Waṭ ṭ ā r was published. Both authors wrote their books only in Arabic, they belonged to the realistic school, yet in time, they used also some elements of surrealism, magic etc. In the interview, Waṭ ṭ ā r said that his writing was based on a dialectical relationship between form and content, and therefore, he did not identify with any specific school¹⁹.

The year 1982 is another turning point. Then, the discursive novel *At-Tafakkuk* ("Segregation") by Rachid Boudjedra was published. Boudjedra made his debut as a French-language writer in 1969 with a novel *La Répudiation*. He strengthened his position with other novels written in French, until the publication of *At-Tafakkuk*, when he decided not to write in a language that was not the language of his soul. Maria Stępniaś wrote:

„En d'autres termes, l'auteur, par le biais de la langue maternelle recupere son Moi profond saccage dans l'enfance. Si tel est le cas, l'écriture arabe de Boudjedra, qu'elle soit primordiale ou non (le probleme est a trancher par les critiques bilingues arabo-francais) serait la recuperation de l'identite perdue, du temps de l'enfance enfin retrouvee. A notre avis, ce probleme releve davantage de la psychologie de l'acte de createur"²⁰.

In my opinion, this problem touches upon far more important questions, such as links, deriving from Kant, between meaning and theories related to it that influence

¹⁷ A. Mosteghanemi, *Dākirat al-ğasad*, op. cit., p. 264; *Memory in the Flesh*, op. cit., p. 212.

¹⁸ J. Bielawski, J. Kozłowska, E. Machut-Mendecka, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, op. cit., p. 524.

¹⁹ *Qira'at li-riwāyat Al-Walī at-Ṭāhir li-al-kātib Aṭ-Ṭāhir Waṭ ṭ ā r*, <http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/features/awi/articles/sports/2005/10/14/feature-02>.

²⁰ M. Stępniaś, op. cit., p. 151.

our perception of the world, which, generally speaking, can be situated around the problem of the linguistic image of the world²¹. Therefore, I understand that by including Boudjedra to the French-language stream, Stepniak underestimated the importance of his manifesto (his decision to write in Arabic could be perceived like that). Yet, I definitely think that Boudjedra's action should be interpreted in a more complex way, especially in the context of the postcolonial discourse and its influence on the next generations of writers.

Hadūqa, Waṭṭār and Boudjedra are called fathers of the Algerian literature written in Arabic. They established the canon in stylistics, imaging or pronunciation that is continued until now. The main topics were: war of liberation 1954–1962, mass imprisonments, struggle for deliverance, arabisation of Algerian culture.

In the face of political changes in Algeria in the end of the 1980s, a new group of writers was formed. They more often undertook problems of identity, emigration and isolation as well as stinging political critique. They attempted to find themselves in the situation of crisis faced by Algeria. Ahlam Mosteghanemi is the most renowned representative of this trend. Other important writers are Muḥammad Sārī²², Ḥallāṣ Ġīlānī²³, Yāsīn Yada wī.

Conquered since 1839, finally incorporated to France as the overseas territory in 1881, Algeria has been definitively colonized. 'Definitively' would mean practically total disappearance of the literature written in Arabic, discrimination of the Arabic. During more than a hundred years, the French policy towards Algeria consisted of impressing the colonized population with the French culture supremacy.

The presented history of the Algerian literature shows the way in which the Algerian authors started to write their books in French that was not their mother tongue. The postcolonial studies establish that such behaviour remained the objection to imperial colonial process²⁴. This is the extended statement made by Ahlam Mosteghanemi in the interview published in the Algerian daily „L'Expression“:

„Votre roman *La mémoire de la chair*, vous le dédiez à Malek Haddad en écrivant: «Haddad est un martyr aimant de la langue arabe». Comment voyez vous l'avenir de l'écriture en langue française en Algérie? Et croyez vous, comme certains, que la langue de l'écriture peut ne pas répercuter la réalité sociale d'un peuple?

²¹ I recommend critical lecture of this question in: *Językowy obraz świata*, ed. J. Bartmiński, Wrocław 2000; *Językowy obraz świata w oryginale i przekładzie. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej przez Instytut Lingwistyki Stosowanej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego w Warszawie w dniach 25–27 listopada 2005*, eds. A. Szczęsny, K. Hejnowski, Warszawa 2007; A. Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words*, 1998 (Polish translation Warszawa 2007).

²² He made his debut with a novel *As-Sa'ir* (1986), then a novel *Al-Mutāha* ("Labirynth") was published. A French translation of the novel *Al-Mutāha* by Muḥammad Sārī is available in „Algérie Littérature/Action“ 2000, No. 41/42.

²³ He made his debut with a novel *Rā'ihat al-kalb* ("Dog's Stink").

²⁴ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Londyn 2002.

Je crois que la littérature d'expression française en Algérie a un très bel avenir devant elle. C'est pour cela que j'essaie d'aider plutôt les écrivains arabophones. Vous savez, je n'ai rien contre les auteurs francophones. Ce qui importe ce n'est pas la langue qu'on écrit, mais la cause qu'on défend. Ce qui me fait mal, ce sont ceux qui écrivent dans le seul but de vendre une littérature exotique. Malek H a d d a d quand il a écrit en français, c'était pour défendre l'Algérie. Ce qu'il écrivait était une lettre ouverte pour la France. Il voulait leur prouver que le petit et sale Arabe pouvait faire de la belle littérature. Et puis vous savez, la langue française va être sauvée par les francophones et non par les Français. Ceux qui écrivent en langue française veulent prouver qu'ils peuvent maîtriser la langue française à la perfection, voire mieux que les Français eux-mêmes. La chanson française n'a pas été portée au firmament par les Français mais par les étrangers, à l'instar de Dalida, Charles Aznavour, Jacques Brel...

Mais ça n'est pas mon problème. Il est vrai que je porte beaucoup de sympathie pour la langue française, parce que j'ai vécu en France, j'ai pratiqué cette langue et puis il m'arrive souvent de penser dans cette langue. Ce qui fait mal, ce sont ces écrivains qui mettent leurs plumes au service de leurs lecteurs. C'est qu'on ne peut pas écrire si on est condamné à faire ce qui plaît aux autres. Je ne veux pas de cette gloire que de n'être lu qu'en France quoique mon roman *La mémoire de la chair* a été traduit et édité chez Albin Michel et bientôt il sera disponible en format poche. Croyez-moi, je n'ai même pas fait sa promotion. Ça fait deux mois que mon livre est sorti, qu'on me prie pour me rendre en France mais je n'y suis pas encore rendue.

C'est pas ça qui fait ma joie. D'autant plus que je sais que ceux qui ont lu le roman en langue française ce sont des Algériens francophones. Vous savez, Albin Michel a acheté les droits de m'éditer de l'Université américaine du Caire. Ils voulaient savoir ce que les Arabes lisent. Savoir ce que la romancière la plus lue, écrit. Ça pourrait être fait par la CIA (rires) pour avoir une idée sur le lecteur arabe. Parce que, sincèrement, mes livres sont les plus lus dans les prisons israéliennes ainsi que dans leurs barrages. Si donc je commence à écrire en pensant au lecteur, je serais obligée de me censurer, d'effacer une phrase pour gagner la sympathie de celui-là, ajouter une formule pour ne pas perdre celui-ci... Quand j'écris, je ne le fais que pour moi-même. Je n'écris que ce que j'aime, ce que j'aurais aimé lire et je fais ce qui me ressemble. Je laisse vraiment mes empreintes."²⁵

This M o s t e g h a n e m i's statement only confirms the assumption²⁶ that the language remains the basic tool of struggle as far as the colonial discourse is concerned. As a theoretical example of the discussion on the linguistic situation in postcolonial literatures one can present the dispute between Chinua A c h e b e, a Nigerian writer and theoretician of postcolonialism writing only in English and not in mother Igbo, and Wa Thiong'o N g u g i, a Kenyan, the author of *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language*

²⁵ H. Kateb, *Assia Djebar n'est pas représentative de la société algérienne*, „L'Expression“ 12.04.2006.

²⁶ Cf. *The Post-Colonial...*, op. cit., p. 261.

in *African Literature*²⁷, who opts for a radical separation from European languages in postcolonial literatures. Achebe shows that English, imposed upon Nigeria by the empire, has become an element uniting the multicultural and multiethnic, artificially created country. Achebe addressed to Ngugi the following reproaches:

„Ngugi's book argues passionately and dramatically that to speak of African literature in European languages is not only an absurdity but also a part of the scheme of Western imperialism to hold Africa in perpetual bondage [...]. The difference between Ngugi and myself on the issue of indigenous or European languages for African writers is that while Ngugi now believes it is *either / or*, I have always thought it was *both*...“²⁸.

In this way, in the postcolonial literature, the response to the imperial language domination is either total rejection of the colonizers' language to manifest objection (A. Mosteghanemi or Ngugi wa Thiong'o), or subversiveness, i.e. writing in the colonizers' language to make the message understandable for the colonizer (M. Haddad or Chinua Achebe).

Two questions important from the perspective of the postcolonial discourse arise. They concern the possibility and the way of understanding a different culture. In other words, they are related to the problem whether naming determines understanding and what are the ideological consequences of choosing the language in the act of creation.

Mosteghanemi seems to be conscious of the fact that writing in Arabic will not decrease the importance of French for the Algerian culture, that her utopian vision of erasing the colonizers' influence from the collective memory will not prove to be successful. However, the author attempts to recover the Arabic language to the Algerian culture. I interpret it as finding strength and hope in its hybridity and not in a utopian struggle to deny the history of Algeria and the times of colonization.

Gender

The contemporary Algerian literature is treated as the discourse with double colonization or oppression. At the first level, one can see the struggle with a colonizer, yet at the level of body/gender/carnality, another field of domination, far more complex, appears. The discourse that attempts to liberate women who – as the postcolonial studies show – are deprived of their representation in a double way, by colonialism and by patriarchy.

I would like to focus most of all on a question of the text gender or its identity that has to assume the attitude towards dualism of mind and body. In this context, “a woman was (and still is) situated on the side of body, while mind is mainly men's speciality”²⁹.

In *Dākirat al-ğasad* by Ahlam Mosteghanemi, we should reflect on identity in two meanings. Firstly, the identity is understood as liberated femininity, resulting

²⁷ Wa Thiong'o Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London 1986.

²⁸ Ch. Achebe, *The Politics of Language* [in:] *The Post-Colonial...*, op. cit., p. 268.

²⁹ E. Hýžy, *Kobieta, ciało, tożsamość*, Kraków 2003, p. 17.

from the deconstruction of the idea of a woman, from showing the literary self through the male body, treating it from the universal gender perspective. Secondly, the identity results from the perception of the body, not only of the body itself, but also the ways of determining the gender of the body and cultural/social conditions³⁰. Furthermore, this identity concerns the body subjectivization and, consequently, its dualism, including all social consequences for women.

The narrator of the novel is Hālid, a man, while the author is Ahlam Mosteghanemi, a woman. Accustomed by the history of philosophy to perceiving all things in Cartesian dualism: woman – man, body – mind, we will attempt to describe the character of this text.

For example, we will analyze the title (*Dakirat al-ğasad*) and its translations. The literal (Polish) translation that I have chosen is *Pamięć ciała* ("Body's memory"). The title perfectly reflects the link between two elements: corporal (body) and volatile (memory)³¹. The English translation by Baria Ahmar Sreih is *Memory in the Flesh*³².

The semantic opposition between the 'corporal' body and 'volatile' memory is clearly visible. *Memory in the Flesh* – isn't it an antithetical juxtaposition? They can be included into the list of distinctions, so denied and respected by corporal feminism, among which there are: matter and form, nature and culture, body and mind, sex and gender. Therefore, in the title, there is a challenge for the readers. They should ask the question whether there is a division into the male and the female. Consequently, they should unconsciously face the main question of contemporary feminism: is the division into sex/gender theoretically and practically justified³³?

In the article on Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Ferial J. Ghazoul quotes the statement of Abdel-Moneim Tallima: "Ahlam Mosteghanemi goes beyond the common notions of the masculine and the feminine to present a human horizon"³⁴.

Is he yet really guided by the idea of presenting the universal perspective? The postcolonial feminist discourse shows that it is rather the result of the absence of representation of real women in the contemporary Algerian literature.

Writing about the contemporary Arabic literature of the Maghreb countries, Wiebke Walther enumerates authors and indicates in which language (Arabic or French) they published their works³⁵. However, the author neither explains, nor develops this topic. From the contemporary perspective, the greater tension seems to be generated in connection with the question of gender rather than with the question of language.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 263.

³¹ I use the division into 'corporal' and 'volatile' after the renowned Australian feminist Elizabeth Grosz in: eadem, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Sydney 1994. Cf. E. Hyży, op. cit., p. 17.

³² A. Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, translated by Baria Ahmar Sreih and Peter Clark, Cairo 2003.

³³ E. Hyży, op. cit., p. 9.

³⁴ F.G. Ghazoul, *Memory and Desire*, "Al-Ahram" 24–30.12.1998.

³⁵ W. Walther, *Historia literatury arabskiej*, translated by A. Gadziąła, ed. M.M. Dziekan, Warszawa 2008, pp. 276–277.

In *Dakirat al-ğasad*, this tension – I would controversially call it ‘sexual’ – is visible since the very beginning. The book, popularized as the first Algerian novel written in Arabic by a woman, turns out to be a history told by the narrator who is a man.

In the article *Dhākirat al-jasad (The Body's Memory): A New Outlook on Old Themes*, Aida A. Bamiā interpretes the meaning of the male narrator in the following way:

“Mosteghanemi appears to have opted intentionally for a male narrator to voice her assessment of the postcolonial period. This dual-gender outlook at play in the structure of the novel offers some valuable advantages: it sheds light on the fate of the women’s emancipation anticipated after the war and it supplements the accounts given by other almost exclusively male Algerian writers. Mosteghanemi is able to stand at a distance to evaluate the situation, comfortably positioned behind the narrator, Khaled. Her views of women are thus expressed freely, without the risk of being considered either self-serving or those of a ‘woman against her sex’. After having been ignored and dismissed as lesser creatures by their society, women have achieved immense progress by raising their voices in writing”³⁶.

This thesis finds the confirmation in the text. This is the dialogue between Ḥayāt and Ḥālīd:

“Amazing”, you laughed. “Agatha Chrisite’s novel contains more than sixty crimes, and other writers’ novels have even more murders. Yet never does a reader raise their voice to call for these writers to be put on trail for these crimes. But a woman writer has only to write one love story to have many fingers of suspicion pointing at her, calling for a criminal investigator to find more than one piece of evidence that will indicate that it is her story. I believe critics should find a way of setting this matter once and for all”.

Ḥālīd replies:

“I laughed at your argument, but I also admired it, though I was not convinced [...]. Deep inside me, I had a feeling that the story was personal and that this man had passed through your life. And probably your body too”³⁷.

As we can see, Ḥālīd – man is deaf to Ḥayāt’s arguments. Finally, he does not understand Ḥayāt’s problem, but only is jealous and cares about himself (he believes that Ḥayāt is not a virgin, what makes him angry). Despite Ḥālīd is an artist, he lives long in Paris, has a mistrees, and still surrenders himself to the patriarchal way of thinking about a woman.

Muḥsin Ġāsīm al-Mūsawī sees the choice of the male narrator like this:

“It is not suprising that Ahlam Mosteghanemi offers the male Khalid the whole narrative through which the beloved female is drawn both as a young attractive lady of real presence and a symbol for national dream [...]. Although avowedly fighting for

³⁶ A.A. Bamiā, *Dhākirat al-jasad (The Body's Memory): A New Outlook on Old Themes*, “Research in African Literatures” 1997, Vol. 28, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=98500450> [Internet access: 31st of December 2008].

³⁷ A. Mosteghanemi, *Dakirat al-ğasad*, op. cit., p. 54; *Memory in the Flesh*, op. cit., p. 82.

clear some imaginative space for women, the Algerian writer can not escape traditional assumptions, already traced and analyzed by feminists”³⁸.

The question whether Mosteghanemi may escape from the tradition of the male narrator is still without answer. I would rather perceive this narrative situation as a conscious creative intention that remains the manifestation of some idea or the conscious struggle with the colonial discourse.

The male narrator is the result of the fact that before regaining independence by Algeria, women in this country had not their say. There was not any representation of a woman, with the exception of a stereotypical image shaped by a colonizer and an idealized figure of a woman-motherland. In my opinion, this situation should be interpreted using categories of showing ‘absence of representation’.

The Algerian pioneer of the postcolonial feminist discourse is Assia Djébar, writing in French³⁹. Her works remain an attempt to liberate women. She tries to show that they have the right to speak, and the right to live. In the introduction to *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*⁴⁰ (the title of collection refers to the painting by Delacroix under the same title) Assia Djébar comments on the choice of the language:

“I could say: ‘stories translated from...’, but from which language? From the Arabic? From colloquial Arabic or from feminine Arabic; one might just as well call it underground Arabic.

I could have listened to these voices in on matter what language, nonwritten, nonrecorded, transmitted only by chains of echoes and sighs.

Arabic sounds – Iranian, Afghan, Berber, or Bengali – and why not, but always in feminine tones, uttered from lips beneath mask”⁴¹.

In her works, Djébar shows that Algerian women are oppressed by the ‘Other’, a colonizer and a man (a Frenchman and an Arab at the same time)⁴². What may strike in Djébar’s works is that while presenting Algerian women, she tries to create them rather than to express them. In the interview quoted above, Ahlam Mosteghanemi says about Djébar like this:

„Aussi, il arrive un moment où ils ne représentent plus rien. L’exemple le plus apparent est celui de Assia Djébar, je suis désolée de la nommer. Elle ne représente plus l’Algérie. Pour elle, l’image de la femme algérienne n’a pas évolué. Elle est toujours telle qu’elle l’avait décrite dans les années cinquante. Malheureusement, c’est cette image médiocre que les Européens nous demandent de brosser. L’Université de Berkeley, aux Etats-Unis m’a invitée à un colloque qui se tiendra les 20 et 21 du mois en cours pour donner une conférence. On m’a demandé d’aller parler de la femme algérienne. Ils veulent

³⁸ A l-Mūsawī, op. cit., p. 238.

³⁹ It is her pen name that she took on for fear of father’s anger. The literal meaning of ‘Assja Djébar’ is ‘uncompromising consolation’.

⁴⁰ A. Djébar, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, Paris 1980.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 12.

⁴² More analyses of Assja Djébar’s works in: D. Grace, *The Woman in the Muslim Mask. Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*, London 2004.

avoir une autre image que celle que leur donne Assia Dj e b a r. Il faut qu'on leur donne cette image de la femme algérienne qui se bat, qui milite, qui croise le fer avec tous ceux qui tentent de la réduire au silence et ceux qui veulent, par tous les moyens, lui imposer l'omerta'⁴³.

The dispute between both authors touches the essence of the postcolonial feminism. First of all, one should mind not to be caught in a trap of the discursive reality creation (mistake made by Dj e b a r). After Sp i v a k and her followers, I would repeat that one should mind the risk of forming [the representation of] the Other apart from his real existence.

In *Orientalism*, Sa i d proved that an imaginary representation may actually begin to exist. In the same way, there are some imaginary representations of Algerian women (or, more stereotypically, Arab ones). Unreasonable interest in the postcolonial studies has contributed to creating the controversial feminist thought. The feminist critics, Spivak at the head, but also the renowned Egyptian feminist Nawāl a s - S a ' d a w ī, underline the importance of giving the floor to women, and not of creating another stereotypes or images, quite far from reality. In this context, it is worth to introduce a term 'a woman's perspective' instead of 'a woman's image'. This transfers the centre of gravity from the presentation, that leads to creating clichés, to the expression, that presupposes multiplicity of viewpoints and shows unlimited number of perspectives.

At the same time, the question concerning assumptions of the postcolonial studies arises. How to present issues erased from the dominating representation systems or hidden under a pretence of discourse? In her famous study *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Sp i v a k claims that such a representation is like the experience of the impossible. The experience of the world in oppression will be yet possible only when it will be accompanied with the presentation itself⁴⁴.

Ahla m M o s t e g h a n e m i gives her support to feminism understood in this moderate way. In *Dākirat al-ḡasad*, there are not real female characters, there are only women-symbols. Ḥayāt – idealized love-motherland, Mother – memory of childhood, Catherine – mistress. The real woman is yet hidden behind the text. This is the presence of the author, an Algerian woman who wrote a novel about the absence of representation of Algerian women.

(translated by Magdalena Wanot)

⁴³ H. Kateb, *Assia...*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ G.Ch. Sp i v a k, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* [in:] *The Post-Colonial...*, op. cit., pp. 28–37.