



REVIEW ARTICLE

ART, POLITICS AND THE BODY IN MOSTEGHANEMI'S NOVELS MEMORY IN THE FLESH AND
CHAOS OF THE SENSES

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ABSTRACT

The Algerian female author, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, wrote the trilogy *Dhakhirat Al Jasad*, *Fawdha Al Hawas* and *Abir Saririn* Arabic. The first two volumes, *Memory in the Flesh* and *Chaos of the Senses*, were translated into English by Baria Ahmer. In my analysis of these two novels, I wish to discuss the relationship between art and politics in Algeria, focussing on body disability and the destabilisation of boundaries between reality and art in the context of postcolonial Algeria.

Key words:

Mostaghanemi,
ALEGRIA,
Novel,
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INTRODUCTION

Khalid, Mosteghanemi's male narrator, is a middle-aged Algerian x-militant whose left arm was mutilated in 1957 during the National War of Liberation (1954–1962) against the French occupation of Algeria (1830–1962). Following a doctor's advice to relieve his depression by rediscovering his interests, Khalid begins painting. A couple of decades later, as an émigré in Paris, Khalid launches his first gallery exhibition, where he meets the young Algerian writer Ahlam. Their love story fails when Ahlam marries a wealthy politician of the new elite and writes a novel entitled, *The Corner of Oblivion*, which seems to narrate her love affair with Khalid. In response, Khalid writes this novel, borrowing Ahlam's motifs of ritual killing (Mosteghanemi, *Memory* 251), as he puts it. Khalid's voice determines the narrative style as early as the first three words: "I STILL remember" (1) by using regular flashbacks in a stream of consciousness mode of narration (Ghazoul). Depending solely upon his memory, Khalid writes this letter, showing that the act of writing is in essence a product of memory—possibly alluding to Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*, where writing and drawing are both presented as outcomes of memory. As writing depends upon memory, memories need writing—or any external inscription—in order to exist (Parker 40).

According to Christian Steineck, memory "concerns something that is not physically present" (40). For Remy Lestienne, memory "is strongly entangled with the notion of time" (1). However, the process of external inscription grants memory its physical presence and, by extension, an immunity against time. One of the strongest forms of such inscriptions is on the human body. Michel Foucault writes, "The body is the inscribed surface of events" ("Nietzsche" 83). War disability, in particular, exemplifies the process of such inscriptions—the nation's violent signature on random, masses of bodies that become abruptly alienated, belonging neither to the dead nor the living, "but [to] an arena only of pain" (*Memory* 20). Body disability acquires a different meaning according to the space in which it exists. The two spaces in which Khalid's body disability is situated in the novel are the artistic and the political. For instance, in Khalid's account of the details of his successful exhibition in Paris, Catherine, his French girlfriend, enters the gallery and congratulates him in a loud voice with dramatic behaviour, as if she suddenly wished everyone to know about their relationship. Khalid reflects, [C]ould it have been that she just realized that, without knowing it, she had been sleeping with a genius for two years and that the missing arm that irritated her now, in other circumstances, took on an artistic dimension that had nothing to do with aesthetic criteria? I discovered that during the twenty-five years I had lived with one arm, the only place where I could forget about my handicap was in exhibition galleries . . . It was probably also the same during the first years of independence when soldiers

still enjoyed some respect and the war handicapped had some prestige among ordinary folk. (*Memory* 43) This passage conveys an unmistakable link between art and war concerning body disability; by being inside one of two spaces, the gallery/battlefield, the disability attains either an aesthetic or a noble dimension, respectively. The “unordinary” body feels “ordinary” only by being inside an extraordinary space; as Khalid reflects, “[in] the gallery . . . I could live for a few days like a normal human being with two arms, albeit maybe an extraordinary person” (*Memory* 44).

Furthermore, body disability is situated in the political space, as Khalid remembers:

They [injured militants] inspired admiration rather than pity. . . We carry our memory in the flesh and that required no explanation. Today, a quarter of a century later, one is ashamed of the empty sleeve hidden timidly in the pocket of a jacket, as though trying to conceal a private memory and apologize for the past to those who have no past. (*Memory* 43) The body disability, which once honourably served as a collective political memory, because of the logic of time, turns into a private memory that concerns no one but the disabled person. The body disability faces the inevitable consequences of time; time dissolves its eloquent connotations, robbing it of its voice, denying it its original reason for existence and changing it from a national reference to an evidence of nobility, pride and self-sacrifice into a hollow “empty sleeve” and a pitiful, personal disfiguration. The disfigured body finds the original justifications of its sacrifice no longer valid, rendering its disability an unfortunate *accident* rather than a purposeful *event*.

The Algerian war-disabled body, hence, is forever searching for a meaning with which to be conceived; its need to be identified within a political or artistic framework arises from its need to be recognised not as a deformed living entity, but as an exquisite, exotic and unique external memory of its nation. Art and politics appear to provide a collective reference without which the body disability becomes intolerable. This situating of Algerian body disability within the political and artistic space, however, is only one manifestation of the relationship between art and politics, a relationship that is central to the two novels by Mosteghanemi considered here.

Art and Politics

As a talented artist, when he meditates his acts of creation and the birth of each painting, Khalid whispers the classical narcissistic/artistic question “Could I be God?” (*Memory* 120). To have only one hand—particularly the right one—as a means of creation and might carries strong religious connotations. The Quran states, “when the whole earth is His handful on the Day of Resurrection, and the heavens are rolled in His right hand” (“*Quran Explorer*” 39:67). The amputated arm also alludes to and shares an aesthetic relation to *Venus de Milo*, the famous Greek statue, believed to be the Goddess of Love and Beauty, which has no arms. Although he does not refer to it by name, Khalid speaks of having an armless female statue in his flat, about which he says, “she’s the only woman with whom up to now I’ve felt at ease” (*Memory* 108)—though it could equally be a copy of *Les Menottes de Cuivre*, Rene Magritte’s version of Venus. Be that as it may, this allusion is one of many in Mosteghanemi’s deliberate attempts to manipulate the boundaries—for reasons that are yet to come—

between life and art, a breathing human being and a lifeless statue. Moreover, Khalid’s mutilated arm, which he lost in battle, and his existing arm, which lives for art are highly allegorical of the complicated relationship between art and politics in postcolonial Algeria, a relationship presented in the novel as both necessary and problematic. Another representation of this paradoxical relationship is in Ziad, Khalid’s poet-friend, who joins the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), and decides to stop writing poetry, “swearing that he would only write after that with a weapon” (*Memory* 100). The conversion of Khalid from a militant to a painter and Ziad from a poet to a political activist emphasises the deep correlation between art and politics in Algeria and the Arab world at large, and accentuates the inescapable nature of such relationships.

Both novels seemingly advocate art as means of expressing revolutionary aspirations, defy the political will, and serve as an external inscription of the political and social memory of Algeria. However, in moments of doubt, they question art’s utility against a bleak political horizon. Khalid wonders, “What kind of entertainment could an art exhibition offer to the Algerian citizen who lived on the brink of explosion or suicide?” (*Memory* 118). Similarly, in *Chaos of the Senses*, Nasser, Ahlam’s brother, criticises her: “Stop and look at the ruins around you. What you’re writing makes no difference. . .

The ones you’re writing for are waiting for handouts of bread and medicine. They can’t afford to buy a book” (73). In such statements, Mosteghanemi indirectly criticises the elitist view of art as detached from the political and social life of Algeria. However, she could also doubt the value of her practices as an author as she did in her speech at the Arab novelists’ Conference in Cairo in 1998, after mourning the death of Algerian citizens “You have to ask yourself what is the feasibility of writing? Does life really need novelists?” (“To be an Algerian Author” [all translation mine]). Her ongoing writing career proves that despite her doubts, Mosteghanemi believes in art as a means of expressing social and political concerns. The view of art as social and political involvement results not from the problem of underestimating its aesthetic function nor from a moralist’s counteraction to what Noël Carroll calls autonomism in art² (127), but from a view of art as the creative articulation of the human experience, including its social and political dimensions.

However, if we are—without any utopian expectations or platonic demands—to embrace a realistic notion of art as an active participant in the moral, social, and political context in which it is created and from which it derives its anxieties and expectations, then we might equally accept the claim that “moral and political theory depends on, or can benefit from, aesthetic concepts” (Wolff, 137). This recognition, according to Janet Wolff, is not new “but rather a return to an earlier understanding of their mutual implication” (138). The question in the Algerian context, however, is not whether art *should* carry moral and political implications—since that is more or less the case—but more importantly, to what extent art expresses the political experience before it becomes submissive to political ideology. Posing this question requires an acknowledgment of the struggle for dominance that such a relationship is likely to engender. It is often the case in the Arab World that such a relationship becomes a practice of exploitation of the weaker side—namely art. Turning back to *Memory in the Flesh*, Khalid’s friendship with Si Sharif, a

politician surrounded by suspicion, dates back to when both men were involved in the revolution before each took a separate path. Needless to say, this friendship is politico-allegorical; it alludes to the change in social and political values after the Algerian Revolution and the rise of the new elite, which took advantage of the vulnerability of the Algerian nation during the critical period in which the country had not fully overcome the painful experience of colonialism nor recovered from the toll of the National War of Liberation—over a million Algerian people.

Furthermore, each major character in both novels is presented with an ethical question to which the answer is extremely reduced to a choice between two paths: to join the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the only legitimised political party after the independence—like Si Sharif and Hayat's husband (the “unethical” choice, which typically grants fortune and the happy ending)—or to become a freelance artist like Khalid and Ziad (the “ethical” choice, which typically involves suffering and unfulfillment). By so doing, the “[a] esthetic qualities in [the novel] [become] overwhelmed by ideology” (Lansari 63).

Moreover, Khalid first *resists* selling any of his paintings to Si Sharif but at the end presents him with one, pessimistically confirming the orthodox—yet justified—fears of the future of the relationship between art and politics in postcolonial Algeria: the complete submission of art to political censorship. Si Sharif replies by thanking Khalid, “I've put your picture up in my living room, and so I'm sharing my house with you, you know!” (*Memory* 175). “Sharing” is far from what the relationship truly is: art displayed within the state's framework (literally in the house of Si Sharif and figuratively by the power of censorship of the works of Mosteghanemi and others), but never the other way around. Throughout history—despite Plato's desire—art has never been authoritatively superior to politics; the relationship suffers from chronological imbalances. Moreover, for art to exist within (instead of in parallel with) the political framework is for it to be de-revolutionised and domesticated; it begins to acquire placid features and carry tame interpretations.

Blurring the Boundaries

After long years in exile, Khalid revisits his hometown, Constantine, and stands on the Robe Bridge, the same bridge he painted in his dearest work, *Nostalgia*: “I could cross that metal barrier just as I crossed into the frame and entered it forever. I could roll down into the rocky deep valley, a human drop for some color on an immortal painting, for a scene I wished to paint. Instead it painted me” (*Memory* 192). This moment depicts the artist as not only emotionally but also physically united with his artwork, ignoring all the rational distances that separate the artist from his creation. It also destabilises the existing boundaries between actual and virtual space. In painting, the relationship between inside/outside tenses. Khalid states, “I don't live in this city [Constantine]. It lives in me. Don't look for me in the bridges. They never once carried me. I carried them” (*Memory* 246). Moreover, *Chaos of the Senses* only further destabilises the established boundaries between the two spaces: the actual and the virtual. It destroys any remaining fine lines between inside/outside the text, arguably demonstrating its own version of Derrida's famous proposition, “there is nothing outside the text” (*Of Grammatology* 163).

The narrator, this time a female voice, is Ahlam—Khalid's lover and an Algerian novelist, bearing the same first name, nationality and career of Mosteghanemi; she re-narrates the love affair between her and Khalid using a substantially different setting and details. The genderchange of the narrator invites a whole set of questions—not discussed in this essay—about the extent to which the change in details and techniques between the two narratives can be attributed to gender. It is not long before the reader encounters a major twist in the plot: Ahlam is also the author of *Memory in the Flesh*, and Khalid is but a character of her own creation. With such a twist, the female narrative appears to have devoured the male narrative; Khalid's voice, desires and disability have been mediated through—and possibly manipulated by—a female narrator. Although this twist temptingly invites interpretations, I wish, nevertheless, to limit my focus to the implications of the shattering of boundaries between text/reality and, in consequence, author/character.

The destabilisation of boundaries reaches a peak when Ahlam begins to fall in love with the character she created—and thus the authoritative position of the author is destroyed, presenting him or her as a vulnerable being, susceptible to as much manipulation as he or she is capable of, and far from representing the Author-God in Ronald Barthes's sense (146). In love with her male character, Ahlam follows the spatial and temporal signs of her texts only to meet a man in reality, who, to her surprise and that of the reader, looks exactly like Khalid, including a disabled left—this time paralyzed—arm. In a final twist in the last quarter of the novel, the reader discovers that Khalid (whose actual name is unknown) is a fond reader of *Memory in The Flesh* and that its protagonist looked so much like him that he started to use his name as a pseudonym in the articles he writes for the newspaper. The reader finally concludes that Khalid is originally a character in a book who has turned into a real man—not the other way around.

The blurring of boundaries between author/character and the destruction of the author's authoritative position by placing her in parallel with her characters, equally helpless and with no control over her text—let alone her life—is highly suggestive of an author's situation in any dictatorial regime. No longer is he or she the subject of the event, no longer is he or she the god of his or her creation; instead, the author *always* remains an object—a “character” in the political narrative. With historical insight, Malika Rahal writes, “In Algeria, the version of events developed by the ... FLN regime turned into an official history imposing a one dimensional and linear narrative of the nationalist past” (120). The political narrative to which Rahal refers is the narrative that I propose renders the author helpless in a much more dominant (con) text.

The idea of the helplessness of the subject/creator and his or her loss of control over his or her creation along with the presence of a larger framework is more evident in the case of the new Khalid. Unlike the “first” Khalid, the “second” Khalid is a photographer who becomes disabled in the middle of an artistic event. While he is trying to take a photo of a little boy amidst the destruction of war, he is shot, thus finding himself part of the war. The second Khalid reflects, “[T]he moment I wanted to capture with my camera and preserve what was preserved in my body forever. It has become a memory of the flesh that I share with the hundreds of the wounded and dead who fell during those events” (*Chaos*, 187).

In the moment of creation, the photographer, when injured, becomes united with the scene, part of the torture and destruction he was trying to capture. Although he seems to be standing at a distance from the scene he intended to photograph, his injury, nonetheless, presents a larger frame of the revolution that incorporates both the photographer and his picture, making him merely another picture “captured” by the revolution. Thus, the subject/creator of art becomes simultaneously an object/a victim of the revolution. By creating this sophisticated scene, Mosteghanemi confirms that by merely being an Algerian artist, one necessarily becomes politically victimised. Therefore, the relationship between art and politics inflates from a mere expression of the human experience to being ideologically suppressive and ontologically binding. Fredric Jameson’s highly controversial claim, “All third-world texts are necessarily ... allegorical and in a very specific way: they are to be read as ... *national allegories*” (69) does indeed—despite its many problematic presumptions and consequences—grasp the extent to which politics has come to define literature in the Arab World. Not only in the Arab World, but also generally, as Edward Said believed that there is no escape from politics to art, because “politics is everywhere” (21).

However, in the case of the Algerian novel, it is not the presence of politics as much as the dominance of the political narrative that I argue is the issue. Moreover, the narration of the two novels exhibits inevitability by swinging between the mourning of Khalid’s love and the historical defeats and massacres of Algeria without needing to introduce or justify the leaps between art/politics, the private/public and the individual/collective. Consequently, and if the notion of the author arises from the idea of individualisation, as Foucault suggests (101), then the Algerian author revises this proposition by suffering from the deterioration of individuality, which renders his work inexpressive of his ontological autonomy, but fluent in addressing the changing political mood of Algeria. Ammaria Lansari reports, “The [Algerian] novel production published by the SNED ... is almost entirely devoted to the Algerian war. Out of the twelve novels published between 1969 and 1980, only two of them do not deal with this theme” (62). Although published in 1993 and 1997, respectively, Mosteghanemi’s two novels are in the period of the 1960s onwards, and they address as much as embody the inflammation of the public at the expense of the private through the submissive tone of Khalid: “Now we are standing in the country’s erupting volcano. We have no longer any alternative but to become one with the lava flying from its mouth and to forget about our own small fires” (*Memory* 12). Therefore, as an Algerian author, Mosteghanemi’s choices are few: to either resist or submit to the political narrative, but not to ignore it. Nonetheless, the political ideology implied in the Algerian post-independence literature or the work that addresses that period—including Mosteghanemi’s—is, according to Lansari, “not denied by the authors, but is even taken by some as a duty and honor” (63). This appears to be the case with Mosteghanemi, as her second novel’s dedication addresses several martyrs of Algeria, including the assassinated president, Mohammed Boudiaf.

Conclusion

At different stages in the novels, each of the three major characters, Khalid the painter, Ahlam the author and Khalid the photographer, eventually becomes united with his/her

artwork; the painter stands inside his landscape painting, the author steps into her text, and the photographer becomes part of his picture, which constitutes a strong rejection of Ronald Barthes’s notion, “the death of the author” (142), and any other postmodern critical attempt to separate an artwork from its creator. In fact, this blurring between the artist and the artwork corresponds to Derrida’s statement, “The origin of the artist is the work of art, the origin of the work of art is the artist, ‘neither is without the other’” (31–32). Similar to Derrida, Mosteghanemi appears to grant priority or originality to neither the subject/artist nor the object/artwork. Therefore, and as suggested earlier, since most Algerian artworks carry political implications (or at the very least accept such interpretations), then such moments of unity imply the proposition that every artist is a potential political activist. Blurring the boundary between art/real is widely adopted in the field of literary criticism, which views reality as the source from which art derives its rationality³ and judges the act of living to be a form of storytelling (Lehrer 81). Mosteghanemi, on the other hand, exoticises the correlation by presenting literature as the original space from which the event arises—then mimicked in reality. This unusual inversion, I believe, is justified in an Arab female author, whose space of freedom in literature is often wider than that in reality. Therefore, and if we are to follow the existentialist definition of ontological existence as the degree to which one is capable of practising one’s freedom, then literature, in this sense, *can be* the original space in which actions take place. In writing, Mosteghanemi is experimenting with her new freedom as a writer and testing the miraculous powers literature grants an Arab female author, who is considered illegible to many axiomatic forms of freedom in the social and political reality of postcolonial Algeria.

The destabilisation of the boundaries between politics/art, actual/virtual and artist/artwork in the novels can be compressed into the anxious relation between subject/object. The intended destabilisation—which, as discussed earlier, grants no priority either to subject or object, and views both as equals in any act of creation—can be said to demonstrate against the social and political boundaries that began to divide Algerian citizens after the Declaration of Independence in 1962, rendering most of the population objects of the political will of the new military elite. The literary blurring that Mosteghanemi practises expresses the desire of the *object* to be as active as the *subject* in the act of creation, which is the same concept of desire that fuelled the Algerian Revolution in 1954 and the Arab Spring in 2011, that is, as active citizens with full rights to practice their political existence and, subsequently, their ontological freedom.

On the one hand, Mosteghanemi employs both body and art as external inscriptions and the material evidence of the inflammation of the collective and the deterioration of the individual during the painful process of decolonising and reconstructing Algeria. On the other hand, Mosteghanemi herself is a victim of such inflammation; her novels are laden with political allegories and loaded with revolutionary ideals. Furthermore, Mosteghanemi’s father, the political activist Mohammed El Sharif Mosteghanemi, died on 1 November 1992, on the same day the National War of Liberation erupted in 1954. As an author, Mosteghanemi lived her life between her fiction writing and her father’s political activism—with their ups and downs; perhaps she eventually saw how the two worlds are terrifyingly bound together, and how inescapable the blood relation is—whether of kinship or war, a father or a

revolution. For the Algerian author, the act of writing is indeed a heavy debt to pay: to remember. The Algerian author will always feel indebted to (sometimes even suffocated by) the specters of independence—the religiously and socially sanctified bodies of the *shuhada'* [martyrs]. Mosteghanemi's two novels are laden with the names and bodies of Algerian martyrs. Through Khalid, Mosteghanemi wonders, "Their [the Algerian martyrs'] martyrdom came years before the War of Liberation. Can I forget them? Should I forget those who entered the prison and never emerged? Their bodies remaining in the torture chambers [*sic*]? Can I forget those who died the worst kind of death—our comrades who chose to die alone?" (209). The bodies that were once buried in the revolution are blossoming now and will blossom for years to come in the body of postcolonial Algerian literature. As gloomy as it may seem, today's Algerian author is imprisoned in the notion of the bodily sacrifice; the anxiety towards his or her nation's sanctified past hinders him or her from expressing his or her ontological worries, for the author's small daily battles and concerns always appear trivial compared to the great sacrifices of the martyrs. I believe this is the reason that Mosteghanemi chose to create the hero of her trilogy as a character with a war disability; her view of heroism is highly entangled with the notions of martyrdom and bodily sacrifice. Moreover, it was important for Mosteghanemi to create a hero who suffered from disability and unfulfillment, just like the Algerian nation with its disabled political will and unfulfilled post-independence aspirations. Khalid, hence, is the embodiment of Algeria and its revolutionary ideals.

Writing in Algeria, for the most part, becomes an act of remembering death; in her speech in Cairo 1998, Mosteghanemi stated, "[W]riting is the apology [Algerian] authors give to the dead for merely being alive". "Life", Mosteghanemi declares, "is the number one novelist in Algeria" ("To be an Algerian Author"). Surrounded by nationalist ideals, the artistic individuality of the Algerian author (including Mosteghanemi) is difficult to locate; for him or her, nation comes first. Such an assertion is not meant to encourage disregard of the Algerian identity, but to acknowledge a neglected part of it. It is more or less a demand to have the right to express artistically the new Algerian visions and dreams without feeling obligated to adopt the slogans of the past. Although it is true that the process of writing heavily depends upon remembering the past, a great part of it also concerns imagining and constructing the future.

Endnotes

1. Khalid states, "I have swapped the brush for a dagger" (Mosteghanemi, *Memory* 3).
2. "[A]ccording to the autonomist, the artistic and moral realms are separate" (Carroll, 127). For more on autonomism see "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding" *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 126–160.
3. For more on literature and reality see Nadine Gordimer, "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" *Writing and Being* (London: Harvard UP, 1995) 1–19.

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