Full Length Research Paper

Representation of gendered art through gendered memories in Ahlam Mosteghanemi’s
Memory in the Flesh and Chaos of the Senses

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This essay considers the way that Ahlam Mosteghanemi makes use of gendered memory in her two novels. Memory in the Flesh (2008) first published in 1985 and Chaos of the Senses (2007), first published in 1998. In order to make it clear which text is being referred to, references to these main texts will include author name, abbreviated titles MIF and COS respectively and page number for quotations. Here, it is argued that gendered memory is linked to the ways the protagonists in the novels approach their chosen art forms of painting and writing, each from a different gendered perspective. For this purpose, the use of trauma theory, as applied to post-colonial literature, provides a useful lens through which to analyse the main protagonists and their approach to memory and art. Thus, the study constructs a theoretical framework for linking gender and art in fiction through memories of trauma. For instance, in Mosteghanemi’s first novel, Memory in the Flesh, the male protagonist, Khaled, takes up painting, while the female protagonist, Ahlam/Hayat, becomes a writer.

Key words: Memory, Gender, Trauma, Art.

INTRODUCTION

Marking a new chapter in the history of Algerian literature, Ahlam Mosteghanemi is the first Algerian woman writer to publish a novel in the Arabic language. Her award-winning debut novel, Memory in the Flesh (1985), tells the story of the complex relationship between a former freedom fighter, Khaled, who has lost an arm in Algeria’s War of Independence, and Ahlam (also called Hayat), the much younger daughter of a fellow soldier who fell in that same war. Chaos of the Senses (1998) continues the story, but while the first novel is told from the point of view of a male narrator, Khaled, the narrator of the second novel is the female character, Ahlam.

In the first novel, Khaled takes up painting while Ahlam/Hayat becomes a writer. These two choices are deeply revealing in terms of Mosteghanemi’s treatment of the themes of memory, trauma and gender. Since Visual and verbal forms of art differ in their techniques and in their level of explicitness in terms of emotional content, these are important elements in the gendered way in which the characters approach their past and present lives.

Therefore, this essay argues that the gendered
memories of these protagonists, as expressed through their art, can be read in meaningful ways through trauma theories as applied to post-colonial literature, following the works of Caruth and Herman, respectively, and in ways that further reveal the importance of taking into consideration the gendered experiences of the postcolonial aftermath of war as methods of gesturing towards ways of healing and moving forward. Moreover, the novelist’s own ambivalence toward the expression of gender and memory in art underscores to the need to include gendered memories in any literary work which aims to grasp the psychological and social impact of trauma on modern Algeria.

Theoretical framework for the study of memory, trauma and gender in fictional writing

Recent literary theorists argue that examining the psychological aspects of trauma and memory in literary works can provide an avenue through which we are able to approach areas which remain problematic in post-colonial societies:

“By bringing the insights of deconstructive and psychoanalytic scholarship to the analysis of cultural artefacts that bear witness to traumatic histories, critics can gain access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation” (Craps and Buelens, 2008:1).

The two contrasting theories within trauma studies relate to the extent to which trauma can be verbalised or otherwise expressed in the aftermath of traumatic experiences. On one hand, the work of Caruth (1996: 91-92) emphasises the impossibility of putting trauma into words, and maintains that there is a lasting effect which leaves the traumatised person always vulnerable and constantly struggling to reclaim their memories in a form which is bearable to them. Judith Herman 1997, on the other hand, sees the construction of a narrative after trauma as a way of helping the individual through that experience towards a position of recovery.

These two different approaches, which Visser (2011:274) calls the “aporetic” and “therapeutic” view of trauma, are exemplified in the novels with the added twist of gender in the characterisations of Khaled and Ahlam/Hayat. Because Khaled relives his trauma every day, it prevents him from finding any peace with himself and his past. His approach is therefore an “aporetic” one because he cannot find any solution or promising avenue through which he can reach an accommodation with the painful past. Khaled sees the past in every aspect of modern Constantine and refuses to build bridges with modern inhabitants of that city, or to identify in any way with the post-colonial Algeria that it represents.

Hayat, however, uses her writing to work through her painful past, while still suffering the hurt of parental neglect and the trauma of growing up in a damaged home environment. Her military husband additionally neglects her just as her father did in the past; however, in spite of her negative experience of patriarchy she still very much does want to be a part of the new Algeria. As for Khaled, it is useful to view how Caruth’s approach to trauma theory rests on Freud’s earlier concept of Nachträglichkeit, meaning belatedness (Visser, 2011:272-274). This term emphasises the way in which trauma is not experienced directly through actual historical events as they happen, but rather is experienced later at some other place or time. According to Visser (2011:273), traumatic experience is “literal yet latent” and is therefore governed by a very different kind of temporality than other kinds of experience. Thus the temporality Khaled experiences appears as disjointed, since his life is divided into two parts: life in Constantine during the War of Independence and life in Paris as an exiled Algerian patriot of the old school. This chasm in time and space presents an insurmountable barrier for him, and he seems always to be looking back, trying to make sense of traumatic memories of the past, rather than living his life in the present.

In contrast, Hayat does not have this chasm in her life, and so the latent meanings in people, places, and objects can be continually overlaid with new meanings, as she encounters them again and again throughout her life. While both Hayat and Khaled have trouble reconciling the past with the present, and their past notion of self with their present, the conditions under which they live make for a very different individual experience.

Importantly, both the aporetic and the therapeutic approach to trauma theory recognise that memory is central to the experience of trauma. Bodily memories, as trauma is re-experienced in the body, as opposed to psychological memories, often adds a collective and social dimension which produces insidious effects on the self-image of the victim (Craps and Buelens, 2008: 3). Particularly, in post-colonial and diasporic contexts, there are repercussions for the individual of living with memories of violence and oppression in a world where the injustices and suffering of whole communities stand as historic facts, with no possible recourse to any kind of restorative justice or even admission of responsibility. Their perpetrators go unpunished and the victims are left to carry on their lives, with all the hurt and resentment lingering in their minds.

Therefore, rebuilding individual and collective well-being and self-respect is very difficult under these circumstances. However, Mosteghanemi’s two novels importantly offer two differing solutions to this problem: the male character Khaled, in Memory in the Flesh, departs from Algeria and seeks to capture the essence of the city of Constantine during its period of resistance to colonial rule in his paintings; while the female character Hayat, in Chaos of the Sense, remains in the country and explores her own personal memories and turbulent
emotions through her writing. The city of Constantine that Hayat engages with is subject to continuing atrocities, with many sudden murders and violent outbreaks which means that both old and new sources of trauma lurk around every corner. Khaled, however, is located at some distance from Algeria, and thus his ongoing trauma is experienced more through his memories of the past.

Some feminist theories on trauma posit that trauma affects women differently from men and further emphasises the cumulative effects of race, class, and gender oppression. Because women and men start from different positions, they additionally deal with the aftermath of violence and trauma in different, and gendered, ways (Lazreg 81-83); Caruth, 1995: 3-12). Men are most often implicated in violence as both perpetrator and victim, while women are most often cast in the role of victim, whether or not they would choose this role (McLarney 2002:22-44; Valassopoulos, 2007: 114).

This contrast necessarily sets up a very different gendered dynamic in the aftermath of wars and violence. My assertion is that Mosteghanemi’s novels, Memory in the Flesh and Chaos of the Senses, demonstrate through the protagonists that memory is gendered and further illustrates how processing memories of trauma through gendered perspectives can either help or hinder a person in dealing with a traumatic past. For example, Mosteghanemi’s male protagonist, Khaled, suffers disempowerment on many levels, through his physical injury, his exile and low social status in France, and his unsatisfactory relationships with women, including particularly his failed ambitions to pursue a love affair with Hayat. In contrast, the flourishing career of Hayat as a writer demonstrates her journey along a path from patriarchal oppression towards a feminist conception of equality and freedom. While memories of trauma hinder Khaled, they decidedly help Hayat, thereby demonstrating a taut link between memory, gender and art.

Khaled’s painting: Gendered memory and art

Although Khaled is a committed and successful artist, there is a very interesting excursus in the novel where Khaled briefly considers the possibility of another art form, namely writing, and immediately suffuses it with all the gendered overtones that he attributes to the act of painting:

“There is nothing more difficult than to start writing at an age when others have finished saying everything. Writing for the first time after the age of fifty is something at once both sensual and insane, a reversion to adolescence. Something exciting but also dumb, resembling a love affair between a man in decline and a new pen! The former, confused and in a hurry, the latter an eager virgin that all the ink in the world would fail to satisfy” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 12).

While this passage occurs at the beginning of the novel, in chronological terms, the event occurs after the novel’s main narrative about the Khaled’s life in Paris and the visit of Ahlam/Hayat. Khaled realises that his lack of skill in writing, which linked also to his age, does not allow him to play the role of conquering male in the medium of the written word and so he retreats into bitter reflection. Later he contemplates the power of writing as a weapon with which to achieve revenge on Ahlam/Hayat:

“Let me admit to you that at this moment I hate you and that I have had to write this book to kill you. Let me borrow your weapons” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, p. 28).

This crucial utterance is a clue to the impotent rage that haunts Khaled throughout his adult life. He wishes to appropriate the new feminimized art of the pen in order to achieve violent revenge, even though he regards this as an inferior, juvenile art form. Khaled’s desire for revenge arises because Khaled experiences a particularly acute form of trauma through physical loss of his arm, thereby drawing attention to his body. This focus on a person’s body is more traditionally something happens to women in a patriarchal society (Scarry, 1985:360). When Khaled feels the critical gaze of the people in Paris on his body he suffers a kind of emasculation because he finds he is forced to play the role of an object.

“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. The missing hand disturbs them and takes away their appetite” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 43).

He cannot stride through Paris as a powerful masculine hero because he is so obviously disfigured by his past battles in Algeria. This memory of the struggle with the martyrs of the past is constantly presented to him in the present as a weakening reality. There seems to be no way for him to build a new identity that measure up to his youthful past self, because he lives in a time and place that is unsympathetic to his suffering. Places are reserved for war heroes in the Paris Metro but Khaled reflects:

“These places are reserved for other combatants. Their war was not your war, and their wounds may well have been inflicted by you. As for your injuries, they are not recognized here … You are the broken memory and this broken body is nothing but a display” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 44).

The only way out of this dilemma for Khaled is to retreat backwards: in other words, to use his paintings to reproduce the time and the place in which he had been a whole man., and in which his injuries would be interpreted as marks of heroism.

Throughout the novel, Mosteghanemi shows that the bridge at Constantine holds more symbolism for Khaled
than simply a connection with a physical place: it connects him with his former self. This is made particularly clear in the scene where he describes his feelings while composing a new bridge painting:

The colors suddenly started to take on the color of my memory and became a gaping wound very difficult to stop […] As soon as I had finished one neighborhood another would be aroused. As soon as I had finished one bridge another would spring to mind (Mosteghanemi MIF 125).

By equating the colours of his memory with a gaping wound, Khaled shows that he still sees the past in terms of trauma. As seen in the previous section, and as Visser’s (2011:274) trauma theory explains, latent suffering rises to the surface again and again, making him experience the pain without any prospect of peace from the past trauma. In addition to connecting Khaled with his former self, Mosteghanemi also reveals that he uses his art in the same way as he uses women. He does not state this directly, but his use of the language of sex and conquest in relation to painting reveals that this is his unconscious position. This can be seen in his description of a moment when the artist contemplates what he might paint:

“But then I might not paint anything, and might die as I was standing, impotent before a virgin canvas” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 220).

Every painting represents a kind of conquest for Khaled, and the memories which flood into his mind are described in highly gendered terms as he casts himself in the role of the male artist/lover exercising power over the female:

He describes himself wanting “to give satisfaction to Constantine, stone by stone, bridge by bridge, and neighbourhood by neighbourhood, like a love who gives satisfaction to the body of a woman who is no longer his” (Mosteghanemi MIF, 125).

The canvas is an object to Khaled, a place where he is able to exert his masculine power by charging the act of painting with sexual overtones. This becomes particularly clear in the language Khaled uses to describe the passion he feels when painting:

“I was going back and forth with my brush as if with my lips. I was kissing its soil, its stones, its trees, its valleys. Distributing my passion over the space with colored kisses, nostalgia, madness and a sweating love” (Mosteghanemi MIF, 126).

It is notable, however, that this love is not reciprocated. It is solitary, and it is imaginary, rather than a real experience with a real woman. Even Khaled’s love for Hayat is lived out mainly in his imagination. He does not possess the masculine power that he thinks he ought to have, since he has lost this dimension of his personality through the trauma of the war. In effect, his sexual identity has been displaced by the trauma and he has not found any way of overcoming this disability in his personal life.

There is no therapeutic value in this imagined activity, however, Khaled expressly states that his loss and grief will continue after the painting is finished:

“I was happy that Constantine would be the painting my body would weep over” (Mosteghanemi, MIF 126).

Here, Khaled weeps because his love for Algeria and his loss in terms of masculine identity still cause him anguish many years after he has left the country behind. The separation of body and mind is another symptom of trauma, since Khaled cannot feel that the damaged body he inhabits is a true image of himself.

Hubbell 2013: (306) examines the work of several francophone Algerians who produce various kinds of visual, dramatic and literary art and explains that “the traumas of the Algerian War are not as much unspeakable as they are unheard.” This is an important observation because it implies an additional layer of trauma in those who have left Algeria, both from the colonising and the colonised parties, to try and make a living in Europe or further afield. Like Khaled, these individuals lack any kind of audience who is able and willing to appreciate their art. Khaled cannot express his anguish in words but hopes that at least in his pictures something of his past will be there for others to understand. Khaled cannot speak about his trauma because he is still going through it at first hand, and painting allows him to express the unspeakable in implicit ways, rather than directly in words. Hayat has digested old memories, and is able to make new narratives out of them. This represents masculine and feminine tactics and their different outcomes for each character.

In France, especially, there is a widespread cultural policy of “wilful forgetting” (Hubbell, 2013:307) and in the case of the pieds-noirs, whose families were complicit in the causing of significant pain and suffering, there is a very conflicted memory of the Algerian past. One photographic artist quoted by Hubbell (307) comments:

“Je ne renie pas mon peuple , je l’aime. Mais je le juge et c’est ce jugement que je ne veux pas écrire. Les histoires de famille se règlent en famille.” / “I do not renounce my people, I love my people. But I judge them and it is this judgement which I do not want to write down.

Family stories (or family histories: the word is ambiguous in French) should be settled within the family”. In the figure of Khaled there are some parallels to this mindset worth noting. Firstly, there is the issue of renouncing his own people. Khaled has, in fact done precisely this by choosing to live in Paris, but he is plagued by constant memories of the bridge in Constantine, which draws him...
forever back in time to his youth in Algeria. The element of judgement which Khaled feels is directed, not so much towards the Algerians of the past, since he reveres the freedom fighters and martyrs of the revolutionary war, but towards the youthful Algerians of the 1980s, who appear to have forgotten the meaning of the sacrifice that gave them independence. At the end of the novel, he observes the nonchalance of the post-independence generation:

"An ill-tempered customs official, as old as independence, stood at his desk. He was unmoved either by my missing arm or by my grief … We stood close to each other, but he could not read me. It happens that nations become illiterate" (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 262).

Khaled’s bitter memories cannot be expressed in writing because they are too intimate, too personal to put into words. Images allow him to convey all his emotional attachments to Algeria without forcing him to confront the very difficult social, political and economic problems that make his country anathema to him as an adult.

**Gendered art in Ahlam/Hayat’s writing**

It has been observed by Henke, 2000 that women are far more likely to turn to writing as a way of working through traumatic memories, and indeed the term ‘scriptotherapy’ has been coined to describe this process in the context of women’s autobiographical writings following traumatic experiences. In Memory in the Flesh the female character, Ahlam/Hayat, chooses writing as a medium through which she finds the ability to express her own gendered memories. This is complicated, however, by the fact that the majority of the novel is presented through the somewhat distorting perspective of Khaled, a male narrator. It is never entirely clear how much of the narrative is a faithful account of events, and how much is a fevered fantasy which derives from Khaled’s jealous mind. At one point in the novel, an important statement regarding the significance of writing as a form of recovery is reported as direct speech from Ahlam/Hayat:

‘I might owe my culture and education to Algeria […] but becoming a writer is another issue. It’s not a gift from anybody. We write to recover what we’ve already lost or was filched from us. I’d have preferred an ordinary childhood and an ordinary life and to have had a father and a family like anybody else, instead of a group of books here and a bundle of notepads there. But Father became the property of the whole of Algeria. Only writing became my property, and nobody’s going to take that away from me!’ (Mosteghanemi MIF 67).

Ahlam/Hayat’s choice of writing represents a more pragmatic and therapeutic attitude to painful memories than Khaled’s tortured self-absorption and longing for past loves, whether they are places, people or diffuse notions of an Algerian pre-colonial golden age. Hayat perceives her experience as the deliberate act of an unjust, patriarchal state, as can be seen by her use of negatively charged words such as filched. The focus on property also highlights the unfairness of a society that allows men to control property, seeing women as dependents rather than equals. Writing affords Hayat a position as an equal to men because it brings her fame and wealth, and at least some control over her own affairs.

As Katrak 2006:(56) points out, women in colonised societies in Africa and further afield had a well-developed range of strategies for resistance to oppression, well before Western feminists came along to take ownership of this concept. Ahlam/Hayat’s choice of writing as a means “to recover what we’ve already lost or was filched from us” combines a therapeutic motive with more than a hint of resistance and rebellion. This passage has particular resonance in Muslim culture because of the restrictions which are placed upon women in many Muslim societies in relation to ownership. There are very strong links in Ahlam/Hayat’s mind between storytelling and her own female ancestry through the figure of her grandmother:

“She was the only person who would find time to tell me about everything. She would return automatically to the past as if she refused to leave it” (Mosteghanemi MIF 67).

This passing down of history from grandmother to granddaughter is an example that Ahlam/Hayat follows in her own search for an expression of sad memories, those of enduring a childhood without a father. The fact that Ahlam/Hayat’s writing is retold through Khaled’s eyes makes it difficult to understand the exact meaning it has for her. It is clear, however, that Khaled is both jealous of her ability to write and afraid of her power as a writer to shape reality in ways with which he does not and cannot agree. This fear is partly provoked by Hayat’s/Ahlam’s half-serious description of her motivation in writing fiction:

“We only write novels to kill those who have become a burden to us. We write to finish them off!” (Mosteghanemi MIF 80).

This sentence echoes her earlier statement, “We write to recover what we’ve already lost”, and implies a collective feminine enterprise that is actively directed against males who attempt to control women. It is significant that Ahlam/Hayat uses the plural pronoun “we” rather than the singular pronoun “I” because this represents the solidarity that she feels with other women writers. This is very different from the egotistical “I” which Khaled uses and the lonely “genius or a prophet” (Mosteghanemi MIF 67) persona which he cultivates in Paris.

The passages from the first novel discussed earlier merely hint at the possibility of an alternative, female
approach to memory that is distinct from the male. This is developed in much more detail in the second novel, without the filter of Khaled’s masculine mind. There have been several first and second-person narrative accounts on the nature of memory and its effects in the aftermath of traumatic events, especially in relation to national or ethnic persecution which results in the displacement of individuals from their homeland. Speaking of her father’s return to Israeli-occupied Palestine at a late stage in his life, one theorist of memory and history remarks that “he inserted his memories of Palestine directly into the present, into a living history” (Abu-Lughod, 2007:79). Like Khaled in Memory in the Flesh, this man lived in exile from his homeland and resisted any confrontation with the changed nature of that place throughout most of his life. The painful encounter with the place of memory can be seen can be seen very clearly in the way Khaled in Memory in the Flesh gazes upon modern Constantine, but sees in the streets, buildings, bridges and the topography, a whole host of meanings from the past. One example illustrates Khaled’s encounter with the building that his family once shared in his youth:

“I came back to that house every night because we were unexpectedly drawn together: I knew the house and the house knew me. It was as if I was climbing up to the purlieus of a faraway childhood and returning to the womb. I was hiding in the womb of an illusory mother, a womb that had been empty for thirty years” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, p. 194).

The personification of the house as a woman is typical of Khaled’s world view, in which the city of Constantine, and by extension the whole of Algeria, plays the role of mother, lover, prostitute and enigmatic eternal female This perspective places him, as a man, forever in opposition to her. He cannot comfortably inhabit this place because he cannot see it without an overlay of painfully gendered memories since these women are all lost to him in his current life as an older man in exile.

In the case of Abu-Lughod’s observation of her father’s experience, a move back to the former homeland was the start of a process of bringing memories into the present, very changed locations, which then made possible “a different knowledge and identification for his children as well” (Abu-Lughod, 2007:79). The means by which this knowledge was passed on is described as “storied memories” in which older adults look back on their youth, seeing themselves as “guardians of an increasingly vivid past” (Abu-Lughod, 2007:79; 82). This author describes how her father conducted guided tours of his home region to visitors, including his family, and comments that “it was about claiming and reclaiming the city in which he had been born, the sea in which he had swum as a boy, and the home he had been forced to flee in 1948” (Abu-Lughod, 83). This transition from a life of exile, to a later life back in the city of his birth is an example of a man facing up to his painful memories, and his return amounts to “the insertion of honed stories in to the roughness of history and a genuine confrontation with the present” (Abu-Lughod, 101). He relives all the sensual experiences of childhood with relish, making them real again in his old age, and embracing the challenge of living in an occupied land.

In Memory in the Flesh, Mosteghanemi depicts in Khaled a man who becomes aware of this very same challenge. The opening page of Memory in the Flesh demonstrates very clearly how Khaled can imagine a return that is free from the hurt of the past:

“before, I thought we could write about life only when we had recovered from our wounds; when we were able to touch old sores with a pen and not revive the pain; when we could look back free from nostalgia, madness, and a sense of grievance!” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 1).

However, immediately after considering this idea about using a pen to revisit the past without pain, Khaled questions the viability of this way of dealing with memory through the arts of writing or drawing, thinking to himself

“But is this really possible? We are never completely cut off from our memory. Recollection provides the inspiration for writing, the stimulus for drawing, and for some, the motivation even for death” (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 1).

Khaled’s associates memory with pain and death, but also with acts of creativity. These opening thoughts reveal in Memory in the Flesh reveal that Khaled uses memory in an aporetic way. Rather than facing up to the discordant elements of past and present that he finds in his brief return to Constantine, Khaled prefers to dwell in the past. He can imagine, a therapeutic approach to memory, but he dismisses it as impossible, since for him the only release from painful memories is to be cut off from our memory. Recollection provides the only release from our wounds; when we were able to touch old sores with a pen and not revive the pain; when we could look back free from nostalgia, madness, and a sense of grievance! (Mosteghanemi, MIF, 1).

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It appears, then, that the ability to turn these memories into a narrative, and to pass them on to the next generation in stories, while at the same time interacting with the changed environment of the present, is an essential part of a therapeutic approach to memory. Khaled has no children. His narrative takes the form of thoughts that are unspoken, and snippets of letters to a lost love He constantly drafts and revises his reflections, but they do not lead to any positive resolution. There is no chain of memory leading from a traumatic past into a difficult and contested present because Khaled dwells only on the first half of that equation.

Research into narrative accounts of memory in general
has noted that “men and women exhibit qualitative and quantitative differences in their reported autobiographical memories” (Rees et al., 28). Mushaben 1999:(8) discusses the “refractive impact of gender on both historical experience and recall” in the context of East and West German women who have lived through the aftermath of the Second World War, the division of Germany and now its reunification. It is argued that women experience events differently than men, due to their different roles in society, and that this means that they recall these events differently also, giving divergent meanings which reflect their gender, social class and location in the capitalist or communist parts of the country. The reason for the gender differences in the way memory is reported may be related to the way in which parents talk to their children when they are young, since “parents are on the whole more elaborate with daughters than with sons” (Reese et al., 1993, 31-32) although it is not entirely clear whether this is because parents impose a more elaborate style on their daughters or because daughters evoke this style from their parents. In this New Zealand psychological study, context was also very important, since reminiscing in the family home was more elaborate than in a neutral context outside the home.

**Gendered memory in chaos of the senses**

In the fictional Algerian context of Mosteghanemi’s novels, there is a very clear difference between Khaled and Hayat’s approach to reminiscences about the past, and here too, factors of gender, social class and location all play their part both in the initial formation of memories, in later recall, and in the way individuals come to terms with the painful elements in the remembering process. The second novel in the series, Chaos of the Senses depicts a woman who has remained in post-colonial Algeria and embarked on a successful career as a writer. At first sight this appears to be a similar strategy to that of Khaled in Memory in the Flesh because Hayat seeks to create an alternative, fictional reality in her art. She keeps a notebook, and gathers observations and thoughts which are later reworked into her writing:

In her creative activity, Hayat explores many deeply emotional issues that are hidden in her sub-conscious mind, and only realises what they were once she has finished writing, as for example when she reflects on her first short story about a woman’s break-up with a mysterious lover:

“I loved this story, without realizing exactly what I had written … I don’t know how this story was born ...” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 10).

Hayat makes deliberate comparisons between her own gendered experience and the political trajectory of Algeria, with its continuing violent struggle for stability as an independent nation:

“Women, too, are like nations. If they want life, then destiny must respond, even if a high officer rules its fate, or a small dictator disguised as a husband” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 148).

This comparison between the personal and the political can be interpreted as a feminist, resisting response to the many restrictions placed upon Muslim women in Algeria. Hayat uses religious imagery to make sense of these limiting rules and show how she triumphs over them with determination and persistence:

“At the first rays of dawn I discovered that ‘No’ was a seven-headed snake. Every time I killed one, another ‘No’ appeared before my face, for different reasons every time. Nevertheless, I beat them all and slept, biting the apple of lust before the snake’s very eyes” (Mosteghanemi, COF, 149).

This analogy with the snake in the Garden of Eden and the biting of the forbidden apple show Hayat identifying with the character of Eve, and it is interesting that she seeks not only to defy the patriarchal “No” but also to exult in the process of doing so by eating the apple while the snake looks on. The breaking of moral taboos gives her peace to sleep, and this shows that Hayat is not content to carry on the traditional wifey role that is expected of her.

In another passage of reflection, Hayat imagines Algeria, that downtrodden victim of patriarchal excess, also rising up to meet its destiny in a flurry of Hayat is aware of the contrast between her own memories of childhood and those of her brother Nasser. The latter was named after the Egyptian leader Abd al-Nasser who was a prominent supporter of pan-Arab union and a photograph of this revered figure was prominent in their family home during their childhood. It was later joined by a photograph of their father taken from newspaper reporting his role as resistance leader and his death during the War of Independence. Hayat discovers these images in their house in exile in Tunis many years later. Finding these two old photographs banished to the attic in a metal trunk, Hayat immediately uses them as a focus for her early memories:

“I remember how happy I was to find those two pictures. They awoke something in me, or a certain time that was so far away that it seemed as if it didn’t really exist” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 133).

Hayat reflects on what to do with these images, thinking first of “leaving them in the dustbin of memory” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 133) or taking just one and not the other, because “In the eye of memory I could no longer
distinguish between them” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 133). The images have a power that resonates with her in ways that she cannot fully comprehend, since she refers to “something within me” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 133) without specifying what it is. The past is recalled and in the process, brought back into existence, through this unidentifiable something within her. In the end she decides to show the pictures to her brother Nasser, knowing that “those memories belonged to me alone, perhaps to Nasser and myself, but to no one else” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 133).

In the event, however, Hayat is surprised by her brother’s silence in front of the pictures “as if he weren’t the third one” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 134). This term the third one implies that she sees an ancestral succession between the father figures, with the patriarchal role falling now on her brother Nasser. This shows that Hayat is seeking to link the past with the present through her brother, making him aware of his connection, and by implication suggesting that he will carry on their political role in the present troubled time. This line of thinking appears not be shared by Nasser, however, and Hayat reflects:

“I did not want to coax him into childhood confessions that might have been erased by the logic of masculinity. I only watched his silence before them and concluded that he had perhaps forgotten his childhood love of one of them and his paternal love for the other. He left them to me to become my obsession alone” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 134).

This incident, recounted from the point of view of Hayat, leaves the reader unaware how valid or not these conclusions are. Once again the narrator is unreliable, partisan, and able to give only one side of the story. There is an awareness of the gendered nature of memory, however, and a vague understanding that the same objects, the same events, might have different meanings for men and for women. Hayat accepts the negative and rejecting power of the “logic of masculinity” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 134) over Nasser, but rejects it herself in favour of a feminine ability to retain past obsessions and integrate them with her present life.

The enduring importance of memory, and its integration with Hayat’s present life is underlined also in her relationship with her mother. There are some frustrations in their mother-daughter encounters, but there are also some comforting reminders of the past for Hayat, for example in the contours of her body, since as a girl Hayat would “dream of the day when I would have a body exactly like hers” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 135). In gender-segregated rituals of the Turkish baths Hayat perceives a very different, feminine kind of reasoning:

“I actually understood her logic. The bath was the only place where she could meet all the women of the city. She could gossip and tell them what was happening to her” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 135).

This is not the silent, masculine kind of logic that relies upon an individual man’s power to apply his mind and decide what to do or think, but rather the kind of collective power that the feminists would define as sisterhood. For Hayat, going to the Turkish baths with her elderly mother is like visiting what Nora, 1989:(7) would call a “lieu de mémoire”. This location evokes the past because when Hayat sees her mother’s familiar personal objects in these steamy surroundings she notes that “just like in the old days she would show off her fine toiletries … Nothing had really changed in twenty years” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 135). The environment that is supportive for her mother, is painful for Hayat, since she recalls the discomfort of a young girl who has not yet developed in to a woman:

“There one learned from others’ looks how to renounce one’s own body, suppress one’s desires, and deny one’s femininity. They taught girls that not only was sex something to be ashamed of, but femininity as well and everything that revealed it, even in silence” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 136).

With the benefit of greater knowledge of the world, the older Hayat in the Turkish baths still rejects the moralising influence of this place. She experiences a sense of affinity with some women who transgress the social order, such as a group of prostitutes who provoke disdain in the eyes of respectable woman. The older Hayat projects her writerly identity onto her experiences with her mother in the Turkish baths:

“Perhaps I was secretly amusing myself by writing comments in my head, there in the middle of steam, water, lust, and female hypocrisy. I stood at a fair distance from both chastity and sin, where every writer and every normal person is supposed to stand” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 138).

This very revealing reflection shows that these deeply gendered memories of the past are not allowed to dominate the life of the Hayat who lives in the present. This older Hayat uses her literary skills to make the steam room interactions in to an allegory of the oppressive forces of the past, mediated in segregated spaces by generations of adult women, which try to perpetuate a religious and moral norm of behaviour for women. The act of writing about these practices but also enables Hayat to distance herself from them. She is both able to perceive the oppressive power of social norms, and to resist them. Hayat will not repeat in her life the oppression that her mother and grandmother suffered, any more than Nasser will take up the mantle of the martyred patriarch. This new generation of men and women will, each in their own way, make their own choices and pursue their own destiny. True to the
collectivist instincts of a woman, Hayat aligns herself not with the hypocritical matriarchs, but with the gender-free community of “every writer and every normal person” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 138).

An interesting dimension of Hayat’s reminiscences is the way they relate to her body and image of her physical being. In contrast to Khaled’s constant memory of loss that is inscribed on his physical body in the form of a missing arm, Hayat is able to imagine a different kind of existence that is not solely dependent upon the physical, reflecting that she might have half-realised as a child that “from the beginning I was just born to be a figure of ink and paper, diluted by all that water and steam” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 136). This shows how Hayat identifies physically with her writing, taking on the properties of ink and paper to replace the all too human flesh that grows old and sags, like the bodies of the older women in the baths.

The adult Hayat still aspires for beauty, but it is a different kind of beauty, and one that will not survive in the suffocating heat and damp of the segregated baths, but by implication has the potential to thrive in the outside world. Hayat has taken this place and these potent memories, recognising their stifling influence on her as a child, but has transformed them into something else that she can use in her adult life. It is this that marks her therapeutic approach to memory. She does not deny memory, but uses it, with the help of her writerly skills makes fictional worlds out of personal, lived experiences. At the end of the novel, reflecting on the death of the lover who started out as a character in her fiction, and then turned into a real person, Hayat reveals more about the power that professional writers possess:

“I had always admired those writers whose greatness was found in their ability to say the most serious and painful things with a stunning lightness. I has always wanted to be like them” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 213).

This lightness, which had proved so infuriating to Khaled because it made her elusive, is indicative of her ability to rise above the weight of painful memories, and traumatic events in the present as well. In the wake of murders and threats, Hayat dresses in provocative clothing and buys cigarettes, both outright challenges to the religious authorities. Hayat aligns herself with the poet Henri Michou, and cites some lines of poetry about the death of al-Taher Jaout, noting that he was buried with pens instead of flowers:

“You will not find him there, with the other graves. He has no gravestone, merely a few pens. Every evening, his hand wakes to continue writing” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 216).

This disembodied hand of the dead writer is the exact opposite of the missing arm of the living Khaled: where Khaled’s missing arm symbolises aporetic suffering, this image symbolises therapeutic suffering which allows something powerful to live on, even beyond the grave. Hayat describes how her sad reflection on these verses facilitates a move into a fictional dimension:

“I believe that my voice died with the last verse. When I closed my notebook over the poem, it seemed to me that I had become part of a movie” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 216).

Leaving her notebook on the grave is another symbolic act, and one that makes Hayat feel like a famous writer following a secret mood:

“It resembled her to the extent that it made me think I was avenging the past for her. She enjoyed making up heroes on paper and killing them in books, the same way life loved and killed for no reason” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 217).

The mention of the past in this context of revenge shows that Hayat is not defeated by bitter memories, but rather they encourage her to action in the present, difficult times in Algeria. Her reaction to trauma and loss is ambivalent:

“Despite my sadness, I left the cemetery almost happy. If all joy holds within it a certain amount of sadness, it is no wonder that sadness, too, carries with it some joy. We are ashamed to call it such, but artists know it well.” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 222).

Hayat views events from these contrasting happy and sad perspectives because she has an appreciation of history which is cyclical rather than linear. This is most evident in the parallels that exist between the opening and closing scenes of Chaos of the Senses. At the start of the novel, Hayat is captivated by a single notebook in a stationery shop:

“... I stopped before this particular notebook, driven by an overwhelming instinct, taken in by that object, distinguished to me from everything else in the shop only by my certainty – or illusion – that it would bring me back to writing” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 11).

At the end of the novel, Hayat mentions “the cycle of seasons” (Mosteghanemi, COS 224) in connection with the starting of the school year, and this idea is then transferred to the position of the writer:

“It had been a sky renewing itself between two seasons and a writer renewing her in between two books” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 224).

Memories of this same situation of the writer visiting a stationery shop at the change of the season one year before are repeated, and the shop owner asks the writer what she wants. The last line of the novel states enigmatically:

“I was on the point of requesting some envelopes and
stamps, when ...” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 224).

Clearly something is about to take place that recalls the past, and no doubt the writer will embark on a new book, or a new life experience that will later be turned into literature, which in turn will become a real part of life, to be turned into literature, and so on. Like the seasons, the writer’s creativity renews itself between projects, and the memories of the past are thus integrated into the life of the present, with some meanings retained, and others transformed. The ambivalence and uncertainty about what is fictional and what is real is a fruitful source of inspiration for the writer. Hayat engages with her memories in a therapeutic way, and in so doing contributes her highly personal acts of revenge for Algeria’s past wrongs and engagement in the struggle to build a society that is not trapped by the limitations of traditional gender roles.

Mosteghanemi’s treatment of gendered memory and gendered art in the two novels

Although it is very clear from the discussion earlier that Mosteghanemi has a good understanding of the differences that gender makes to the storing of memory and to the way a person deals with painful memories in later life, some questions remain about the way in which the novelist herself deals with gender issues in her own narratives from male and then female perspectives in turn. Craps and Buelens 2008: (5) propose that in the literature which examines the genre of the post-colonial trauma novel “a reliance on self-reflexivity and anti-linearity is shown to be an integral part of the authors’ critique of naively redemptive accounts in which colonial trauma is easily and definitively overcome.” Linear reasoning and a focus on hierarchy and dominance are features of patriarchal elites, both colonial and post-colonial.

This view certainly could be applied to Mosteghanemi’s novels which have a self-reflexive and non-linear structure more akin to the episodic nature which is typical of traditional storytelling. If there is a redemptive strain within the series of novels about Khaled and A flam/Hayat then it certainly does not carry the hallmarks of a traditional fairy tale which leads inexorably through various trials and tribulations to an inevitable happy ending. If anything the budding romance between Khaled and A flam/Hayat proves to be a thorny jungle of conflicting emotions, in which neither party is really sure of the other, and which leads to a frustrating and painful outcome, especially for Khaled. In choosing to narrate one novel from a male perspective, and its sequel from a female perspective, Mosteghanemi cleverly manages to represent both male and female strategies. Khaled’s choice of wordless art, and A flam/Hayat’s choice of the patriarchal language of Arabic represent a deliberate reversal of traditional Algerian gender roles but this is a deliberate device which shows that the ways of Algeria’s past are not necessarily going to be the ways that will be required in its post-colonial future.

Using the example of African American women in the 1920s and 1930s who faced the double oppression of race and gender, Whitehead 2004:149) explores the creative potential of the medium of jazz music for women in that period: “Solo improvisation, the jazz riff and call-and-response are creatively adapted to narrative and literary form. Jazz also acts at a metaphorical level in the texts to symbolize women’s experimentation with prescribed gender roles and expectations.” All of the support systems and mechanisms for making a career in the world of jazz were dominated by men, just as the literary world in modern Algeria has been dominated by men for many centuries. McIlrney, 2002:(24) notes that Memory in the Flesh was very well received in Arabic literary circles, but many readers could not believe it was written by a woman. It is no coincidence that Mosteghanemi has had most of her work published in countries outside Algeria, and that her reputation is largely based on international rather than home-grown support. The memories that are recounted by Hayat are too personal, and too painful, for an Algerian public to face up to, and perhaps also there is an unwillingness on the part of the Algerian literary establishment to deal with the implications of what Hayat describes as the “betrayal” (Mosteghanemi, COS, 221) that comes with the success of every book. Publishing these works in Arabic is an act of resistance, and a challenge to the patriarchal order which has thus far prevented Algerian women writers from using their native language to express themselves.

If Khaled’s art represents a masculine strategy of avoidance, and A flam’s writing represents a therapeutic strategy of processing painful memories, then what does A flam Mosteghanemi’s literary endeavour in the form of the novel series represent in terms of memory and gender? Lloyd 2000, suggests that “a non-therapeutic relation to the past, structured around the notion of survival or living on rather than recovery, is what should guide our critique of modernity and ground a different mode of historicization.” This appears to be a good approach with which to view Mosteghanemi’s literary work. It does not devalue the suffering of men or of women, and it does not deny that there needs to be space for them to work out their own survival (Hassan, 1988: 420) using whatever tools and strategies are available to them. It recognises, however, that both of these strategies exemplified in Khaled and A flam/Hayat have their limitations. They are both focused on the individual, and hardly begin to address the wider social and cultural issues that have to be faced by the Algerian people as a whole. The theory of collective memory (Halbwachs) is useful in this respect, because it shows how difficult history is best overcome when people come together to formulate meanings together, incorporating different perspectives. This departure from the artistic expression of individual traumatic memories to something more
social and collective demands a consideration of potential collective ways of commemorating the past, of building a new and confident national identity, in other words of marking, mourning and moving on.

The markedly different attitudes that Khaled and Ahlam/Hayat express in relation to their chosen art form, and to the professional persona that they adopt as they pursue their respective choices as artist and writer respectively reflect the differently gendered memories that they have of both their own past, and the traumatic history of the Algerian war of independence. Both of these characters identify very strongly with Algeria, and they unconsciously live out the age-old metaphor of the conquering and the conquered. Memory is embodied in the two fictional human beings, but also in the images that they hold in their minds in relation to their art.

Khaled sees his art as a form of conquest. He perceives Algeria as a beautiful woman, and casts himself as the conqueror, lover and saviour of his native land, at least in terms of his attempt to represent it in his art. His paintbrushes are tools of love, with which he arouses his compliant canvas, creating a sense of happiness while he is in the act of artistic creation. Concurrently, however, he realises that this attempt at conquest is futile, and that there is no easy way for him to rebuild contact with his native land after so many years in exile. He is left painting symbolic bridges, representing the irreconcilable chasm between his present and his past, with his nostalgia and pain forever suspended between these differing harsh realities. Khaled’s relationships with women, like his relationships with his native land, are bound to be fractured and unfulfilling. This is because his memories are inescapably tied up with the traumatic past and memories are an aporetic force in his life, trapping him and preventing him from moving on.

Ahlam/Hayat chooses a different medium to come to terms with her past but in similar ways she accepts the customary narratives of Algerian history. She too relives the period of the Algerian war but in her memory she plays the role of the abandoned and dispossessed child, robbed of her father and condemned to a childhood among grieving women. Her recourse to writing is an attempt to make good this loss, and to recover some control over herself and her surroundings. The act of writing is thus personally therapeutic but it also contains some small seeds of collective solidarity. Drawing upon relationships she witnessed in her youth, with her mother and in the gender-segregated social spaces of Algeria in the past and these tactics are at least partially conditioned by gender. The memories that they struggle against are certainly gendered, with Khaled’s patriarchal sense of outrage at the lack of respect shown to martyrs and Ahlam/Hayat’s deep sense of loss and abandonment when her father never returned from the war. In psychological terms, the male and female characters suffer similar symptoms, including a loss of confidence and apparent attachment difficulties, but they adopt different strategies to manage these issues. The gendered memories in evidence here are both a part of the Algerian history of wars for independence and for stability after independence, and the novels seem to be suggesting that an appreciation of both male and female modes of remembering is necessary before future generations can build a more promising and stable collective future.

On a deeper level, an analysis of the complex relationship Mosteghanemi develops between both the narrator and the reader as a source of new questions. The books require considerable effort on the part of the reader, who has to sift through complex relationships and between the narrators and their own art forms. Taken together, the books suggest a new, more collective way out of the impasse that gendered memory creates. The second novel ends on an open question about what might happen next, for example. The way ahead is uncharted:

It is neither male, nor female, but might be expected to incorporate elements of both

As the novel series progresses, the boundaries between narrator, character and reader appear to be subtly blurred, creating a strange kind of multiple persona, or to put it in another way, a multiple memory which is not confined to one person, or one gender. The prismatic quality of the narrative allows the reader to perceive multiple simultaneous realities. Confusing though this may be for the characters and reader, it opens up new avenues for understanding Algeria today. This foray into gendered memories may serve the purpose, after all, of breaking down the barriers of gender and creating a new space for reflection. The books thus become, in this sense, a kind of bridge, between past and present, pre- and post-colonial Algeria, and of course between the male and female understanding of art and literature.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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