REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN IDENTITY IN NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

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By

Nancy E. Wardle, M.A., B.A.

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The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Eugene Holland, Advisor
Professor Danielle Marx-Scouras
Professor John Conteh-Morgan

Approved by

Advisor
Graduate Program in French and Italian
ABSTRACT

A study of francophone literature, written by French and by Africans, about Africa’s people and territory reveals distinct characteristics regarding literary representations about the Other (who are regarded as not sharing in the author’s identity) and the Self (who are regarded as sharing in the author’s identity). The earliest novels about Africa in the French language were authored by French men, and the majority of these works are united by the depiction of Africa and its people as Other to the author’s European identity and associated values. These representations were instrumental in defining the identity of the African as essentially separate and different from the norm, and their basic concepts about the Other were to remain a prominent influence in the collective imagination of the West for centuries afterward. African literary responses to these assertions in the early to mid twentieth century tended to maintain this division between Africa and Europe but reversed the dichotomies, as African authors assigned positive status to all that was African and denounced the Western civilization that had Othered them. New representational techniques were adopted to reflect Africans as subject of their own discourse and to further distinguish their use of the French language, which had been adopted from the former colonizer.

Two nineteenth century French novels that exhibit some of the more common attributes in French literature of the era about Africa are analyzed, Pierre Loti’s Le
Roman d’un spahi (1881) and Eugène Fromentin’s Une année dans le Sahel (1859). Both authors depict Africa as Other to France, but to varying degrees. In Le Roman d’un spahi, France has virtually nothing in common with subsaharan Africa, which is described as a sort of hell on earth for the young French protagonist who is far from home and fears his strange surroundings. The African characters are largely stereotypical, black of skin and soul. North Africa in Une année dans le Sahel, while not depicted in a negative light, is nonetheless another opposite to France. Fromentin by contrast aims to inform his readers of the beautiful land that serves as an inspiration to his paintings; and in attempting to make it seem familiar to a French audience, the lack of similarity between “them” and “us” is communicated. The novel distinguishes itself within the genre of travel literature through the presentation of multidimensional African characters and the factual descriptions of local culture.

In the two twentieth century francophone novels that I have selected, Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre (1979) and Assia Djebar’s L’amour, la fantasia (1985), the female authors employ the narrative form as a tool for asserting themselves as subjects of their own discourse. Ramatoulaye, the Senegalese narrator of Une si longue lettre, declares her ability to stand on her own two feet as an individual outside the bonds of the couple relationship after her husband’s death. L’amour, la fantasia contains the accounts of a number of Algerian women who have resisted classification as an object as well as a new history of Algeria in which her countrymen and women play an active role. The manner in which Bâ and Djebar have composed their novels tends to be as equally subversive as their message, as they seek to decenter the standard grammatical and ideological constructs present in the Western novel.
Dedicated to my parents,
Edward and Barbara Wardle,
and to my sisters
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November 12, 1969........................................Born - Youngstown, Ohio

June 1993 .......................................................B.A., French, Youngstown State University
                                                B.A., History, Youngstown State University

1993-1994 ......................................................Graduate Teaching Associate
                                                Department of Modern Language Studies
                                                Kent State University

1994-1995 ......................................................L’École de Traduction et d’Interprétation
                                                L’Université de Genève
                                                Geneva, Switzerland

May 1996 .......................................................M.A., French
                                                Kent State University

1996-1997 ......................................................Adjunct Instructor, French
                                                Kent State University, Trumbull

1998-2004 ......................................................Graduate Teaching Associate
                                                Department of French and Italian
                                                The Ohio State University

2004-2006 ......................................................Adjunct Instructor, French
                                                Ohio Dominican University

2006-present...................................................Adjunct Instructor, Cultural Studies
                                                Ohio Dominican University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: French and Italian
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representations of the Orient in French literature from the eleventh to the eighteenth centuries</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Orient in French literature: The Middle Ages</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of the binary signifying system</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotyping</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity constituted as difference</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exoticism</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Orient in French literature: The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montesquieu's <em>Les lettres persanes</em></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining African identity during the twentieth century</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early efforts</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>René Maran and Batouala</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new focus on Africa</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A post-colonial African identity: <em>Négritude</em></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical remarks on <em>Négritude</em></td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism and binary representations</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity in African identity: Responses</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre Loti’s <em>Le Roman d’un spahi</em>: African stereotypes rooted in European identity</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise and fame of the author’s work</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early influences in the author’s life</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The objective of this dissertation is to analyze several novels written in the French language that examine the identity of the African people. In this process, the methods that their authors have taken to represent African cultural identity as a product of their own cultural identity and values will be investigated with a goal of considering the validity of their conclusions both to their audience and to the people that they have chosen to represent. I have decided to contrast two novels written by Frenchmen during the nineteenth century and two novels written by African women during the twentieth century. The two French novels that I have selected are Pierre Loti’s *Le Roman d’un spahi* and Eugène Fromentin’s *Une année dans le Sahel*. Each of these novels looks at a different part of Africa (for Loti, subsaharan Africa; for Fromentin, Algeria), which was a significant motivation for choosing these particular works. Further impacting my decision was the different manners in which they decided to represent Africa. Loti strongly bases his analysis of the African people in his knowledge of himself, depicting Africa as the opposite to France. Fromentin counterbalances Loti in that he also regards Africa as very different from France, but in much more positive terms. His novel is also an excellent companion piece to Assia Djebar’s *L’amour, la fantasia*, which is one of the twentieth century novels that I have chosen, as she recognizes the effort that he has made to contribute to African subjectivity. As the nineteenth-century novels each describe a
different part of Africa, so do the twentieth-century novels: like *Le Roman d’un spahi*, Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* speaks of Senegal; and like *Une année dans le Sahel*, Assia Djebar speaks of Algeria in *L’amour*. Bâ is one of the first major female subsaharan African novelists to be recognized, and works such as hers and Djebar’s examine the importance of autobiography in postcolonial women’s fiction. *L’amour* was also selected for the author’s attempt to regard African identity in more inclusive terms than had been previously seen.

For centuries, Europeans were the exclusive authors of literary narrative concerning “the dark continent,” and a distinctive Western bias is present in their works. The privilege of Western civilization within the realm of discursive thought has been the subject of many studies during the past 100 years. One of my goals will be to tap into and to contribute to the existing body of scholarship. Some of the same theorists to speak of the authority accorded to the power structure in discourse were also to describe and promote techniques that would both permit and encourage those who do not conventionally possess that privilege to represent themselves. As these people were reduced to the status of Other through a tradition of presumed Western subjectivity, the field of significance would need to be completely refigured before they would be able to take discourse into their own hands. What distinguishes this dissertation from the majority of recognized studies on the topic of francophone literature on Africa is that it looks not only at the practices employed in novelistic representations of the Other as described by Said and Todorov among others but also at the efforts made by the African

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1 Among the more prominent studies that address this theme are Bill Ashcroft et al.’s *The Empire Writes Back*, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, and Tzvetan Todorov’s *Nous et les autres*.
Other to become the subject of literary discourse, thus focusing on representation of the Other as well as the representation of the Self.

Edward Said\(^2\) addresses the state of representations in the Western world as tools to subjugate the Other, looking specifically at the amorphous collective of nations categorized as “Orient” that are regarded as profoundly different in relation to the Occidental world. While one generally associates the label “Orient” with eastern and southeast Asia, it is possible to apply Said’s theories to the manner in which any Other to the traditional Western majority is represented. He has long been the target of criticism, particularly for his tendency to overgeneralize. Still, his contentions can be useful when approached in moderation and especially in conjunction with those of other theorists, who can serve to rein in his extremism somewhat. Like Foucault and Derrida, who were important influences, Said focuses on the role of the power structure in determining how people are represented in Western texts. Regarding itself as the master for presenting foreign lands and populations in narrative, the Occident’s defensive reaction against the unknown Orient prompts the author to name it and attempt to classify it within his knowledge base, in order to better hold it and gain possession over it as a concept that is defined using his own discourse. This discourse rests on a dialogue of polar opposites that is unable to analyze the surrounding world in anything other than extremes. The Orient is thereby viewed as different and exotic, a spectacle and a fantasy encompassed by vague generalizations suggesting sameness that result from an attitude of superiority of the subject towards its object. Said’s strategies for reinscription of the Other in the form of postcolonial representations center on rebellion against the imperialistic ideology

\(^2\) Among the most significant works by Said in the field of postcolonial representation are *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*, and “Orientalism Reconsidered.”
that marginalized it and restoration of a sense of community based around what had been subordinated by the ruling power. Similar techniques were advocated by Frantz Fanon\(^3\), who in his seminal work *Les damnés de la terre* defines colonialism as an act of violence that can only be eliminated through violence and promotes African mobilization by reversing Western hierarchies and revalorizing pre-colonial accomplishments and values, a response to the blanket condemnation of all of African culture by Europe. While Said’s desired revolt was in terms of discursive violence, that of Fanon was more centered on physical violence. Tzvetan Todorov\(^4\) was to question Fanon’s unquestioned reliance on a traditional Western binary framework that discouraged intercultural dialogue by continuing to view Africa and Europe as opposite terms; and Fanon himself would later contend with these issues, as we will see in chapter 2.

Todorov’s writings on the Other are marked by Jacques Derrida’s influence, particularly concerning the latter’s views on avoidance of extremes in literary representations as represented by the antagonistic pairing of Self and Other. He rejects the exclusive application of universalist standards in the form of ethnocentrism and scientism as damaging to constructive intercultural communication, because it does not indicate true understanding of the Other. While exoticism is sometimes believed to reflect more altruistic attitudes towards the Other because it bathes it in a very positive light, Todorov points out that exoticism is not so much about love of the Other as criticism of one’s own culture. The Other gains value solely as an element in the couple

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\(^3\) Among the most significant works by Fanon in the field of postcolonial representation are *L’An V de la Révolution Algérienne*, *Les damnés de la terre*, and “The Fact of Blackness.”

\(^4\) Among the most significant works by Todorov in the field of postcolonial representation are *La conquête de l’Amérique*, *Nous et les autres*, and *Les morales de l’histoire*. 
relationship with the Self by comparing them, and its definition exists in relation to the primary culture. A “good,” more moderate universalism would involve thoroughly knowing the particular first and avoiding transcultural judgments, to ensure that we do not attempt to know the Other through the Self and see our own cultural values as “natural.” This result can be achieved by passing through Todorov’s phases of cultural understanding, which show a definite debt to Derrida’s theories on deconstruction of the centralized signifying system. Both processes attempt to correct an imbalance that exists when one set of values is regarded as taking precedence over its opposite. After one’s subjectivity is exchanged for that of the other, in which it takes on more credence than one’s own, both of these diametric concepts are transformed, allowing their once-impermeable boundaries to overlap and creating a gray zone where neither party is privileged and prejudices have been discarded. With this goal in mind, it is possible to understand why Todorov felt that Fanon’s Négritude-inspired response to postcolonial representations was insufficient, because it might appear to do little more than establish one universalist doctrine in place of another. Todorov’s theories are especially useful to my project in consideration of the attention that he pays to writings in the French language that are based in a specifically Gallic culture.

The arguments of the aforementioned theorists establish Self and Other as fundamental categories that serve as the framework for the relationship between France and Africa as represented in texts as well as describe these texts as a significant component in defining cultural identity. These concepts are central to this dissertation, which will incorporate knowledge from other disciplines and literary theoretical constructs to develop my thesis. Chief among this information are an examination of the
development of how the Oriental Other has been represented in French literature since its origins in the Middle Ages; the role played by myth in the perception of cultural difference; and evidence of transformation of the traditional French novel into a tool that could be employed to assert the subjecthood of the African Other, whose alterity was encapsulated within its most basic structures and principles, through the representational strategies of *Négritude*\(^5\) and *écriture féminine*\(^6\). Most significantly, these theories will be visible in literary representations of Africans by both the French and the Africans themselves.

As I approached this dissertation, I hoped to examine and to answer several questions in the body of my text. Foremost among these are, in the order that they will be encountered throughout this project: Within representations, how is it that a people and culture come to be categorized as “Other” in comparison to the “Self”? What risks are entailed when someone chooses to represent in literature members of a population of which he is not a part, especially when the author is part of a culture that considers itself diametrically opposed to the one that he is describing? Is there a place for ambiguity in a narrative that is rooted in binary discourse? Considering that narrative does reflect one’s sense of self as a people, how would the previously colonized Africans be able to express their subjectivity using linguistic and textual forms that are based on a civilization that had Othered them, restricting their status to objects rather than subjects? Is it possible for the Other to consider itself in possession of a narrative that it did not create, that is based

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\(^5\) Among the more prominent studies that address *Négritude* are Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Frantz Fanon’s *Les damnés de la terre* and “The Fact of Blackness,” and René Maran’s *Batouala*.

\(^6\) Among the more prominent studies that address *écriture féminine* are Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe*, and Luce Irigaray’s “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine.”
on a civilization that sought to subjugate it, and in a language that was thrust upon it as an act of violence? What is the difference between representing a people as member of that culture or as a non-member? Is one “better” than the other, and on what grounds?

The dissertation begins with an examination of the representational practices inherent in French texts about the Orient that were written in the many years preceding the two nineteenth century novels that I have chosen to analyze. These characteristics have a long history, handed down and adapted over centuries of Oriental representations. I have chosen to speak of the Orient here because both it and Africa are represented as Europe’s opposite and possess similar representational practices, and also because North Africa is sometimes subsumed into the category of Orient due to the domination of Islam in both areas. Relations between Europeans and Orientals were profoundly influenced by the Crusades, a period of increased nationalism which established Christians and Muslims as antagonists. Literature from this era, probably the best-known of which is the Chanson de Roland, focused on this enmity and represented the Muslim Sarrasins as the opposite of the Christians. Fact was not necessarily of the greatest importance here, as information was occasionally created to reinforce the conflict. Some of the characteristics present in the Chanson de Roland would be seen in representations about Muslims in the following centuries, attesting to the pervasiveness of Western myths surrounding the Orient. Representations from this era are characterized by the presence of a centered and subjective process of interpretation that set apart the European Self and Oriental Other, speaking of the unknown in stereotypical terms through knowledge of one’s own cultural values. It is not uncommon to see these traits expressed most strongly during periods of heightened nationalism. When greater interest in the Orient took hold
at the end of the seventeenth century, it became an object of avid study, its various traits classified into distinct pseudo-objective categories to permit it to be better understood by Europeans who regarded it as diametrically different from their own world. This further cemented the Western objectification of the Orient. Conclusions were often made on the basis of fragmentary and sometimes false information. These misconceptions, however, remained part of Western ideology for centuries afterward even when contrary evidence was available. A new trend known as exoticism arose during this period, which valorizes the Orient as a relative category in comparison to the West. The 1704 publication of 1001 Nights sparked even more fascination with the Orient, as readers were dazzled by its fantastical images that contrasted so sharply with staid European life.

Chapter 2 addresses the issues and theories behind Francophone novels from the early 20th century through shortly after the end of French colonial occupation in the 1960s, a period that witnessed the development of an independent, subjective African identity. Along with changes in African ideology came a number of new approaches to self-representation, as literary practices were adopted to mark a break from the colonizer. Perhaps the most significant novel in the earliest African responses to Western hegemony was Batouala by René Maran, recognized by Léopold Sédar-Senghor as “the precursor to Négritude.” The novel distinguishes itself by denouncing colonial rule, presenting a true tragic African protagonist through whose eyes the reader sees the African continent, and refashioning European modes of expression to represent the African voice. Among the techniques he used that would remain a fixture in the Francophone novel were a poetic language, incorporation of African words, and oral traits, which reflect the roots of African storytelling. A shift in Western consciousness on Africa occurred during the two
World Wars, resulting from a reaction against the rational thought of preceding generations in favor of the free expressionism and “primitivism” associated with African culture. Cultural pluralism became valued over similarity. French-educated Africans and Caribs, who had accepted European definitions of themselves as true, reversed them to focus on their opposites. Rather than feeling compelled to accept European values, they encouraged fellow blacks to embrace their blackness as a positive affirmation and developed an image of essential black character. These assertions were at the heart of the social and cultural pan-African movement known as \textit{Négritude}. Many works of literature were produced that reflect \textit{Négritude} ideals, and I will examine several passages from Aimé Césaire’s “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” in order to introduce some of the movement’s more common characteristics. \textit{Négritude} also had a number of vocal critics, who felt that it remained linked to Western binary discourse about Africa and gave black identity a conservative nature because it resided in pre-colonial value systems. It has also come under attack for promoting traditional, idealized images of African women, to which many female Francophone authors responded in their own works. \textit{Négritude} representations are similar to those written by the French about the colonized Africans during the preceding century when one considers that both were published at a time that nationalistic sentiment was elevated, as such attitudes tend to produce totalizing, self/other discourse that does not tolerate difference. Neither could easily accept hybridity and cultural mixing, and several Francophone authors wrestled with the imperative to incarnate only one side of the dichotomy.

In chapter 3, I introduce the first novel that I chose to examine in close detail, and the first of two novels that I have selected written by the French about Africa during the
nineteenth century: Pierre Loti’s *Le Roman d’un spahi*. An extremely popular novel during the age of colonization, it is the story of a French soldier from the Cévennes region named Jean Peyral, who is rather shy and naive in contrast to his heroic appearance. He is sent to pass several years of his service as a *spahi* in Senegal, which he regards as extremely different from his beloved hometown. Much of the novel is spent lamenting his fate. Both he and the narrator describe Africa in strict binaristic terms in comparison to the “superior” France. In order to distract himself, he gets involved with the dark-skinned former servant Fatou-gaye, a mendacious and bewitching trickster who is compared to various animals throughout the novel. Jean stays with her more out of inertia than love, his spirit dulled by the oppressive heat of the African climate. Much to his surprise, he discovers that she bore him a son. The novel ends with Jean’s death in combat, followed by Fatou’s suicide and murder of their child when she discovers his body in the desert. I will provide significant information about Loti’s life prior to writing the novel, contemporary beliefs about Africans, and fictional representations about Africa that predate *Spahi* with the goal of elucidating direct influences on the development of the author’s protagonist and his description of the African continent. My argument is that Loti’s Africa is less a product of fact than of his own predilections and experience, and that his desire to create a hero whose personality is so close to his own would center his focus on the Frenchman Jean Peyral rather than Africa and its people. Primary among the ideas communicated to the reader are the image of Africa as a desolate place of death and loneliness, which reflect Peyral’s isolation as well as his fears of change; and the positive aspects of European culture vs.

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7 *A spahi* is a soldier from the French army who has been sent to serve in Africa.
the backwards tendencies of African ones, also reinforcing the turmoil he felt to be separated from all that he holds dear back in France. In both of these cases, it is the particular feelings of the protagonist that determines how Africa is to be represented. I will present and analyze several examples from the novel that reinforce stereotypes about Africa that were prominent when it was written, which include the belief that Africa’s desolation is evidence of it having been punished by God, and emphasis placed on the heat of Senegal and the blackness of its people’s skin and souls. Further stressing the gulf between Africa and Europe is the praise accorded to all that is French, particularly Peyral himself.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to a discussion of the second French novel of this dissertation, Eugène Fromentin’s *Une année dans le Sahel*. While his novel did not incorporate as many Eurocentric themes as Loti’s, Fromentin could not have helped but to have been influenced by the nineteenth-century intellectual climate regarding the Orient (for North Africa, containing such a large Arab population, was often considered to be part of the Oriental world). Many French novels from the 1800’s portray the Orient as an exotic paradise where one could escape the changes in modern society that had made Europe materialistic and less concerned with traditional values, which they saw as lost to the past. Sparking the interest among Romantic authors for return to a simpler life in a primitive land was François-René de Chateaubriand’s 1802 novel *René*, whose protagonist travels to the Americas to escape a sense of overwhelming boredom and dissatisfaction known as *le mal du siècle*. The Orient soon became the ultimate destination for those seeking new sources of inspiration outside their homeland. Other nineteenth century authors to depict the Orient in their works, which I will examine
briefly in this chapter, were Victor Hugo, Gérard de Nerval, Alphonse de Lamartine, Théophile Gautier, and Charles Baudelaire. Not all shared the same objective behind their writings about the Orient – Nerval, for instance, reportedly identified with the Oriental people and wanted to describe their everyday existence in his novel – though they tended to describe it in similar ways. Europe was frequently presumed as setting a standard for normalcy, and the Orient was represented as different and exciting precisely because it was viewed as not conforming to these standards. The opposition between Orient and Occident was often stressed by these authors as they sought to appeal to their readers with vivid, dazzling images of an almost unreal land. Fromentin, on the other hand, was concerned with describing Algeria as realistically as possible, since his notes were meant to serve as a guide for his paintings, but he was admittedly more swayed by beauty than reality and sought to present an image that was somehow superior to reality itself. One of the goals of his novel was to describe Algeria so that his readers would be able to know it, and Orient and Occident are represented as so dissimilar that the former could use some explanation to be comprehended by his French audience. Everything about “them” is described as different from “us”; and in such a context, both lands are ideologically separated. The subject of the narrative is the European, for whom his text has been constructed. His tendency to view Algeria in terms of Other also causes him to overgeneralize on occasion, of which he is very cognizant. As an outsider from a culture that is very different it is only natural for one to feel a sense of curiosity, causing one to focus on those differences. Through the writing of this novel, he designates himself as an authority who can explain Algerians in conceptual terms on the basis of knowledge about the Occidental world. He frequently described them as incarnating his personal beliefs
on how one should live, which were rooted in criticisms of the European values of his
day. The female character of Haoûa is noteworthy as one of the first Algerian female
protagonists in Western literature and for being represented in a mostly unstereotypical
manner; and it is for Haoûa and for his factual descriptions of Algerian cultural life
during the colonial period that he remains an important figure in the genre of Oriental
literature.

In chapter 5, I speak about the first of the two twentieth century novels I have
chosen that are written by African women, Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre. It is no
coincidence that I have selected two novels, Le roman d’un spahi and Une si longue
lettre, that take place in Senegal; although the former represents a subsaharan African
woman as the object of the narrative, and in the latter an African woman asserts herself as
an independent subject. African women did not come into writing until long after their
male counterparts, primarily due to lack of opportunities, leisure time, and education, and
had generally been represented by African men in stereotypical roles. The status of
African women began changing in the 1950’s, and it was around this time that the first
texts by subsaharan African women were written. Many of these novels reject traditional
aesthetic literary criteria, seek to redefine and promote the identity of African women,
and approach the autobiography of an individual as an opportunity to tell the story of a
larger community of African women. They also permit the African woman to speak for
herself. I describe the life experiences of Mariama Bâ to show the parallels between Bâ
and the protagonist of Une si longue lettre, Ramatoulaye. After her husband’s passing
and many years of being the victim of sexual inequality as the lesser partner,
Ramatoulaye endeavors to redefine herself as an individual, without need of a man by her
side to survive in the world. Bâ exposes the inferior status of women in traditional African society and calls for changes that she believes can be achieved through a Western education. African women took advantage of this benefit of colonization to elevate themselves from the secondary place to which they had been restricted through traditional patriarchal values. Assia Djebar in particular (as described in chapter 6) wrestles with the issue that something which has permitted them to improve themselves has also subjectified the African people for over a century through colonization. Ramatoulaye also encourages women to become involved in politics, as Bâ herself had done, to challenge the status quo, and to support each other through a feminine support system. While she attacks what several men in her life have done to suppress women, she continues to believe in the institution of marriage and the possibility of a better future through children as enlightened as her own.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the final novel that I have chosen, Assia Djebar’s L’amour, la fantasia. As in the case of Une si longue lettre, it was selected because it speaks of the people in the same country that was analyzed in one of my nineteenth-century novels: this time, Algeria. Before discussing the novel itself, I will speak more about the situation between France and Algeria at the time that it was written to give a sense of the ideological tension between the two nations in which the author’s sense of identity was rooted. Like many other Algerians, she regarded her sense of self in pluralistic terms rather than in the essentialism that colored texts by Négritude authors, the focus on inclusion of those who had traditionally been excluded from discourse. In her novel, Djebar wanted to rewrite France’s history of Algeria by uncovering the presence of the disenfranchised and to share the largely unknown stories of Algerian
women. It is at this time that I introduce Derrida’s strategies for deconstructing the centralized text, which by removing the privilege of the center would permit those who do not normally possess this privilege to expose the biases inherent in binary discourse and to gain a level of control over the language that had been employed to classify them as Other. Use of the French language in her novel carried with it many issues, including lack of ownership over the language system and persistent reminders of the violence of colonization, and her writing shows a desire to make the language her own. One of the primary threads in *L’amour, la fantasia* is the importance of the past in the Algerians’ lives, a theme which other writers had also explored. Djebar’s new history of the conquering of Algeria re-introduces her people into the story, shows the French soldiers as brutal tyrants, and allows the reader to experience the suffering of the Algerian victims. Her interweaving of historical and individual narrative both subverts divisions between genres and stresses the interconnection between present and past, woman and nation, and love and violence. It is through her French education and writing skills, both of which she inherited as a result of assimilation practices, that she is able to improve her own position in Muslim society and endow her Berber sisters with the representational power that they lack – thus presenting quite the conundrum that the frequently destructive institution of colonization has given some individuals the tools for liberation.

All four of the authors whose novels I will examine in this dissertation represent Africa and its people. Who is the African, for Pierre Loti, Eugène Fromentin, Mariama Bâ, and Assia Djebar? Pierre Loti’s Senegalese are, in most regards, inferior to Europeans. They are black of skin and soul, animalian, unrestrained, and lazy. They live in an inhospitable land that is arid, hot, desolate, strange, and surrounded by death; and
the Senegalese climate seeps into its inhabitants like a poison, paralyzing their minds and bodies. Nearly all of these opinions are expressed by the protagonist and the narrator in comparison to the French people and their homeland, which are both praised and upheld as accepted standards for normalcy. His novel is more an assertion of late nineteenth century France’s identity than that of Africa, which the author tends to present through popular stereotypes. For Eugène Fromentin, who seemed to have a more fervent interest in understanding the subjects of his novel than Loti, the Algerians are still very dissimilar from Europeans, but more equal to them than Loti’s Senegalese. His intention to make the strange Algerian people and their land better known to his reading public displays a deep interest in their culture yet also communicates that the Algerians are so different as to require interpretation. It appears that he values their civilization so much that he opposes it being corrupted by Western influences, which he finds distasteful in comparison to those that he finds in the Orient. While his physical descriptions can occasionally be subjective and tend towards capturing a more perfect version of reality, he is very respectful towards Arab cultural practices even when they seem illogical to the European mind. Both Loti and Fromentin had very different approaches when it came to representing the Other. As to Bâ and Djebar, the task that they undertook was to represent the Self in a response to previous efforts to speak in their place and to define them from the point of view of an outsider. Bâ’s protagonist Ramatoulaye identifies African women as proud and strong in spite of the difficulties that they face in everyday life. They support other women because to do so is to support all womankind, and they look to the future with a desire to improve their situation. Here, identity is regarded in a collective sense, as a female community. Djebar’s Africans are on the periphery, either
excluded or ignored in the case of Muslim women, and dare to make themselves known and heard in the world. To do so is to perform a transgression, to work against centuries of efforts to silence them either through representations or through traditional Islamic restrictions. Like Bâ, she also views African women in terms of the collective; but their goal is not so much to promote themselves as to resist the power structure. As we will see, what tends to affect each of these representations of African identity is the author’s sense of self and motivation behind the writing of their novel.
CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ORIENT IN FRENCH LITERATURE FROM THE ELEVENTH TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

Before delving into an examination of the representation of Africans in nineteenth century French literature, it would be a good idea to look back to the origins of texts such as those in the preceding centuries of French literary history. This examination will show the roots of the conventions seen in the colonial novels that were written by citizens of the colonizing power during the height of imperialism. As we will come to see, the commonly accepted beliefs that are shared in Western culture regarding distant lands have been largely handed down and adapted from past representations that have been created by Westerners, producing a familiar and comforting image of others based in a system of Western values and ambitions which becomes a habit that is hard to break, even in the presence of contrary evidence.

Some background to the creation of the Other as depicted in French novels can be observed in the origins of the presence of the Orient in French representations. While the Orient does not necessarily include Africa, because both are considered Other to the Western subject, the Occidental discourses concerning them share common characteristics. Africans and Orientals are generally presented in Western texts as groups of people who share a certain amount of preconceived characteristics and who are
constitutive of a society that lives in an opposite manner to that of the West. In the majority of European texts about members of different cultures, the perspective is generally that of the European observer; and what remains the primary characteristic in most portrayals of the Other is the manner in which it compares to the standard of normalcy that is embodied by Occidental culture, values, and custom. The nineteenth century novels that I have chosen to analyze, although they deal with two very different African cultures that are not described as equals in French novels (the Arab-African is frequently classified as “superior” to the subsaharan African in terms of culture, physique, history, and mores), possess similar representational practices.

THE ORIENT IN FRENCH LITERATURE: THE MIDDLE AGES

Through the evolution of the Oriental novel and the attitudes that spawned its many works, we can witness the literary tradition that laid the foundation for and inspired those of the nineteenth century. In my discussion of this background, I refer primarily to Pierre Martino’s thorough study, L’Orient dans la littérature française au XVIIᵉ et au XVIIIᵉ siècle. Martino writes that in many of the earliest texts on the Orient that were written during the Middle Ages, the time of the crucial first contact between West and East, it was interpreted through a Western viewpoint. Europeans were fascinated by the vast vegetation that was found by the Crusaders in the East and equated this land with the legendary Garden of Eden, and it therefore became a locus of interest for European Christians. The area around Jerusalem was valued because it was perceived as the miraculous ground where Christ lived and where Christianity was born. They came to
“see” the Orient through the Bible and through their knowledge about the creation story and the New Testament. The people of this lush paradise, however, were not favorably depicted. It must not be forgotten that at this time, the Christian West was engaged in a war with the Muslim East, which arose after centuries of enmity between these cultures, over ownership of the Holy Land and other areas such as Spain that were occupied by Muslims. During wartime or other periods of global unrest when nationalism is at its height, we frequently observe that one group becomes united in its desire to defeat the other group, which results in the classification of all members of the other group as an evil collective that becomes regarded with hatred and/or intolerance (for example, with regards to America’s animosity towards the Germans and Japanese during the Second World War, the Russians during the Cold War, and the Arabs during the continuing conflict that originated with Operation Desert Storm and intensified after the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001). They were “the enemy,” not like European Christians and dedicated to a style of life that contrasted significantly with their own. Thus, from the very roots of cross-cultural contact, Orientals were perceived as the Other. The hatred of Muslims and of the prophet Mohammed, which colored texts that took on the Orient as their subject, was strong at this time. The people were viewed as “un fléau de Dieu” (6), sacrilegious possessors of sacred territory. It was inconceivable that the lands the Christians cherished so dearly as the birthplace of their faith should be populated by infidels. Very little was known about Muslims, and what was known was generally described in a negative way. While the fact that the struggle against the nonbeliever was a preoccupation in medieval texts, Martino writes, is no surprise, a remarkable image of the Orient based in fantasy and in history was popular in
representations of the period. This fictitious idea could have been countered by factual information that was gained as a result of the trade with Asian countries of rugs, spices, satin, and precious stones that were brought to France, but few would have listened (7-8, 10-11). These convictions were based in concepts that were fundamental to their belief system and that supported their divine right to declare war on the Muslim infidels in order to expel them from the Holy Land. Verisimilitude, as Todorov wrote in *The Morals of History*, can take precedence over truth in narrative representations so that the author can lend an air of realism to his text; yet “when it leaves the book” and is adopted by others in their regular thinking processes, “a fabulation becomes a lie” (118). The Orient came to be depicted more through fantasy than reality, and the reliance on what was felt to be true but had proven to be false stubbornly held in popular imagination. This attitude remains to this day, even though the reasons behind them may no longer be the same.

*La Chanson de Roland*, one of the most significant epic poems of the Middle Ages partly because it is the first known work in the history of French literature and for its poetic value, serves as an excellent example of the medieval Western representation of Muslims. Many of the beliefs described in the preceding paragraph can be seen in *Roland* and in a great number of other epic poems authored during the era of the Crusades. A pure tale of good versus evil, *Roland* is mainly centered around the French emperor, Charlemagne, his nephew, Roland, and their inevitably successful struggle to defeat their enemies, including the Muslim Sarrasins. The goal of the author is not to present the Sarrasins in an accurate manner but to depict them binaristically as the reverse image of the Christians. The Muslims are labeled as pagans for not worshipping the
Christian god; and it is asserted that they have several gods, including Mohammed (when they in fact have only one) and that they worship idols (which they do not). Their faith is rather “a generalized sort of paganism, which is really an amalgam of non-Christian religions… The ‘Muslim’ religion in Roland is a defiled version of Christianity” (Gabler). At the end of the story, the surviving Sarrasins ultimately acknowledge the supremacy of Western civilization and quickly drop their own beliefs to embrace Christianity. Martino comments about the depiction of the Sarrasins in Roland:

Cette confusion première de l’image n’a pas permis que les Sarrasins de l’époque eussent aucune nuance propre; on les a figurés sur le modèle des Chevaliers français, soumis aux lois d’une même féodalité, et fort semblable à eux dans leurs gestes et propos. Il traîne bien dans le poème quelques vestiges de mots arabes déformés; mais c’est là tout en fait de couleur locale: les Arabes ont si peu de caractère qu’aussitôt vaincus et pris, ils ne font pas de difficultés à devenir « vrais Chrestiens »! (8).

The Sarrasins of the Chanson de Roland share several characteristics with the Muslims described in French novels centuries later, and the manner of the representation of these Others has changed very little. The representation of the Sarrasins is based in the understanding that the French possess the one correct faith and should be considered a superior model for all to emulate. They are expected to have the same standards as the French; the presumption is that these are the only standards. The beliefs of the Muslims are interpreted through those of the French. Islam is judged harshly because it is not structured in the same manner as Christianity and is therefore misunderstood. All Muslims are viewed in the same way; what truly matters is that they are not like the Christians. They serve as little more than a point of contrast. The term “Muslim” is more a negation than an affirmation, tending to mean “non-Christian.” In fact, observes Alain Ruscio in “Des Sarrasins aux Beurs, une vieille méfiance,” all enemies of the
Occidental Christians in the Chanson de Roland come to be labeled “Sarrasins,” suggesting the collective classification of all groups who are Other to the Self. It is not necessary to distinguish individual character traits among them. Elements of Muslim culture are interspersed not to gain a better understanding of it, but serve the function as ornaments to decorate the scene and to increase its level of verisimilitude. The story of the Muslims is used to further Christian ends, to celebrate the superiority and might of Christianity over the belief system of the pagans who dare to maintain their hold over territories that are only rightfully the property of Christians. The narrator lauds Christians and chastises Muslims; and through the pretense of an historical account with characters such as Charlemagne who are not fictional creations and the position of the jongleur as eyewitness to these events, this preference is given authenticity and weight. What we end up learning about Muslims of the Middle Ages in La Chanson de Roland is insignificant and biased, as it appears that the true aim of the depiction of Muslims is to enact literary revenge upon them for refusing to yield the Holy Land.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BINARY SIGNIFYING SYSTEM

Works such as the Chanson de Roland reflect a tendency in Western narrative representation that persists to this day: namely a world view that, in structuralist terms, is anchored by the weight of a center. All systems tend to produce a center, viewed as the privileged origin that determines the meanings of everything that lies within the system. Decentered systems depart from the expected state of things, as human nature strives to seek out a source of meaning. The center is unquestioned as well as the beliefs that it has
spawned. Within French literature, it is the Subject that occupies the center. Here, the word “Subject” does not refer to any individual, but to a concept, which in this case is represented by Western culture, values, and standards. As we saw in the above examples from medieval epic poetry that seeks to depict the Orient, the French author tends to interpret the world around him through what he knows about and values in his own culture. It is only possible to “see” what conforms to his belief system. While it is true that not all French authors who wrote about the Other refused to question their own society (Montesquieu and Flaubert are among those who sought to expose what others may view as the idiocy of French culture by exposing the primacy of the Subject and Eurocentric standards in the production of knowledge); the instinctive way for one to view the outside world, or what Todorov referred to as the first “phase of understanding,” consists of interpreting the world through the identity of the self: “I am a literary critic, and all the world about which I speak allow only one voice to be heard: my own. I am interested in distant cultures, but they are, according to me, all structured like my own. […] The act of perceiving the others does exist, but it only reproduces several copies of the same thing” (The Morals of History 14). We can clearly see this level of understanding in the characterization of the Sarrasins in La Chanson de Roland. In La Conquête de l’Amérique, Todorov reiterates that the first spontaneous reaction in meeting a stranger is to imagine him different from, even inferior to, the self (81). Passing on to the next phase requires reversing the relationship between subject and object and de-emphasizing the importance of the self and its value system in the recognition that the Subject is not the only determiner in interpreting the way that the world is structured; yet it seems that most efforts made by the French to understand members of cultures that
they viewed as dissimilar to their own between the Middle Ages and the Age of Colonization were based in this first phase, in which Western culture is the filter through which all others are assessed. There was no desire to move on to a second stage, since the power of the Subject in the production of Western discourse was too prominent in representations of the day to permit its position to be questioned.

Edward Said has referred to this practice of representation of the Other through the primacy of the Self as “Orientalism.” The Orient, writes Said, is little more than an artificial grouping of people and nations based on their cultural and social distance from those of the Occident that becomes “created” as a product of Western discourse; and the ability of the Occident to represent the Orient in discourse indicates its power and control over the knowledge about what is viewed to be an inferior collective. Said has been widely challenged for his willingness to overgeneralize and especially for his assertion that the Other is not able to speak (by Abdel-Malek in particular). I believe that Said should have qualified his statement to say that the Other, as a theoretical construct rather than a people, lacks access to subjectivity as long as he remains the object of a Western representational system in which knowledge is the product of an Occidental, hegemonic, and imperialist power structure: in essence, where the Subject, the Center, is the source of signification within the body of discourse. As I will discuss later, many postcolonial writers who desired to represent the people traditionally viewed as “Other” needed to dismantle the subject-based representational system in order to deny the traditional right of Occidental culture to determine meaning and to impose the status of “Other” rather than “Self.” As we will see, however, it was necessary not simply to invert the system, placing the object in place of the subject, but to deconstruct it completely.
Another important aspect of the centralized system that plays into representations of the Other, as we have seen employed vividly in the characterization of the Sarrasins in *La Chanson de Roland*, is the basic unit of structuralism, the binary pair of mutually exclusive, polarized terms (white/black, good/bad, man/woman, etc). The Muslims in the legendary epic have been depicted as the mirror image of the Christians: everything that the Christians are, the Sarrasins are not, and vice-versa; and that which is not associated with Christian values is intrinsically abnormal. In the determination of meaning, the natural tendency of the Subject-centered system is to base it on binary groupings. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is defined in its essence by what it is not in relation to other members of the signifying system. Within this framework, a sign such as “woman” gains significance based on how it is different from its polar opposite, “man.” It allows one to separate the whole body of systemic knowledge into discrete boxes into which similar knowledge is encased and different knowledge excluded. That which does not share values with me is, by definition, different; and the boundaries which separate us have been established by my sense of subject. I can easily group together those who are like me and exclude those who are different, or Other, in comparison to my Self. Blendings are not possible: belonging is to one group or to the other, allowing for simplified meanings and an easy way to make sense of the world. Stuart Hall writes⁸ that we form our definition of national culture based on shared meanings through which we analyze the cultural “things” which surround us; and it is through this process that national cultures come to designate what is “normal” and “abnormal” and thus what is to be excluded from the self. Said proposes that national identity is not simply an

affirmation of the self but also carries alterity with it as part of its definition. This process can be displayed in binaristic representations in the following manner, as we observed in the *Chanson de Roland*: if the author views himself and his audience to be French, Christian, monotheistic, brave, good, and intelligent, all those who do not share those characteristics are presumed to be unlike them. (Note that the representations in *Roland* are not strictly binaristic; it is important in the story that the Sarrasins must appear as worthy a military force as the French to create suspense. They are, otherwise, opposite to the French in every way.) The use of binaries can be an effective tool in narrative representations, as it permits the author to draw conclusions about others by generalizing all members of a national collective as similar in nature and temperament.

The sense of difference implied by the binaristic system is taken one step further by turning it into hierarchical classification. Jacques Derrida, in his study of structuralism, stressed that one pole of the opposition is always inherently valued. It is the source of meaning, the center, that assigns a positive label to one element and a negative label to the other. As was discussed in the above paragraph, an individual may define the world around him or her structurally in terms of that which shares and does not share in this person’s sense of self, excluding the different. The discursive practices employed by a national group subconsciously mark as negative that which does not identify with and strengthen the values of that culture. This becomes especially prominent in a situation marked by gross inequalities of power, where one national culture takes precedence over others and views the world as a function of its own existence.
MYTH

An important product of binary discourse is a more global level of signification that Roland Barthes referred to as “myth⁹.” Myth is not concerned with the simple link of signifier to signified but connects a set of signifiers to a central theme or concept. The signifiers can then “speak” through the mythological unit – they are no longer simply words or signs, but meanings in themselves. For example, the image of a flower in bloom suggests birth, newness, and springtime; whereas a leafless tree in the late fall implies death, dormancy, and the arrival of winter. Myth appears to be a result of the human desire to understand that which surrounds us and apply some sort of meaning to the world, in order to better grasp and control it. Things that hold meaning for me become part of my world and exist in terms of how I see them. The resulting meanings are not necessarily the same for all people. A signifier can mean several widely different things, depending on a person’s life experience, culture, and ideology. In “Le vin et le lait,” Barthes explores the mythology that exists in France around wine. It is not so much a beverage as a “totem” (83), and this connection is accepted as part of the culture. However, unlike the usual link between signifier and signified, the link between signifier and myth is not arbitrary; it is created. Wine, Barthes writes, is deeply implicated in French capitalism; and therefore the motivation surrounding the wine myth is strong. Myths have value in a culture. Motivation is always present in other myths, according to Barthes; and it is the central theme or concept behind it that determines its urgency. This can be a political agenda such as imperialism, asserting the superiority of French culture

over any that would dare to challenge it. Barthes wrote in “Grammaire africaine” about the language used in official French documents during France’s war with Algeria:

Le vocabulaire officiel des affaires africaines est, on s’en doute, purement axiomatique. C’est dire qu’il n’a aucune valeur de communication, mais seulement d’intimidation. Il constitue donc une écriture, c’est-à-dire un langage chargé d’opérer une coïncidence entre les normes et les faits, et de donner à un réel cynique la caution d’une morale noble (155, italics in original).

While the situation was slightly different earlier in the period of colonial occupation, the language used by the French to designate Africa in their novels definitely had an intention behind it to mythologize it as they saw it, as they took the continent into their subconscious and represented it as a part of their own culture.

In the area of cultural difference, myth is expressed by allowing the member of a national culture to “understand” a member of another national culture through a set of binaristically interpreted characteristics. We recall once again that within Western culture, the world is instinctually assessed in a subjective manner. Others are viewed in relation to what is known about the self and one’s own national cultural values, and what is learned about others allows an individual to elucidate the understanding of the self. They are important to me in that they can serve to strengthen my own value system and my sense of self. It therefore becomes difficult if not impossible for a Westerner to view those who are regarded as different or “inferior” other than in a couple relationship with the cultural values of the West as a norm. The Other is defined in Western representations not on the weight of his own actions, but in relation to the Westerner as the “lesser half.” In the Chanson de Roland, we recall that the Sarrasins are presented as wanting in relation to the Western Christians, as their opposite. It is expected that they behave exactly like the French, which exists as the cultural norm. The Sarrasins only
redeem themselves by recognizing the fallacy of their choice of faith. They have the opportunity to become the equal to the “superior” Christians.

In an environment of race, color, and sexual prejudice, however, the ability to rise above one’s inferior status is not always available. An individual’s skin color or sex cannot be as easily reversed as one’s religion, even in literary representations; and these signs of difference are taken as marks of their societal standing in relation to the male, white norm of the Western power structure. During the eighteenth century, thinkers saw a link between one’s skin color and the color of one’s soul. The blacker the skin, the darker the soul; and a hierarchy developed with the lightest-skinned at the top and the darkest at the bottom, next to apes and other animals. Arabs and Far Easterners were felt to be “above” Africans due to the proximity of their skin color and customs to those of Europeans. Biology and science took a primary role in explaining the superiority of whites over other races especially during the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, at which time both of the French novels that I have selected were written. Physical characteristics of blacks as well as women, especially their small skulls in relation to the European male norm, were viewed as indicators of their inferiority and the reason why they would never be able to rise to the level of achievement attained by white males. Because of their inferiority, which has been “proven” by objective scientific methods, these groups were seen as requiring assistance in order to live in a “normal” manner. Throughout Western culture, mythological representations of other races have generally focused on skin color or sex as an outward symbol of inferior status. Albert Memmi explains\(^\text{10}\) that the representation of the colonized as lazy, sadistic, stupid,

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evil, and childlike served an important role in the justification for colonial dependence, because it was considered proof that they required protection and supervision in order to guide them on the path to becoming more like the “superior” national culture, the French (103). At the same time, however, permitting the colonized to become exactly like the colonizer would signal the end of the colonizer’s hegemonic dominance over the colonized; he must remain the object of discourse, and not its subject, within the Occidental representational tradition in order to sustain the predominance of the West. Whether or not it is possible for the Other to exist in standard Western discourse on his own terms, as the subject and not the object, is open to question.

STEREOTYPING

An important element in Oriental and African representations and closely related to mythologizing is the stereotype. It takes binarism one step further by typing an entire “race” of people in relation to the self, separating what is “normal” and acceptable from what does not fit and is different. (I choose to place “race” in quotes because I view it as an arbitrary means of separating people from one another into classifications as a function of their physical characteristics; and especially when it comes to the Other; it tends to imply that different groups of people are not of the same species, as with animals.) A group of traits becomes associated with another “race,” allowing someone to define others easily based on their national origin, skin color, body shape, sexual orientation, or belief system. No distinctions can be made for individuals within the stereotype; one person is viewed as constitutive of his or her race. Thus, upon meeting or
seeing a man who is considered different, it is possible for someone to make general statements about him without having spoken to him or learned anything about him other than one characteristic. Arabs or Muslims are typically viewed as alien, exotic, sensual, and arbitrarily barbaric; Africans as lazy, stupid, uncivilized, and rather naive. These adjectives always bring along with them a value judgment, underscoring that this is how they are in relation to us. The implication is that one’s own culture is the standard against which others are to be assessed. Asked to define one’s own race, however, and the response would likely be that the variety of individual personalities embodied in one’s cultural group leave it resistant to classification. It is therefore reserved for those who are different. These traits are fixed in popular imagination, seen as impervious to change because they are part of one’s national character. Stereotyping reminds us of Derrida’s statement that there is always a violent hierarchy between oppositions as well as Foucault’s interplay of power and knowledge, classifying people according to a norm and establishing the excluded as Other.

IDENTITY CONSTITUTED AS DIFFERENCE

Particularly during the Age of Colonization, the colonized peoples were described in contrast to the white colonizer, as a negative, as a lack of the admirable qualities known to be possessed by the colonizer. Dependence upon the colonizer was not only economic and political, but also representational. The traits that come to be associated with the colonized contradict one another and remain inflexible even in the presence of contrary proof, indicating that the source of these meanings is not with the colonized
himself. Writes William Cohen, “Africa served Europeans as a convenient mirror or as a screen onto which they projected their own fears about themselves and their world” (33), as they feared that they would be without the cultural benefits that they have enjoyed.

Let me explain further how this works by using some of Michel Foucault’s theories about madness and reason. Like white/black and civilized/uncivilized, reason/madness is a binary pair; and the first element is generally valued over the second in Western discourse because it serves to reinforce Western culture and contributes to the valued concept of work as a route to progress. Madness, writes Foucault, is useful in upholding and defining reason by setting up what is opposite to it and casting it out, excluding and controlling it, and denying it the right to speak on its own behalf:

meye structure de refus, à partir de laquelle on dénonce une parole comme n’étant pas langage, un geste comme n’étant pas ouvre, une figure comme n’ayant pas droit à prendre place dans l’histoire. Cette structure est constitutive de ce qui est sens et non-sens, ou plutôt de cette réciprocité par laquelle ils sont liés l’un à l’autre; elle seule peut rendre compte de ce fait général qu’il ne peut y avoir dans notre culture de raison sans folie, quand bien même la connaissance rationnelle qu’on prend de la folie la réduit et la désarme en lui prêtant le frêle statut d’accident pathologique (Dits et écrits I,162)

The same is true for the Westerner who, by stating what he is not in the form of the Other, allows him to better understand who he is. Europeans are civilized, Africans are savages. Europeans value work, Africans are lazy. Europeans are intellectual, Africans are instinctual. Europeans are intelligent, Africans are stupid. Whether the second part is true or not does not matter; what does matter is that it allows for the European to be able to say who he is by labeling the people who he is not in relation to what he believes that he is. The African Other comes to be represented in negative terms as the opposite of what is thought to be a known constant, European identity. As Stuart Hall writes,
“[Representation of difference is] necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self as a subject but can also be threatening, producing danger and negative feelings, hostility, and aggression towards the ‘Other’” (238).

It is important to consider a general sense of French ideology as it is represented in literature of the nineteenth century, how it viewed itself with regards to the rest of the world, in order to better understand who the writer/reader is and, by extension, its Other. The period of colonial expansion in the mid-nineteenth century coincided with a general sense of nationalistic fervor of France as a land with a great cultural legacy that should be embraced by all, and the belief that the French were better than others was one of the primary elements of what constituted Frenchness at the time (Reflections on Exile 418). In a period of strong nationalism, it becomes difficult for someone who is proud of their country’s accomplishments and status to be an unbiased critic of how its actions affect the rest of the world if these actions serve to give it power and prestige. Todorov writes in Nous et les autres that philosophers J. S. Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville did not consider whether colonization was right or wrong, only if it was useful to the nation of France (267-9) and states that nationalism and humanitarianism cannot coexist because nationalism presumes inequality. “En première approximation, on peut dire que ce nationalisme-là procède de la préférence avouée pour les « siens » au détriment de tous les « autres »” (239).

The Western practice of representing people of other cultures, which took root during the Crusades, blossomed and expanded in the following centuries. While the observations themselves may have changed, the stance of the observer with regards to the
object that he endeavors to describe is the same one for the author of the Middle Ages
and for that of the present. The fundamental characteristic of European representations,
that of a centered and subjective process of interpretation which gives rise to binaristic
structures and mythologized discourse, remained essentially intact: the Other is regarded
in relation to the national culture of the Self which is the norm and the source of meaning.
Let us continue to observe the evolution of Western representations of the Orient in order
to demonstrate this fact.

EXOTICISM

One element that came to be considered by many to be synonymous with the
Orient, particularly during the nineteenth century, but which did not emerge until long
after the Middle Ages, is exoticism. Exoticism, which can be viewed as a form of
binarism because it marks difference, involves labeling a component of a foreign national
culture to be worthy of study, intrigue, and excitement. Something that is exotic is by
nature “étranger” (from another nation as well as “strange”); and it implies both interest
in and distance from the national culture to which it belongs. The exotic takes place in a
binary hierarchy above the “normal” and mundane surroundings in the observer’s culture.
It was not possible for exoticism to exist in representations from the Middle Ages through
the Renaissance for the simple reason that there was no fascination with foreign cultures.
A strong sense of nationalism, which is the pure opposite of exoticism, dominated the
discourse of this period. People of these eras did not dream of protesting against their
present society or of imagining a different one, writes Martino (14-15); given a choice
between Oriental and Occidental cultures, if this even occurred to them, yielded only a preference for their own. The extremely few Oriental texts written during this period tended to be structured in a similar manner: the Oriental characters, generally from India, Persia, China, or Japan, possessed unusual names to indicate their difference but had exceptional manners and were extremely polite and well-dressed, modeled after the ideal European of the day. The French character who came to Persia found that it was a near-replica of the country he had left behind, and the geographical landmarks that he visited were given names that had been poorly adapted from books. At the time, there existed almost no resources with factual details about the Orient, leaving the author who wished to write a detailed novel about China little with which to work. Lack of knowledge about the Orient led to lack of interest, in turn producing lack of knowledge because very few people felt that knowing more about the Orient would be enriching. This was a time of universalism, when it was believed that all people were basically the same, and diversity had no place.

THE ORIENT IN FRENCH LITERATURE: THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

It was not until the late 1600’s that the French started to find value in learning more about the lands designated as the Orient. The court in particular was very interested in acquiring Oriental knowledge and objects. Both curiosity and desire to please the court spurred many people to travel and to write about the places that they had visited. These voyages, however, did not allow them an opportunity to get to know the Other on
more than a superficial level. Most explorers traveled out of a desire for wealth rather than knowledge; their objective was focused on acquiring things rather than to learn something. Interest in exotic lands, Martino observes, began around the same time as the interest in colonization: the explorers’ primary goal was glory for themselves and for France, and any information that they gathered about the Orient reflects this subjective level of interest. Unable to communicate with the natives, they could not discover the meanings behind the gestures that they saw and reported their misunderstood and fabricated conclusions to the French reading public. In addition, many explorers’ explanations for the natives’ behavior contradicted one another. These authors’ impressions were replete with images, sensations, and tidbits, the most basic elements to catch their eye. The French’s knowledge of what they knew best – French society, standards, and customs – remained their point of departure for understanding the outside world, just as it had been in the Middle Ages. “[P]our tout ce qui concernait l’homme, leur connaissance de la vie exotique était trop imparfaite: ils ne comprenaient et même ne voyaient que ce qui se rapprochait de leurs idées et en général de la vie française: les visions trop nouvelles et les sentiments trop étranges, ils les écartaient délibérément ou du moins ils les revêtaient de couleurs connues et moins vives” (Martino 51). In general, the people were described as extremely nice – how else to describe those who had been so welcoming to them – in spite of some bizarre elements of their daily lives and superstitious beliefs, and devoted to love (this due to the many physical pleasures that traveling passengers were accorded in the Orient). It is important to note that but for a few exceptions, those who wrote about the Orient during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century had never traveled there, retrieving their knowledge from books
without questioning the veracity of the information they repeated. In turn, those who read their second- and third-hand findings considered what they wrote as original and authoritative since it was presented as such. Most people in the early to mid-eighteenth century felt as if they “knew” the Orient through the representations of their cultures.

Probably the most significant work on the Orient of this early period of interest, the *Dictionnaire universel contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connaissance des peuples de l’Orient*, was written by Herbelot and went through several editions between when it was first published in 1697 and the late eighteenth century. It was so highly regarded that nearly all authors who chose to write about the Orient in the eighteenth century and beyond used it as a resource, undoubtedly serving as a foundation for the general public’s knowledge bank about the Orient. Herbelot’s manner of structuring the knowledge that he acquired about the Orient in this work reflects the subjective and binary process through which Western culture analyzes its surroundings. Everything was placed into a category, writes Martino; “tout avait sa place: histoires, traditions, religions, politique, sciences, arts, biographies,…etc., le tout disposé sous des rubriques commodes, accompagné de tables des matières qui en rendaient l’usage aisé même aux moins érudits” (145). The Orient, through the eyes of the Westerner, becomes transformed into an object of study that must be observed carefully and analyzed through the eyes of the observer in order to be understood. Such a methodology makes the Orient easily comprehensible to the masses and implies that it is possible to “understand” a people and their culture through methods of analysis. Said would state that being able to understand a culture and hold an opinion about it suggests that it is possible to “hold” it and to have control over how one is able to speak about it. Herbelot’s work represents one of the
earliest efforts to view the Orient scientifically and pseudo-objectively, placing a distance between the observer and the observed. Similar Oriental texts of this period are marked by their simplicity and generality, rendering it intelligible. The urge to categorize and understand the Orient caused many writers to make conclusions on the basis of fragmentary information. They took the admirable words that they read in Confucius to be reflective of how the Chinese lived their everyday lives, and commonly repeated stereotypes began to be accepted as fact. Indeed, travelers who came to the Orient unconsciously and instinctively wrote their observations to coincide with prominent, preexisting beliefs, showing that even those authored original works were clouded by popular opinion. The dominance of these strongly held images about the Orient is likely due to the role that they played in reinforcing Occidental values, leading them to deduce that the qualities they found important were universal. “Cette vision d’un Orient idéal et d’un Chine philosophique ne pouvait que plaire aux hommes du XVIIIᵉ siècle” (Martino 149). The classification of an amorphous mass of territories and people as “Orient” led many authors to make generalized conclusions about the Chinese, Indians, Muslims, Persians, and Turks as a unit: once again, it is the perspective of the Western observer that is the departure point.

The interest of the seventeenth and eighteenth century French in Eastern religions is likewise based on the primacy of Western beliefs. Other faiths were appreciated in relation to Christianity. The general good will felt for the Orient at the time, writes Martino, was due to a lack of sympathy for the Church that, a century beforehand, had persecuted those who decried them and continued to serve as a hostile presence. This attitude appears to be very much the contrary of the one that persisted through the
Crusades and represents a form of exoticism: the Other is appreciated for the statement that it makes in a contrast to the characteristics that are disliked about the observer’s own culture. Islam did not enjoy the same positive regard through most of the eighteenth century. It had been regarded as the enemy of the Church since the Middle Ages, and it remained difficult for Christians to study it with a completely unprejudicial viewpoint. Two of the earliest works on Islam published in the seventeenth century sought to help their readers better understand the faith by refuting what were viewed as falsehoods and exposing Mohammed as an impostor. A 1730 text that viewed Mohammed favorably was criticized for being “impie et injurieux à la religion chrétienne” (Martino 163). The zeal of the time for challenging pretenders to the “one true faith” brought them to condemn Luther and Calvin, and the British were angered that their religion was being compared to Islam: it is clear that what makes all these faiths the same to the French observer is the manner in which they differ from Christianity. Opinion on Islam did not begin to change until the end of the eighteenth century. Voltaire came to recognize that he might have portrayed Mohammed more wickedly than he truly was, and in his writings he presented Christianity and Islam as similar. Did Voltaire only see Islam more positively because it was seen to be closer to Christianity than was originally perceived; and was it only possible for him to do so by misguidedly seeking out commonalities between both faiths? Once more, it appears that the subjective nature of analyzing the world and binary categorization have played a primary role in the representation of the Orient. The Orient is either idealized or hated, nothing in between; what is important is that there appears to be no real judgment being made on the basis of factual information and only in relation to elements about Occidental culture that are embraced or disdained.
Knowledge becomes twisted and misrepresented in order to maintain the supremacy of Western culture as the root of determining meanings about its surroundings in the world.

Several travelers during the eighteenth century, when interest in the Orient was growing, were more educated and were able to speak the languages of the people among whom they planned to live. Their desire was not for riches, but for intellectual enlightenment. However, the Orient that they created in the works that resulted from their travels, which Martino refers to as an “Orient-type” (61), was not much closer to the real Orient than that of their predecessors. Although their descriptions were significantly less simplistic than those of previous generations, little new knowledge is to be found in the works of the Oriental authors of this period. They continued to be influenced by the long-standing beliefs that had been held and accepted without question by previous generations, which transformed and crystallized. Earlier conceptions had not been challenged, but rather expected; and they remained (and remain) a part of Western ideology for centuries after. The explorers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century were not satisfied with having simply observed well; they reflected on what they saw and felt themselves qualified to relate their conclusions. The precise details that these travelers reported allowed them to categorize and label people of different nationalities based on the character traits that they had witnessed. Singular instances, both good and bad, easily turned into hasty generalizations that became constitutive of a sort of national character: the philosophical Chinese, the jealous Turk, the sensual Oriental woman. It is likely that their descriptions were accepted as true since they were actually there and appeared to speak with a certain level of authority. What makes the studies by Tavernier, Bernier, and Chardin important to the body of this dissertation is
that their seeming expertise later inspired many authors such as Voltaire, Mme de Sévigné, Racine, La Fontaine, and Montesquieu in their depictions of these strange lands; and their stories were likely an important source of knowledge about the Orient (and, by extension, the Muslim regions of North Africa, as all believers in Islam came to be categorized as “Oriental”) into the nineteenth century and beyond. Writes Martino, “[I]l n’est pas étonnant que l’idée d’une contrée infiniment voluptueuse soit devenue l’élément principal de la tradition littéraire sur l’Orient, telle qu’elle se forma à travers les récits de voyages” (71).

Novels about the Orient became especially popular in France after the 1704 translation of the Persian tale, *1001 Nights*. It is composed of a variety of fantastic stories that many readers took as an easy way to know about Oriental civilizations. They liked the excitement of Oriental novels, which they found to be less predictable and more imaginative than the traditional novel that has France as a setting; and the love expressed by the Arabs was passionate and voluptuous in comparison to the puritanical and orderly style of the European. What the French would find extraordinary is taken by the *1001 Nights* characters to be ordinary, and the European reader was led to believe that this was an authentic reflection of Arab life. “L’imagination du XVIIe siècle, de bonne heure libertine, eut là des visions de sérail, de harem, d’odalisques, d’eunuques, dont jamais elle ne lassa” (Martino 257). What is clear is that from the beginnings of the Oriental novel in France, the most singular characteristic desired in a portrayal of the Orient is its difference in relation to the Occidental norm. The *1001 Nights* was so popular and the taste for the Oriental novel so strong that it inspired many imitators who sought to create original Oriental tales. These authors sought their images of Oriental life in works such
as Herbelot’s *Dictionnaire universel* or translated stories from other Oriental countries and included elements of Arab culture to give them the appropriate flavor sought by their readers. Martino remarks that these novels were not about the Orient at all, “il n’y est parlé que de la France” (269). What was created in these works was a fictitious Orient, which was the result of many of the aforementioned factors: the strong belief that the European way of life was the norm and any other was an anomaly, the intention to categorize and label Oriental mores as different in relation to European ones, and the willingness to see Oriental culture as a function of popular stereotypes.

**MONTESQUIEU’S LES LETTRES PERSANES**

A French novel that examines both the risks involved with self-analysis and the tools that are best suited to analysis of the other can be seen in Montesquieu’s *Les Lettres persanes* (1721), which Todorov describes as containing “l’effort le plus abouti, dans la tradition française, pour penser simultanément la diversité des peuples et l’unité du genre humain” (*Nous et les autres* 467). Discussion of *Les Lettres persanes* will allow me to touch on some of the more prominent characteristics of the novels that I examined in closer detail in the body chapters of this dissertation, as many of them are embodied in Montesquieu’s work, and to explore how his representation of other cultures manifests itself.

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11 Because Todorov regards the diversity of people as tending to be nationalist and relativist in nature and the unity of the human species humanist and universalist, he considers them largely incompatible.
Les Lettres persanes is the story of two Persian men, Rica and Usbek, who travel to France, where they live from 1712 to 1720 and report their findings on the country in the form of letters that they address both to each other and to friends and associates living in Persia and elsewhere throughout Europe. Both men are good observers, and Usbek describes himself and Rica as

peut-être les premiers parmi les Persans que l’envie de savoir ait fait sortir de leur pays, et qui aient renoncé aux douceurs d’une vie tranquille pour aller chercher laborieusement la sagesse. Nous sommes nés dans un royaume florissant; mais nous n’avons pas cru que ces bornes fussent celles de nos connaissances, et que la lumière orientale dût seule nous éclairer (24).

They have decided to travel out of a desire for knowledge, which many Persians seem incapable of comprehending (letter V); they do not understand why Usbek would choose to leave his family, friends, and homeland behind to venture to a land that is unknown by Persians. Because of this lack of knowledge of France among the Persians, it would seem that the concept of France is therefore not dependent on that of Persia, as in the relationship between France and the Orient (where, as we have seen, an understanding of the Orient is often generated through an understanding of the Occident). Within the letters of Usbek and Rica, France is presented as the astonishingly different land; the Occident is not constituted as possessing the primary point of cultural reference, as is frequently the case in representations authored by Westerners. They do not, however, rely on Persian culture as a basis for their critical observations but reason itself. The letters primarily addresses their authors’ thoughts on European culture and government, philosophical questions, and the growing sense of unrest among the women at Usbek’s
seraglio\textsuperscript{12}, which ends with the suicide of his favorite wife, Roxana, at the end of the novel.

The format that Montesquieu has selected for \textit{Les Lettres persanes}, that of a series of letters, allows for a wide variety of voices who speak in the first person to be heard in a manner similar to Assia Djebar’s \textit{L’Amour, la fantasia}, as we saw in chapter 6. Not any single character has the ability to ascribe one particular system of values to the novel and be more influential to the reader’s perception of the events that they describe. Rica and Usbek do not dominate the text, and the last word comes in the form of a letter sent by Roxana to Usbek, to which his response is not included. Each speaker has a unique voice, and their values and manners of speaking do not always correspond. Not even the two Persians express themselves in the same way or have identical judgments. Both employ a different writing style – Usbek’s is more serious and florid, while Rica’s is lighter and more buoyant – and their points of view occasionally conflict. Elements of human feeling and emotion are expressed in the letters from the members of the seraglio, which contrast with the frequently dispassionate and contemplative letters of Usbek and the curiosity of Rica. There is no one “Persian”; their interests and values are not strictly defined by their sense of national belonging. Because the dates of the letters extend across eight years (1712-1720), one also gets the sense that attitudes and values are not timeless; that they can and indeed do change over time, as with Rica’s evolving perspectives of French culture. In addition, time and setting are occasionally fragmented, as the place where each letter is composed changes constantly and some letters do not follow in chronological order (such as those at the time of the unrest at the harem towards

\textsuperscript{12} A type of harem.
the end of the novel; letter CXLVII, the first of the series, was composed in 1717, whereas CXLV was composed in 1720). While these techniques were likely not new, they contribute to the impression that the reader is standing on a slippery slope on which neither the format, nor the protagonists or sense of time and space are to be construed along traditionally expected lines.

Another characteristic of the epistolary novel that was seen in Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre is the lack of any precise beginning or end. Les Lettres persanes begins, after Montesquieu’s preface, with a letter written by Usbek to a friend at Ispahan. It would seem that some correspondence might have pre-dated this letter, which was composed 25 days after their departure. It is unclear as to whether this was the first letter in the chain of correspondence between the Persians and their home base or merely another link. The final letter, as has already been mentioned, was written by Usbek’s wife Roxana as she committed suicide. One would expect that Usbek would undoubtedly feel the need to respond, considering the sentiment of jealousy that he had expressed in previous letters regarding the inhabitants of his seraglio; and that the letter-writing would continue among its correspondents past the end of the novel.

Aside from multiplicity, the epistolary form is also associated with contrast and dissent. The exchange of letters constitutes a dialogue of differing opinions, sometimes exposing the mistakes in judgment made by the various characters. At the same time that Usbek chastises the eunuchs and his wives for their lack of faithfulness to him, reminding them of the power that he has over them (letters XX, XXI, LXV, CXLVIII, CL, CLIII, and CLIV), they speak of their devotion to Usbek in their letters and the sacrifices that they have made out of their love for him (letters III, VII, IX, LXIV, CLVI, and CLVII).
Montesquieu’s eighteenth-century French readers also engage in a dialogue with his Persian readers, who see their culture in a different manner than that to which they have become accustomed. This technique of making the familiar foreign discourages the reader from identifying too personally with any single position, making truth a more relative concern that varies from one individual to the next rather than applying to all indiscriminately. Is the “true” France the one based on what is known by those who live there, or on what the Persian visitors have described in their letters; and what is the basis for this determination? A conclusion based on the novel is that both images of France have merit, based on the position of the observer with regards to the object being perceived and that observer’s life experiences and values.

In a similar way that the narrators of Le Roman d’un spahi and Une Année dans le Sahel endeavor to describe to their readers a foreign land to which they have traveled, so do Usbek and Rica in Les Lettres persanes. Much like Peyral and Fromentin, the Persians are initially struck by those attributes of French society that are so distinctly different from those at home; and this presentation of French culture as “strange” in comparison to the accepted norm provides the French readers with the sense of unattached, disinterested distance from their own culture that would allow them to regard it with less prejudicial personal interest. The Occident no longer serves as the unique reference point, as it has been so often in Western literature. The basis upon which they make judgments of foreign cultures distinguishes Rica and Usbek from the French travelers in novels, particularly Peyral. For the French traveler, as we have seen, it is often their own culture that they see as representing a standard of behavior by which all others should be analyzed; but for Montesquieu’s Persians, this measure is most often
founded on reason rather than on their own society. They appear to reject the common
convention of estimating one’s surroundings on the basis of one’s own value system.
Writes Rica, “Il me semble, Usbek, que nous ne jugeons jamais des choses que par un
retour secret que nous faisons sur nous-mêmes. [...] quand je vois des hommes qui
rampent sur un atome, c'est-à-dire la terre, qui n'est qu'un point de l'univers, se proposer
directement pour modèles de la Providence, je ne sais comment accorder tant
d'extravagance avec tant de petitesse” (84). Orient and Occident are thus not hierarchized
in relation to each other, one ranked as “good” while the other is “bad”; each has its own
pros and cons. (This is by no means exclusive, as Usbek occasionally expresses
judgmental comments with regards to the French and finds Asiatics “plus sensés” than
Europeans [55].) Rica and Usbek assess matters of religion through reason rather than
blind faith (letters XVII, XXIX, XXXV, XLVII, and LXXVI), questioning both Muslim
and Christian practices that others accept unconditionally. “[Usbek’s] voyage from
Ispahahan [sic] to Europe and ultimately to Paris is based on a rejection of his own culture.
[...] he believes that his own virtue and wisdom can only increase with the distance that
separates him from Persia .... He believes in values above cultural determination, and he
believes that his voyage to the west will allow him to become their representative”
(Gearhart 730, emphasis mine). Nor does there remain a distinct separation between Self
and Other by the end of the novel, particularly for Rica. After spending two years in
Paris, he writes to Usbek, “Mon esprit perd insensiblement tout ce qui lui reste
d'asiatique, et se plie sans effort aux moeurs européennes. Je ne suis plus si étonné de
voir dans une maison cinq ou six femmes avec cinq ou six hommes, et je trouve que cela
n'est pas mal imaginé” (86). He has been changed by his voyage, more able to identify
with the Other through the knowledge that he has gained and interactions with the French at the same time that he has not forsaken his sense of self as a Persian. This is not to say that he finds himself able to understand French culture like a native would: he does not misinterpret it as much as he had at first but finds it no less incomprehensible. Such was not the case for Loti’s *spahi* Jean Peyral, who remained shocked and disoriented by his African surroundings even after spending years in Senegal.

While Usbek is able to analyze French culture with a degree of insight and lucidity that the French themselves do not possess, his awareness of his personal life back in Ispahan lacks these qualities. Because he is personally implicated as sultan of his seraglio, he is unable to apply the tenets of reason that he seeks in Western society to his attitudes and behaviors during the revolt of his wives with the same open-minded stance that he has in relation to Europe. His letters consistently stress the importance of valuing the community over the individual. Lessons given throughout the novel denounce the employment of tyrannical measures to maintain dominance over a people (letters XCI and XCV), as it is contrary to reason (letter LXXX) and their response will be expressed in rebellion (letter CXLI)\(^\text{13}\). As Usbek writes to Ibben:

\begin{quote}
Mais, si un prince, bien loin de faire vivre ses sujets heureux, veut les accabler et les détruire, le fondement de l'obéissance cesse: rien ne les lie, rien ne les attache à lui; et ils rentrent dans leur liberté naturelle. Ils soutiennent que tout pouvoir sans bornes ne saurait être légitime, parce qu'il n'a jamais pu avoir d'origine légitime. Car nous ne pouvons pas, disent-ils, donner à un autre plus de pouvoir sur nous que nous n'en avons nous-mêmes. Or nous n'avons pas sur nous-mêmes un pouvoir sans bornes: par exemple, nous ne pouvons pas nous ôter la vie. Personne n'a donc, concluent-ils, sur la terre un tel pouvoir (131).
\end{quote}

\(^{13}\) I do not mention here the many remarks made in letters XXIV and XXIX about King Louis XIV’s absolute rule and the hypocrisy of Christianity, even though they constitute some of the strongest statements in the novel condemning autocracy, since both of these letters were composed by Rica and I am particularly concerned with Usbek’s beliefs here.
Liberty and equality are extolled as the soundest principles with which to lead a nation. Usbek, however, completely disregards these principles of liberty and equality when it comes to his own sort of nation, his seraglio, and the wives and eunuchs who reside there. He is forceful in his letters to them, reminding them who is in charge and referring to them as:

\[
de vils instruments que je puis briser à ma fantaisie; qui n'existez qu'autant que vous savez obéir; qui n'êtes dans le monde que pour vivre sous mes lois ou pour mourir dès que je l'ordonne; qui ne respirez qu'autant que mon bonheur, mon amour, ma jalousie même, ont besoin de votre bassesse; et enfin, qui ne pouvez avoir d'autre partage que la soumission, d'autre âme que mes volontés, d'autre espérance que ma félicité? (44).
\]

He expects them to be happy in spite of whatever feelings they may have to the contrary. To quell their squabbles, he threatens them with violence and accuses them of wanting to deceive him since they had promised to leave the seraglio in good order (letter XXXVIII). When he learns from the chief eunuch that all but one of his wives have lost all restraint and virtue and his slaves have slacked in their duty, Usbek, overtaken by jealousy, interprets their behavior as a personal affront and vows vengeance upon those who have dared to defy his will. Contrast this to the attitude that is reflected in a letter to Rica, in which he writes on the position that superiors should take with regards to their subjects,

\[
Il aurait fallu, Rica, que nous eussions eu un bien mauvais naturel pour aller faire cent petites insultes à des gens qui venaient tous les jours chez nous nous témoigner leur bienveillance: ils savaient bien que nous étions au-dessus d'eux, et, s'ils l'avaient ignoré, nos bienfaits le leur auraient appris chaque jour. N'ayant rien à faire pour nous faire respecter, nous faisions tout pour nous rendre aimables: nous nous communiquions aux plus petits; au milieu des grandeurs, qui endurcissent toujours, ils nous trouvaient sensibles; ils ne voyaient que notre coeur au-dessus d'eux: nous descendions jusqu'à leurs besoins (90).
\]
Rather than reaping the desired result, the commands that he has issued to eunuch Solim have only served to turn his humiliated wives against him. Writes Zachi, “J'ai soutenu ton absence, et j'ai conservé mon amour par la force de mon amour. Les nuits, les jours, les moments, tout a été pour toi. J'étais superbe de mon amour même, et le tien me faisait respecter ici. Mais à présent... Non, je ne puis plus soutenir l'humiliation où je suis descendue” (170). In Roxana’s final letter to Usbek, her suicide note, she explains why his rules, which were designed to be the foundation for a just society, did not succeed. Even though the environment in the seraglio was like a prison, she states, “j'ai toujours été libre: j'ai réformé tes lois sur celles de la Nature, et mon esprit s'est toujours tenu dans l'indépendance” (171, emphasis mine). Clearly, his laws were not based on Nature, the very element that he had expressed in previous letters should be central to the foundation of the ideal nation. In matters that are personal to him and that are affected by emotions of jealousy and pride, the clear-sighted disinterest he has for groups in which he does not take part becomes lost.

One might want to identify the underlying message of Les Lettres persanes as, based on Usbek’s inability to know himself in an disinterested manner, that one can only understand the Other, the group in which he has no personal interest. However, remarks Todorov, such a conclusion would ignore the fact that the novel is not a translation of letters composed by veritable Persians but was written by the Frenchman, Montesquieu. How, then, could he analyze a society to which he belongs and that is the source of his national identity? He has managed to gain a level of distance that permits him to be more open-minded by effacing himself through the identity of the Other, his Persian narrators, seeing France through the gaze of those who are foreign to it. “Comme le dit d’Alembert
dans son « Éloge de Montesquieu », en décrivant le travail de préparation pour l’Esprit des lois: « D’abord il s’était fait en quelque façon étranger dans son propre pays, afin de le mieux connaître »” (Nous et les autres 470-471). While Montesquieu does not present the inner knowledge on the workings of French society that can only be known by someone who lives within it, he makes the reader aware that it is precisely this inner knowledge that can prevent the native from truly knowing his own culture.
CHAPTER 2

DEFINING AFRICAN IDENTITY DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Europeans remained the sole authors of representations of Africa and African identity within Western discourse until fairly recently, leaving centuries of works in which, as we have witnessed, the continent has tended to be misrepresented through a Western focus. The authors of these African novels, while attempting to describe Africa for their readers and to speak for the presumed inferior native peoples who lacked the ability to contribute to writing, have ended up giving them a misguided meaning derived from their experiences as members of Occidental society along with their native culture’s ideology, culture, and belief system. As Carroll Yoder writes in White Shadows: A Dialectical View of the French African Novel, the basic assumption of European superiority (which we can conclude include the concepts inherent in the predominant practices in Western representations of the Other examined in the previous chapter) had never been seriously questioned until recently, even by the most outspoken French critics of colonial policy (17). Indeed, many educated Africans during the period of colonial occupation clearly accepted Western social institutions as the norm (the fact that the education that they received was in French assimilationist schools undoubtedly communicated to them the predominance of French culture and beliefs). Their writings,
like those of the French, tended to reflect popular Western stereotypes about their own people as they wrote through a Western frame of reference. Several concurrent events, ones that were to modify contemporary society’s ideas about the ascendancy of Occidental bourgeois culture, were necessary to permit the dominance of Western ideological supremacy to be challenged, making it more receptive to hearing an African voice. In the process, Africans were to discover an identity independent from that which had been imposed upon them through assimilation.

EARLY EFFORTS

Some of the earliest responses by blacks to assertions of white Occidental superiority were authored by Haitians around the turn of the century. Works by Anténor Firmin (L’Égalité des races humaines, 1885, a direct response to Gobineau’s De l’inégalité des races humaines), Hannibal Price (De la réhabilitation de la race noire par la République d’Haïti, 1890), and Jean Price-Mars (Ainsi parla l’oncle, 1928) sought to validate black Haitian culture and by extension that of Africa from which it had been derived. These men, rather than denying what had been widely viewed as their inferior roots and ancestry in favor of their more recently adopted identity as semi-citizens of the great nation of France, embraced their sense of self and their race at a time that darkness of skin and African physical features had long been associated by most Westerners (and likely by those indigènes who had been educated in French schools) with depravity, stupidity, and immorality.
RENÉ MARAN AND BATOUALA

Regarded by many as the most important novel of this early phase in the quest for African identity and for a uniquely African means of representation is René Maran’s *Batouala* (1921). Léopold Sédar-Senghor, Senegalese poet and politician and one of the pioneers in the Pan-African philosophical movement known as *Négritude* (which will be addressed more thoroughly later), described Maran as “the precursor of Negritude because of his commitment to his race and because of his style of writing” (Yoder 56); and F. Abiola Irele refers to him as “the creator of the modern African novel” (132).

“Before Maran, literary expression conformed in its themes and formal patterns to the French norm. Its tone was dictated exclusively by the prevailing fashion in Paris, its sentiments largely determined by the attitudes of the average Frenchman towards the Antilles” (Irele 128). The author’s background reflects his conflicted sense of identity as a black man, one which likely plagued many of his contemporaries. African colonial administrator Maran, of Guyanese descent, had lived in Bordeaux since the age of seven where he was an excellent student and never seriously challenged the concept of Western dominance, appearing to recognize the basic inferiority of the black man and his need to rely on the colonial structure to avoid lapsing into the bad habits that he had practiced before the white man had enabled him to become a functioning member of Western society. He found himself in a sort of no man’s land between adopted and native cultures, his sense of self split between an allegiance to France and its ideas in addition to the African people and the land that he served and cherished; this state was not uncommon to those African authors of the twentieth century who felt that they owed their
successes in life to the advantages that they had received as the result of a Western education while remaining torn by a sense of belonging to their homeland and community.

Maran’s novel *Batouala*, which describes life in an Ubangi city (Maran resided in the Ubangi area when he lived in Africa), is unlike the works about Africa written by Europeans that preceded it in that, instead of justifying colonial rule and the rightness of Occidental values, it denounces them. In his introduction, he attacks directly the manner in which the French colonial administration managed its equatorial African possessions as well what he viewed as the failure of its *mission civilisatrice* to improve the lives of the Ubangi people, which was caused by the corruption of the representatives of France. Such negative aspects had not previously been widely acknowledged. He writes:

“Civilisation, civilisation, orgueil des Européens, et leur charnier d’innocents, […] Tu bâtis ton royaume sur des cadavres. Quoi que tu veuilles, quoi que tu fasses, tu te meus dans le mensonge. À ta vue, les larmes de sourdre et la douleur de crier. Tu es la force qui prime le droit. Tu n’es pas un flambeau, mais un incendie. Tout ce à quoi tu touches, tu le consumes” (11). Maran’s protagonist, African chief Batouala, laments the negative changes that have come to his country since the arrival of whites. The *terreur* that they brought to Africa had done nothing but hurt the native tribes whereas they had previously lived in happiness; and the blacks had been turned into slaves to work for the benefit of the whites. The reader is led to conclude that the colonization of Africa was a big mistake and did not succeed in fulfilling the lofty goals of colonial theorists due to the debauched character of the whites. While they may view themselves as possessors of the greatest civilization, the narrator asserts, their demeanor denies this. Batouala refers to
the whites in the Ubangi as “tous les fils de chien” (72) and declares “Je ne me lasserai jamais de dire la méchanceté des blancs” (76), women and men alike. In the person of Batouala, Maran has created an African hero who, for the first time in French literature, serves as a true tragic figure. The focus of the novel is not a white man but an African, and it is through the African that the reader “sees” the continent.

The significance of Batouala, aside from voicing the thoughts of an African hero who openly exposes the defects of the colonial system, lies in the efforts that Maran has taken to transform the traditional European terrain of the novel into a tool that could be employed by the people of Africa to represent their experiences by reacting to and against prevailing Western modes of representation which, as we have witnessed in the preceding chapter, had been used to define Africans as objects through the eyes of the European subject. He eschews the exoticism of Loti and his fellow French authors in his descriptions of the African landscape, with a preference for a poetic language that communicates a sense of the African atmosphere to the reader. African words incorporated into the text are communicated as part of the narrator’s experience, unlike similar uses in European novels where they are generally observed and not experienced. Some words, such as “ga’nga,” which refers to the complete or partial excision of a woman’s clitoris, are employed so frequently in the novel that the reader is required to “know” these entities in their African reality and not as African translations of European equivalents. In addition, it is not necessary for the narrator to explain a custom such as the “ga’nga” to the readers in the anticipation that it would not be comprehended by those possessing only knowledge of their European experience. It is presented as a part of life rather than as a foreign manifestation of an unknown culture. European words and parts
of European culture, on the other hand, are explained in words that an African might better understand. “Et ce « doctorro », — c’est le nom que donnent les blancs à celui qui chez eux tient commerce de sorcellerie, — ce doctorro qui vous faisait pisser bleu, — oui, bleu! — lorsque tel était son bon plaisir” (38-39). The doctor is presented as something foreign and that does not make sense within the reality of the narrator. The African scene, in opposition to the strictly decorative purpose that the it serves in many colonial novels has been incorporated into the narrative, allowing the reader to view the “true” Africa and not the one which exists in the European imagination.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the language of Batouala and which would later become strongly associated with post-colonial African literature as a distinct category is the influence of orality. Based in the roots of African storytelling, when most tales were shared not through writing as in Western societies but through the spoken word, often by one individual (the griot) to a group of spectators, oral literature is akin to theater, marked by a mixture of genres (sounds, music, gestures), reactions from the listening community, and improvisation. These elements are absent from written (Occidental) literature, which is defined by rigidity. It is based on a solitary and individual act of reading a text, and the word itself is the sole means of communication. Maran attempts to incorporate oral stylistic traits into the African novel, in an effort to echo the origins of African storytelling as a cultural manifestation and to capture effectively the feel of the speech of his African characters. The reader, while seeing French, is actually “hearing” the African voice. As we will see later when examining L’amour, la fantasia, many post-colonial Francophone authors struggled to represent African speech through the medium of the French written language, which was forced
upon them through the colonial interlude. Maran’s Africa comes to life within what is
generally considered a “dead” medium through his poetic phrasing. The following
passage demonstrates Maran’s literary style:

Et voici que, là-bas, là-bas, plus loin que là-bas, plus loin encore, de toutes parts,
à gauche, à droite, derrière lui, devant lui, des bruits semblables, des roulements
identiques, des tam-tams pareils grondaient, persistaient, répondaient: les uns
faibles, hésitants, voilés, imprécis; les autres compréhensibles, et rebondissant
d’échos en échos, de kagas en kagas. L’invisible s’animait (40-41).

While Maran has employed the French language, his technique recasts it into a new, more
foreign form that he judged “trop noir et ineuropéen” (Puig) for his French readers. It is
only in this manner that the Occidental language can be employed to speak for Africa
while attempting to avoid the intrusion of the Western super-subject\(^\text{14}\) that has
traditionally spoken for it, in its absence.

A NEW FOCUS ON AFRICA

Several concurrent events and cultural movements during the early part of the
twentieth century served to create a climate that was more receptive to hearing the voices
of the African colonized and that strengthened their nationalistic sentiments. World Wars
I and II in particular had a profound impact on African subjectivity. Throughout history,
it has generally been those groups possessing power and wealth that have dominated and
asserted their will on a global scale. Both of the world wars, however, caused the nations

\(^\text{14}\) The term “super-subject” places emphasis on the geopolitical strength that is wielded by the Western
world to assert subjective power over the non-Western world. I refer the following citation in Said’s
Culture and Imperialism: “The tendency in anthropology, history, and cultural studies in Europe and the
United States is to treat the whole of the world as viewable by a kind of Western super-subject, whose
historicizing and disciplinary rigor either takes away or, in the post-colonial period, restores history to
peoples and cultures ‘without’ history” (35).
of Europe to suffer serious losses in both power and wealth, not to mention a loss of confidence and pride in their achievements and principles as well as their conviction of their international superiority. A general sense of malaise arose among the younger populations of Europe during the l’entre-deux-guerres who, maintaining that following the puritanical precepts of the generations that had preceded them had produced the world of suffering in which they lived, emphasized turning away from rationalism and logical thought and focusing instead on free expression, unconscious thought, and what had been considered illogical: the weaknesses of traditional Occidental thought processes and concepts such as family, nation, and religion (Breton 76-77). As we observed in the previous chapter, the Orient and its people had long been viewed negatively because of their violation of conventional cultural expectations. It is likely that the influx of surrealist thought provoked the reassessment of cultural manifestations of the Other. Indeed, there was an increased interest in “primitive” African artistic and musical expression in France during the Jazz Age (1920s and 1930s) because of their perceived lack of rationalism and industrialization through what was to be known as the Harlem Renaissance and “la folie noire.” “Black Venus” Josephine Baker became a sensation in 1925 in Paris, where her color was accepted and her fresh, exotic sensuality excited the public. Black entertainers James Reese Europe, Sidney Bechet, and Ada Smith also enjoyed a great deal of popularity in Paris at this time. Common themes expressed by participants in the Harlem Renaissance that had long interested peoples of African descent include concerns about racial marginalism, diversity, and experimentation; pressures to integrate; and a sense of identity divided between Africa and Europe. Blacks were able to take pride in their own culture. African rhythms and folk stylings became
accepted and adopted as valid forms of cultural expression in Europe, where they had previously been denigrated as manifestations of nonintellectual civilizations. While it is true that the African culture that had been replaced with assimilationist practices in the French colonies was valued by Europeans primarily for its difference, this was an early step towards it being valued on its own terms. While European culture had been focused on similarity and in following the status quo, a new awareness was in the air that emphasized individuality and cultural pluralism. At the same time, the African people themselves started clamoring for political (and, by extension, cultural, ideological, and representational) independence. Africans made a significant contribution to the war effort on the behalf of the French, with over half a million fighting and providing support during both World Wars (Shillington 364). Allied propaganda, which stressed defending democracy against the forces of autocracy, produced discussion about the rights of subjugated peoples. Having fought for freedom, many Africans wanted their own share. The Western education of colonized Africans was an additional force that would permit Africans to demand representational subjecthood. Having been taught that all men are created equal – France, after all, prides itself on its ideological values of liberty, equality, and fraternity – educated Africans began to question discriminatory colonial policies and practice on a public scale through critical publications and in the political sphere. While the goal of assimilation was to convert Africans into French citizens who would share equal rights and privileges, they remained disenfranchised, for colonialism (along with the economic and political benefits implied for the colonizing country) would have ceased to exist if the colonized were not dependent upon the colonizer. Biological and
historical racism\textsuperscript{15} were certainly an impediment, along with the imperialistic Occidental mind-set in which Europe regards peoples perceived to be underprivileged as dependent upon Westerners. Through the eyes of the West, Africa simply could not be independent either ideologically or geopolitically. It seemed common sense to them that its populations, who could never quite match them in any respect, would always require the parental hand of Europe to allow their culture to blossom in a way similar to how Europe itself had. There was, of course, no other way to develop a civilization, for that was the only one they had ever known, and anything different was simply unnatural. Within this conventional perspective, where Europe is the subject of the object “Africa,” it appears that most literary representations of Africa authored by Europeans would never succeed at depicting Africa as equal to themselves, or at defining Africa without using Europe as an axis of interpretation. Clearly, in order for Africans to be subjects of discourse, it would have to be accomplished through their own efforts.

\textbf{A POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN IDENTITY: NÉGRITUDE}

One of the first steps necessary to permit the writing of purely African representations was to arrive at a sense of an authentic African identity that was not based on their position as objects of a subjective Western experience. For centuries, this was

\textsuperscript{15} As described by Todorov in \textit{Nous et les autres}, biological or scientific racism asserts the superiority of particular races over others on the basis of undeniable scientific disciplines such as physical anthropology, craniometry, and phrenology, producing a racial hierarchy with whites of European descent on the top and others ranked lower according to how they are seen to deviate from the Western norm. With historical race, human behavior is seen as being governed by race, surroundings, and epoch (which is the combination of these two).
the identity that had been disseminated to them through the colonial system and colonial educators; and their own histories, civilizations, languages, and cultural practices had been effaced in the interests of better controlling them. With an identity that is rooted elsewhere and that does not belong to them, the colonized are condemned to immobility and alienated from their cultural heritage. Taught that their traditions and institutions were weak and stagnant, they became shameful of them and grew to know only those of the colonizer. Their collective memory not conserved, the accomplishments of their people are forgotten, leaving “[r]ien qu’un grand vide” for future generations (Memmi 123). African history had become the history of the French, focused around accomplishments of great European explorers and soldiers while frequently failing to recognize the presence of the Africans themselves (for one of the foundations of colonialism is the refusal to view the Africans as individuals, which would curtail the cultural and biological relativism that justifies expansion). To enable them to know who they were as a people, to envision a future, and to be the authors of their own discourse, Africans would need to know their past and their cultural legacy. A fairly large contingent of educated Africans and Caribs of African descent residing in France, who were literate and interested in world events, were among the first to spur this search for an identity. Led to ask “who are we, if we are not French?”, they sought to create an African identity based on indigenous African culture. They had accepted European views of themselves as the truth, then reversed them to focus on their opposites. “African” emotion, rhythm, and earth were valued over “Occidental” reason, order, and concrete. The identity that they invented was not limited by national boundaries but a pan-African identity, in which all Africans are united by their collective culture and
experience. Let me pause to observe here a trend in African representations, which are marked by the overwhelming presence of the elite and the absence of the indigenous lower classes. From the post-war period to the twenty-first century, those Africans who have been able to make their words known to the world, to spread their concepts of identity and history, have nearly all received a Western education. In addition, many write in European languages, excluding the illiterate majority from hearing or sharing their experiences. While both of the authors whose works I will address later are part of this group, they have in some ways succeeded at communicating the words of many subaltern peoples.

*Négritude*, a Pan-African literary and cultural movement that had its greatest influence prior to the formal independence of the African colonies, made significant contributions towards the continued reassessment of African identity and thus their narrative representation and textual subjectivity. It was founded by black intellectuals Léopold Sédar-Senghor, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Aimé Césaire, who believed that forming a solidarity of black people with a unified sense of their place in the world, a common culture and history about which they could be proud, a common expression that belonged to them alone, a common emotional and mental disposition: in short, a doctrine of blackness, would be one of the greatest weapons that they could employ against French hegemony and cultural and intellectual suppression. No longer would they need to view themselves as a lack in reference to the colonizer – without a legitimate culture, history, civilization, and character in the eyes of the West, or as representing a stage in their past which it had left behind with the perfection of the uniquely Western capacities of reason and science – proponents of *Négritude* transposed the traditional dichotomies,
ranking all that is black superior. It is not necessary for the black man to change his
nature, to attempt to be more like the white man, in order to be viewed as an equal; within
himself, he has all that he needs. Within Négritude-inspired representations, the Other
has taken a major step towards becoming the Self. Reason and science were not to be
celebrated, because they are the tools of Occidental oppression; whereas the
characteristics common to blacks such as emotion, intuition, and sensitivity lead to
liberation of the spirit. In order to introduce in detail some of the more common
characteristics of Négritude textuality, I would like to cite several passages from Aimé
Césaire’s long poem “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” (first published in its full form in
1947), which introduced the term of Négritude and that is widely recognized as one of the
most eloquent statements on the black condition of the twentieth century:

Raison, je te sacre vent du soir.
Bouche de l’ordre ton nom?
Il m’est corolle du fouet.
Beauté je t’appelle pétition de la pierre.
Mais ah! la rauque contrabande
de mon rire
Ah! mon trésor de salpêtre!
Parce que nous vous haïssons vous et votre raison, nous nous réclamons de la
démence précoce de la folie flambante du cannibalisme tenace.

Trésor, comptons:
la folie qui se souvient
la folie qui hurle
la folie qui voit
la folie qui se déchaîne

Et vous savez le reste

Que 2 et 2 font 5
que la forêt miaule
que l’arbre tire les marrons du feu
que le ciel se lisse la barbe
et caetera et caetera… (11-12)
In the above stanzas, Césaire fiercely rejects reason in favor of the irrational, which he views as holding more truth for the black people than a standard that others have established for them to obey. It is their tortured memory, a common theme in this poem and in other works of the Négritude and post-Négritude period, that has caused them to seek refuge in the opposite of the reason that has long subjugated them and to strike back against reason and those who wield it. Here and elsewhere, Césaire contrasts the stone (pierre) of Western civilization and the earth (mon trésor de salpêtre) of his people.

Such antithetic metaphors are often seen in postcolonial African representations when the author seeks to contrast the positive qualities of his or her social group with the negatives of the one that has repressed it, and we will note these in the feminine novels that I will analyze in greater depth later (although, for women, the Occident is sometimes not the greatest threat to their subjectivity). We also witness a very loose poetic style that is not regulated by traditional expectations for a poem through his lack of a rhyme scheme or regular rhythm, uneven pacing that in some cases appears more typical of narrative than of poetry, and verses and stanzas of variable length (in fact, some of his verses are several lines long and more closely resemble paragraphs in their form than poetic verses). Still, there are poetic elements such as onomatopoeia and repetition, giving it the character of a poem, but of a poem that communicates to the reader in both its style and its message the rebellion against the dominating power and that there is more than one concept of truth in the world.

In the stanza following, Césaire continues his theme of white, Occidental pierre vs. black, African terre and more thoroughly contrasts Western and African civilizations
and their constitutive parts. Where Europe is made up of cold buildings, of lack of humanity, and of absence of life, Césaire’s *Négritude* (making it a personal attribute by the use of the possessive adjective) is none of these; the long-suffering people that had been viewed as a lack in relation to the dominating power has its own unique meaning and turns the tables on the colonizer by identifying its weaknesses. Themes such as these stress the reactionary nature of *Négritude* against preeminent Western attitudes about Africans as an inverse expression of the prevalent black/white dyad:

Ma négritude n’est pas une pierre, sa surdité ruée contre la clameur du jour
ma négritude n’est pas une taie d’eau morte sur l’œil
mort de la terre
ma négritude n’est ni une tour ni une cathédrale
elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol
elle plonge dans la chair ardente du ciel
elle trouble l’accablement opaque de sa droite patience (23).

In the next two stanzas, Césaire prolongs his encomium of *Négritude*, blackness, and black people. While Europeans had generally represented blacks as lower on the racial hierarchy than whites because they had no political or scientific accomplishments, he stresses that rather than being indicative of their baseness, these qualities make them worthy of celebration. Black people, writes Césaire, are characterized by their intuitive and emotional disposition, in contrast with the superficiality of Western culture. He portrays Africans as possessing the oldest of civilizations, thus predating and perhaps giving birth to the Europeans who have traditionally been represented as God’s first children, and idealizes the purity of the African land and the ancestral, pre-colonial cultural values that lie in the hearts of all black people:

Eia pour le Kaïcédrat royal!
Eia pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien inventé
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien exploré
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien dompté
mais ils s’abandonnent, saisis, à l’essence de toute chose
ignorants des surfaces mais saisis par le mouvement
de toute chose
insoucieux de dompter, mais jouant le jeu du monde

véritablement les fils aînés du monde
poreux à tous les souffles du monde
aire fraternelle de tous les souffles du monde
lit sans drain de toutes les eaux du monde
étincelle du feu sacré du monde
chair de la chair du monde palpitant du mouvement
même du monde!
   Tiède petit matin de vertus ancestrales (23)

CRITICAL REMARKS ON NÉGRITUDE

The role that emotion plays in African identity is one of the major characteristics
of Négritude as defined by Senghor and became one of its most problematic arguments
due to the tendency to essentialize the African character into a timeless definition and to
place all Africans into one global category (much in the same way that the colonizer did
in its representations of Africans, except that the Négritude writings portray these fixed
attributes as characteristic of a superior rather than an inferior personality). The “noble
savage” myth that had been popularized by Westerners remains intact, and the varied
character of African societies and peoples is denied with the interest of presenting the
image of a unified African continent in order to facilitate nation-building. Such a
concept, which correlates one’s blackness with an external mark of one’s internal being
in a manner similar to white supremacist attitudes, further highlights Négritude’s reliance
on existing binaristic racial structures that are rooted in Western discourse as a basis for
African identity. In this pre-independence stage of African representation, it appears that Africa remains the Other to Europe and is linked to it in discursive practices. The primary difference is that the African is not defined as the opposite of the known character of the Westerner, but vice-versa. The African writes himself, whom he knows; and the colonizer becomes his opposite, endowed with negative stereotypes of excessive rationalism, lack of humanity, and superficiality, possessing the antithesis of those characteristics that are valued by Africans. Both groups were intolerant of one another, which was likely boosted by representations in both cultures that insist upon their contrariety and that paint their opposites in stereotypical, essentialist shades. As a result, post-independence efforts, primarily spearheaded by Senghor and Jean-Paul Sartre, that emphasized resisting relativism in favor of universalism with the goal of encouraging a dialogue between Africans and Europeans, were not feasible.

Another issue evoked in the aforecited stanza that was questioned by critics of Négritude is the connection of the African spirit with tradition. Its defenders, as mentioned in preceding paragraphs, sought to rediscover the repressed past of Africa from which they had been cut off, as contained in their ancestors and the African land itself, as a foundation for a post-colonial African identity – a “retour aux sources” that was approached historically, physically, and psychologically. The authentic character of the black man that did not depend on the overbearing presence of the European outsider was viewed as residing deep in the fullness of his inner being, in his metaphysical essence. Critics of Négritude such as Ezekiel Mphahele and Wole Soyinka16 have

maintained that the concept of African values as planted in a root-identity out there to be
discovered rather than created would stultify the future of Africa and its people. They
felt that it gave African identity a conservative nature because it was based in antiquated
mores, religious beliefs, and myth (Ahluwalia 30 and Irele 83-85). Looking to the refuge
of an idealized past for a sense of self, the African tends not to be as concerned with
change for the future (which would risk threatening his identity) and to remain focused
on the image of the world that has been wrested from them and that they could never
have again. Writers Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon of the late Négritude period were
concerned that the celebration of traditional values could be used by colonial powers to
prevent political independence (Yoder 91). With the principles of African identity fixed
in time and more concerned with the past than with the future as an independent people,
those swayed by traditional images might not be willing to embrace something
completely new. Thus, the image of the African that advocates of Négritude promoted to
liberate the African mind from colonial occupation also had the potential to keep them
fixed in a pre-industrialized past, without the ability to develop and support themselves
economically or politically in the modern global sphere.

More recently, the traditional component of Négritude philosophies has also come
under attack for its representation of women, most commonly seen through the repetition
of the “mother Africa” myth. Within this image, Africa is personified as a nurturing
mother, a symbolic figure for an idealized African womanhood that bears little relation to
her actual existence. The concept of what it means to be an African woman is cemented
in conservative traditional values, and she is encouraged not to improve her situation

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70
beyond her conventional position as second to the man without whom she has no value. We will see later that some Négritude ideals threatened African women’s subjectivity. In addition, the depiction of women by Négritude authors bears some resemblance to the manner in which Europeans have generally written about the African Other, in terms of an object which one observes and that does not interact with the speaker. This form of characterization serves to reinforce traditional African power relationships between men and women: she is written about and does not write for herself. It seems that the only chance for an African woman to write would necessarily result from the reorganization of the binary system on which oppositional concepts of African/European and man/woman are based.

NATIONALISM AND BINARY REPRESENTATIONS

It cannot be denied that Négritude, despite its negative aspects, contributed significantly to raising African morale after centuries of discrimination and subjugation and was an important tool of mental decolonization to prepare the world and themselves for political decolonization. As I have previously mentioned, the philosophies of Négritude are reminiscent of those that lie behind Western Orientalist novels in that they both employ universalist discourse that seeks to represent all people in general through the terms of their own value systems, classifying those who do not possess these characteristics as their opposite and as lacking that which they regard as natural. I see additional parallels between much of the binaristic representations of both Europeans and Africans, primarily that hierarchical expressions that rank one’s own people and
civilization at the top with others below coincide with strong sentiments of civic and cultural nationalism. Much as the colonization of Africa both strengthened and created a nationalistic fervor of France as a great land with a cultural legacy that should be imparted to those who were not as fortunate as them, Négritude and similar Pan-African philosophies contributed to ethnocentric movements and texts that defended and glorified African culture, simultaneously reinforcing the push for nationhood. The link is even more direct, writes Benedict Anderson, when one realizes the extent to which the early spokesmen in African independence were inspired by European models through their Western educations: “they had access… to models of nation, nation-ness, and nationalism distilled from the turbulent, chaotic experiences of more than a century of American and European history,” thus giving shape to their ideals (140).

One of the most important traits of nationalism resides in its binarism. During periods of heightened nationalism, totalizing, self/other discourse that does not tolerate diversity is useful in the propagation of common ideas about what it means to be a member of a social group though a sort of cultural, physical, and historical system of classification, restricting identification to those who fit in those boxes and giving them a sense of cultural and civic oneness. All who do not fit into these definitions are excluded from sharing a sense of identity and often do not figure in representations because they are not considered to share the characteristics of the essentialist African or Frenchman. Those who were not part of the power structure in Pan-African discourse, such as women, were rarely the protagonists of narratives or played stereotypical roles. The same can be seen in European novels from the preceding centuries about Africans. Women were similarly portrayed in most Western literature prior to the nineteenth
century; for they, like their African counterparts, were either uneducated or shut out from literary expression by a dominant male contingent. The elite groups in Africa after independence favored the interests of African men; and as a result, women tended to view colonialism more positively because they felt that European values of modernity and education would allow them to advance in society, freeing them from the prison of anonymity and dependence that was their traditional place within a conservative, paternalistic community. There was also the problem of those Africans who had received a Western education and found themselves divided between their Africanness and their education, part of neither group but split down the center. As one is taught within binary discourse, there is no middle ground between two groups that have been defined as mutually exclusive. The increase in hybridity as well as the vocalizing of those who had been excluded from Négritude’s image of “the African” after independence led to new conceptions of African identity. After the urgency to end colonization, the necessity for universalist and ethnocentric principles had abated.

DIVERSITY IN AFRICAN IDENTITY: RESPONSES

I would now like to address some literary responses to hybridity in the struggle for developing an African sense of self at a time that most discourse stressed the essential character of blackness as a central concept and relied on binary representations in order to promote African nationalism. The goal of this assessment is to establish a sense of the intellectual climate regarding African identity that existed at the time of the writing of the twentieth century novels that I will analyze in more depth in further chapters. These two
authors whose works I will examine below express the difficulty inherent in resisting
classification, binarism, absolutes, and stereotypes in the quest to define themselves as
well as illuminate the delicate situation of European (modern) and African (traditional)
cultural mixing both during and after African independence. It is possible to view them
as part of a call to action to consider new approaches to African identity in a post-colonial
framework, which remains unresolved at the end of their works.

One of the most influential theorists on African identity and decolonization is
Frantz Fanon, who speaks of his demoralizing experience as a black man in a white world
due to the color of his skin in his celebrated essay, “The Fact of Blackness” (published in
1967). He establishes the binaristic basis of the black man’s identity, as the villain to the
white man’s hero: “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in
relation to the white man. […] [H]is inferiority comes into being through the other” (108-
109). Fanon’s aim is to sever this link which implies his subordinate, object status to the
subject. The anger that he feels towards whites for making him feel like less than human
externalizes itself as a defensive reaction to prove them wrong.

His response to the white man’s hatred towards blacks is to assert himself as a
black man, to take away from whites the ability to determine his identity and to make it
his own. He attempts embracing the precepts of Négritude, of unreason, after his efforts
to communicate his equality through reasonable arguments have failed. Note his choice
of wording in this sentence: “From the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro
culture was hailing me” (116, emphasis mine). He appears to acknowledge openly his
desire to work within Western constructs, which plot Negro culture as residing on the
opposite end of the white world. This would seem to be an instinctual response in an
environment which, as Fanon reminds us, is tainted by color prejudice. There is no way to escape being instantly judged by one’s skin color in reference to the popular stereotypes, through “white eyes, the only real eyes” (112). Awareness of the color of one’s skin is so ingrained in his society that there does not seem to be any other option than to maintain a dialogue of opposites. For several pages, he extolls the values celebrated by Césaire and other Négritude theorists, including tradition, emotion, orality, poetry, music, rhythm, and a valid African past and spirit that existed prior to the arrival of white conquerors. Particularly remarkable is Fanon’s use of singular rather than plural pronouns to refer to all Africans collectively: “So here we have the Negro rehabilitated, ‘standing before the bar,’ ruling the world with his intuition, the Negro recognized, set on his feet again, sought after, taken up, and he is a Negro – no, he is not a Negro but the Negro” (117). In much the same manner as the colonizer, he views all blacks as similar but endowed with positive rather than negative characteristics. The war of black against white remains, but now the good guys wear different hats.

Even though affirmations of blackhood have served to raise their morale, this is not adequate for Fanon, who continues to find himself rejected by whites. They protest that within a world of reason and science, Négritude principles would not permit blacks to survive. The white voice responds to his jubilation of no longer being a nothing that black ideals of emotion, music, and nostalgia make them quaint, akin to a child; and leave them unable to function for themselves, forever requiring the assistance of superior intellects such as whites. Fanon feels that his one last recourse for a unique identity has been taken from him: after trying to identify with either side of the dichotomy, he has failed. The antithetical nature of Négritude is also indicated to him in an essay by Jean-
Paul Sartre (a supporter of anti-colonial struggles and a major influence on Francophone thinkers and activists), which states that it creates a form of “anti-racist racism” that establishes the black man, in Marxist terms, as proletariat to the white man’s bourgeoisie (120). This appears to imply that within this framework, as long as the system remains in place that allows the bourgeoisie to exploit the proletariat, the black man is part of the white system of production and that Négritude only serves to maintain the situation that existed previously. As well-intentioned as he may be, Sartre has committed a misstep by aiming to subsume the situation of blacks into a Western perspective, thereby negating it by appropriating the African experience into a foreign context. Stubbornly, Fanon continues to rely upon relativism and mythification as a means for defining himself. Referring to Sartre’s words, he says, “For once, that born Hegelian had forgotten that consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain to consciousness of self” (120). At the end of the essay, Fanon finds himself “straddling Nothingness and Infinity” (125). I see him as wanting to accept Négritude but also recognizing its deficiencies. If he rejects Négritude, he is nothing; but if he accepts it, he has everything. Within this climate of essentialism, it seems that blacks might have had no other place to turn. Fanon finds it impossible to develop a sense of himself without relating himself to others, and the end of the essay leaves him with little more than questions and ambivalence.

Perhaps the best-known novel of this period to address the conflict inherent on having an identity based on heterogeneous values is Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s L’aventure ambiguë (published in 1961, one year after the nations of the area where the novel takes place declared their independence from France). The antagonism of Western and African
value systems is incarnated in the protagonist, Samba Diallo. Samba, the son of the leader of the Diallobé people, represents the future of African societies built around religious values and the path that they would take after the encounter with Europe. The author’s perspective on this future is fairly pessimistic, as seen in Samba’s journey in ambiguity. Samba is the most cherished student of Coranic school master and religious leader Thierno, and all believe that he will take his place one day due to his great piety for a person of such a young age. The intervention of the West, however, would wrench him from his expected destiny. All the Diallobé seem to recognize that it is important for their children to be educated in the French schools in order to ensure the survival of their people in the modern world, yet simultaneously fear that exposure to Western philosophies would cause future generations to become disciples of France and to lose their faith-based identity as well as their belief in God. Either choice would represent a loss. Whereas a complete refusal of the Occident would lead to the destruction of their culture, what they would learn in the French school would destroy their spirituality. Most of the Diallobé people see the arrival of the French as the end of their world. Because they have been taught that modern Western values were irreconcilable with their own, they believe that it would be possible to be a part of either one group or the other, but not both. We recall how Césaire, who was one of the first theorists to give shape to Négritude, depicted both cultures as polar opposites of one another and implied that modern accomplishments and reason are not to be considered components of African culture, which is based on emotion and spirituality. Ideas such as those that he propagated also made Africans aware of the strong link between adherence to tradition and their identity as black people. The embracing of secular interests such as modernity
and science, therefore, comes to be equated with the absence of blackness. La Grande Royale, the highest-ranked female in Diallobé society, reasons that there is no choice but to send their children to the new school, as they must think of the future. Like many African women in post-colonial representations (and like those in the novels that I will address in further detail in future chapters), she is forward-thinking and not as apt to be tied down by observance of conservative, traditional values than the males of her tribe. The first youth to be sent to the French school is Samba. It is expected that he will receive the tools for survival in the modern world and become the next tribe leader, thus perpetuating the dominance of his family’s social group.

Although the decision to study in the new school is not Samba’s choice, he hopes that he will be able to reconcile his society’s belief system with that of France. He is overjoyed to discover that the words of Thierno, his father, and Descartes (who has been referenced by several Négritude authors as the primary spokesman for reason in French civilization) share a common message and concludes that both schools of thought have more similarities than differences. He aims to prove that it will be possible to embrace Occidentalism and Africanism at once, in spite of the concerns of the village elders. Kane’s protagonist, however, while immersing himself in his Western studies and eventually traveling to France, becomes progressively alienated from his black roots in precisely the manner that the Diallobé people had feared. In the narrative, Africa and the West are continuously contrasted. Where home is a place of warmth and the hearth that arises from the ardor of tradition, the Occident is cold as a result of modernity. In addition, white represents the West and black, Africa: their opposition could not be any more clear in structural terms. People and spirits surround Samba in Africa, but taking
their place in France are steel structures and mechanical snarls. Observations of coldness *(crispaient, frissonnai, crispation, glace, froid, glucé)* and hardness *(sec, asphalte, dur, dure, durcissait, pierre, granit)* along with his observations that there are no people and that “les mécaniques y régnaient” create a frightening image of the world that modernity has produced.

Once exposed to the forbidden fruit of Western civilization in the French school, Samba begins to waver as some of his strongest traditional beliefs are challenged by contrary Western concepts. He decides to study philosophy, admitting that this is precisely the area of knowledge most likely to make him lose his way. Being encouraged to think for himself is completely opposite to what he had learned from the Diallobé, to obey what his elders said without questioning as with an act of faith. He begins to use his reason to analyze everything, which is more centered on the individual than the collective, and views the universe more impersonally. While he does not seem to be completely aware of this change at first, he soon comes to realize that his French studies have caused him to stray so far from his African roots that he could no longer identify completely with his people; yet he does not feel at home in France, either. The progression of Samba’s journey leads him to a no-man’s land that is a part of neither traditional nor modern society: belonging to neither, he is, in fact, nothing. “Je ne suis pas un pays des Diallobé distinct, face à un Occident distinct, et appréciant d’une tête froide ce que je puis lui prendre et ce qu’il faut que je lui laisse en contrepartie. Je suis devenu les deux. **Il n’y a pas une tête lucide entre deux termes d’un choix.** Il y a une nature étrange, en détresse de n’être pas deux” (164, emphasis mine). Samba clearly concludes that, between the extremes of black and white, gray cannot exist. It is
necessary to be either one or the other, and hybridity is not a viable solution in the
determination of one’s identity. Samba’s final destination, the only possible resolution to
his ambiguous adventure, is death. Upon becoming a spirit, there is no more
ambivalence; and reason and philosophy are revealed as they truly are: mirages that have
no place in the spiritual afterlife. The reader is not informed of the fate of the Diallobé
people, but it is possible to conclude that with Samba’s demise, their own would soon
follow due to their failure to modernize.

The reader of L’aventure ambiguë is led to wonder if Samba’s transformation and
eventual self-destruction is a self-fulfilling prophesy, if he had been so profoundly
convinced by the words of the town elders that there could be no other result; or if it is
Kane’s opinion that modern Western and traditional African values are so mutually
exclusive that taking on more of one can only lead to loss of part of the other. I tend to
agree with the latter. I feel that the author wants to communicate to an African reader
who decides to study French philosophy with the conviction, like Samba, that it would
effectively complement his traditional beliefs, that this path is doomed to failure because
Western and African values cannot coexist. As I have cited above, Kane stresses their
incompatibility and opposition on numerous occasions, particularly with the physical
descriptions of Africa and France. Whereas Africa is traditional, warm, black, populated,
spiritual, and real; France is modern, cold, white, empty, mechanical, materialistic, and
phony. Details are rare in this novel, and everything that the author has chosen to include
serves to place focus on the tragedy that befalls Samba and the Diallobé as a result of the
intervention of the West. Within a dichotomy where one centralized subject-power is
determined to assert its dominance over subservient parties that figure as part of the
signifying system (that give it relevance and serve to define it further), the inevitable outcome is the elimination of the Other.

Future generations of novelists, as I will examine in a future chapter, would struggle with this same issue of asserting an identity that is composed of two conflicting sets of values. Assia Djebar, for example, states unreservedly that she considers herself in a no-man’s land between European modernism and North African tradition. We will see how she in particular dealt with this perplexing situation without sharing in Samba Diallo’s fate: she managed to discover a gray space in a world that conventionally assigns meaning in terms of black and white.
CHAPTER 3:
PIERRE LOTI’S LE ROMAN D’UN SPAHI: AFRICAN STEREOTYPES ROOTED IN EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The first novel that I will analyze in further detail in this dissertation is Pierre Loti’s *Le Roman d’un spahi*, which was published in 1881 and coincides with one of the most fervent periods of French colonial expansion into Africa. While he is not read much today, what is important is that he contributed to the myth of Africa that survives today as part of Western discourse and that has threatened efforts promoting African subjectivity.

The protagonist of the novel is Jean Peyral, a handsome, young, and naïve soldier from the Cévennes region in France who passes several years of service in Saint-Louis, the colonial capital of Senegal. He has left behind his beloved mountain home, his parents, and his fiancée; and his absence from them makes the experience especially unbearable. He spends much of the novel bemoaning his fate and the harsh climate. Life in sub-Saharan Africa is at first extremely difficult for him due to what are perceived as the absolute differences between Senegal and his homeland, and his initial efforts to distract himself in what he describes as a prison lead to public drunkenness, sleeping with prostitutes, and bellicose behavior. He does not spend much time engaging with the native populations, whom he regards for the most part as strange and animal-like. Desperate for companionship, he decides to establish a relationship with black slave
Fatou-gaye. Their relationship is turbulent, and he frequently considers leaving her when his white pride re-awakens and he finds her distasteful but is always drawn back to her. Whether or not he truly loves her is questionable. Her dedication to him, however, is akin to dependence. After spending many years in Africa, he has come to love the harsh land; and Fatou bears him a son. The novel ends with Jean’s death in combat, which is soon followed by Fatou’s murder of their son and her suicide after she discovers his body in the desert.

Prior to looking more closely at Loti’s portrayal of Africans and Africa in *Spahi*, I aim to examine common conceptions about Africa as seen in French representations not long before the novel was published as well as to elucidate the background of its more prominent themes by examining the author’s life and previous works. I have chosen to do this because the novel tends to reflect more about Loti and the collective French imagination at the time about Africa rather than the continent in its unbiased reality.

**PRAISE AND FAME OF THE AUTHOR’S WORK**

Although Pierre Loti’s *oeuvre* is not terribly well-known or studied today, he did enjoy immense popularity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “His fame during his lifetime was enormous – equivalent to that of a continuous best-seller today” (Hartmann 57). As the author of tens of novels that depict faraway lands that were unknown by the overwhelming majority of his contemporary readers, he was widely praised for the depth and realism of his imagery, which likened him to a painter (one of his talents) who was able to delineate his native characters and their surroundings without
the distortions of personal bias. In the 1931 work *Histoire de la littérature coloniale*, Roland Lebel recognized Loti as a descendent of Chateaubriand in his ability to paint what he saw in its essence. “Loti, pour un moment, se fait le compatriote de l’indigène, l’habitant du pays… A l’heure où la France accomplissait son plus bel effort d’expansion coloniale, Loti fut l’initiateur qui dirigea les regards vers les pays nouveaux, et c’est à lui que l’on doit la première connaissance exacte et colorée de nos colonies renaissantes” (emphasis mine, cited in Fanoudh-Siefer 53). Firmin Boissin wrote in a review shortly after the novel was published, “Mais on y devine une grande préoccupation de l’exactitude, et l’on sent que l’oeuvre est terriblement vraie. Trop vraie peut-être, car il se dégage de ses peintures de la vie équatoriale comme une exhalation de fièvre jaune” (cited in Vercier 283-284), and most of its critiques during the nineteenth century stressed the author’s originality in awakening interest in a land to which Europeans’ senses had become dulled after years of Western occupation in Africa. Nor were Lebel and Boissin the only individuals to acknowledge Loti’s abilities: he received many awards and gifts from the countries that he had visited and, more significantly, he was recognized by his peers by being elected to the Académie Française in 1891 (ten years after *Le Roman d’un spahi* was published) over competitor Émile Zola, a body from which fellow exoticists Théophile Gautier and Eugène Fromentin had been excluded. One can only imagine how solidly his descriptions of the southern continent inhabited the minds of his readers at a time that the myth of Africa was passing from its infancy during the early nineteenth century into full maturity by its end, not to mention for generations of readers afterwards.
EARLY INFLUENCES IN THE AUTHOR’S LIFE

In the following paragraphs, I will introduce significant information about the youth, adolescence, and adulthood of Pierre Loti with the goal of identifying the influences that shaped his perception of the world and therefore his writings. Based on this evidence, we will see the extent to which his own background shaped the manner in which Africa is depicted in *Le Roman d’un spahi*. Pierre Loti is the pen-name of Julien Viaud, who was born in Rochefort-sur-Mer on January 14, 1850 (he was therefore 31 when *Spahi* was published), the third child of Théodore Viaud and Nadine Texier. His parents’ religious foundation and his mother’s intense piety were to remain major influences throughout his life (Szyliowicz 15-16), fostering racialist attitudes rooted in the Bible that I will describe later. Szyliowicz writes that Julien was much spoiled and coddled as a child, affection lavished upon him by the many women in his family; and his greatest fear was that they would abandon him and leave him to live the remainder of his days alone (*ibid*). Throughout his life, he was obsessed by his future and feared that which was new and different. “His nostalgia for the past, his fear of change, and his conservative stances were almost an obsession; he feared any disruption in family life or any change in routine” (*ibid.* 19). Both the author’s fears of abandonment and of change would be reflected in the attitudes of Jean Peyral in *Spahi*. Young Julien’s greatest male influence was not his father but his brother Gustave, twelve years his senior. Gustave was to die at sea when Julien was a mere fifteen years old. In spite of the temerity of his youth, Gustave’s death prompted Julien to follow in his footsteps by traveling the world as part of the navy in search of the exotic that his brother had described to him. During
his voyages, he kept detailed journals of the places that he visited which were later to serve as the foundation for many of his novels, including *Le Roman d’un spahi*.

The author’s early experience with women helps us to better comprehend his portrayal of the indigenous female characters in his novels and indicates to us that they may be directly based on his particular perceptions and preferences. Szyliowicz indicates that compared to other males of his age group, he was sexually immature and felt a need to match up to their claims of conquest. However, in his autobiography, he wrote that he loved dominating women from an early age. This appears to be the idealized image through which he would prefer to present himself, and he was not quite as imposing in real life. Julien’s first sexual encounter was with a dark-haired gypsy, and many of his female characters in his Oriental novels share her characteristics of forthrightness, primitivism, and audaciousness (*ibid.* 21). In an era when the realism of Balzac and Stendhal predominated, Viaud retained a traditional romantic aesthetic associated with classically handsome, brave heroes and beautiful, docile women who servilely recognize the male as their intellectual and social superior. In the case of his Oriental novels, this man is always a white European. “Each Loti novel finds the protagonist’s needs and desires being met by the individual or individuals selected by the hero to act out his fantasies. […] As usual, Loti’s imagination projects the male figure as captive to the woman’s intense desire for him” (*ibid.* 22). As for the author himself, he did not cut quite the same figure as his dashing male lead. He was relatively short and viewed himself as unattractive; and it is perhaps due to these reasons that he was obsessed with physical beauty (*ibid.* 22). Many of Loti’s main characters, Jean Peyral included, incarnate those qualities that he prized. We are led to wonder, therefore, if his
representations of native women are accurate, or if they merely personify his ideal woman; and if his male protagonists are more perfect versions of himself. I will take the opportunity to examine these hypotheses as they relate directly to *Le Roman d’un spahi* later in this chapter.

**LOTI’S TRAVELS IN AFRICA**

Julien Viaud traveled to Africa during the 1870’s, a few years before his first work was published and seven years before the appearance of his African novel. He lived in Dakar from November 1873 until May 1874 and traveled extensively between Dakar and Saint-Louis. Many critics acknowledge that *Le Roman d’un spahi* is, for the most part, directly based on his voyage: Szyliowicz refers to the novel as highly autobiographical (27), and Elwood Hartmann goes so far as to indicate that Loti’s visit to Senegal is “as recounted in *Le Roman d’un Spahi*” (60), essentially implying that the novel is a faithful retelling of events that actually occurred. Undoubtedly, the author’s descriptions of the flora, fauna, and human activity of Senegal, which are fact-based rather than the result of his opinions or relative judgments, are generally founded upon his personal observations. His extensive journal entries, which he took throughout most of his life and his travels, would have certainly proved to be a font of information for a man who, as a painter, was interested in creating a narrative picture of what he saw in his writings. As he wrote in a letter to Alphone Daudet shortly before starting to write the novel, “J’ai apporté ici tout un gros cahier de mes notes du Sénégal, d’où le roman doit sortir. […] Tout cela amalgamé avec mes aventures personnelles et celles d’un spahi
auquel je m’étais attaché dans ce pays d’exil. Je changerai le moins possible” (cited in Vercier 29). In addition, it is well-known that one of his minor characters has been directly based on someone whom Viaud met during his visit to Africa. The author wrote in his *Journal intime* and in *Un jeune officier pauvre* (the posthumous work that contained fragments of his journals) that he fell in love with the mulatto wife of a government employee in Dakar; and he was devastated when she became inaccessible, protected by her family. This woman was to be the inspiration for Cora in the novel. The author does not play the role of Jean Peyral in his published journal, but rather that of the senior officer with whom the young *spahi* caught his lover and who later reappears during the *spahi*’s convalescence to promise that he would never see her again. Even more telling, the name of the *spahi* in *Un jeune officier pauvre* is Jean Peyral, and that of the officer is Julien Viaud (Vercier 18-19).

It would not be correct to assume, however, that the character of Jean Peyral in *Le Roman d’un spahi* does not contain any elements of the veritable Julien Viaud. Vercier indicates that “Le *Journal* n’a pas fourni seulement l’épisode de Cora et de ses deux amants…: Loti donne à son héros toute une série de traits et de remarques qui viennent de sa propre expérience” (30). It is certainly worth noting that Jean Peyral shares many characteristics with the protagonist of *Aziyadé* (which the author has clearly acknowledged was directly based on his experiences in Turkey), who bears the name of Loti: both interact very little with the native populations and focus on how their surroundings affect them personally, feel lonely and isolated as there are few people with whom they can communicate, have lovers who are so dependent upon them for their survival that they cannot bear to leave them (this aspect, however, does not extend both
ways), make black and white comparisons between their adopted home and France with an outright preference for one over the other, and prefer traditional values. In addition, both Peyral and Loti of _Le Mariage de Loti_, the author’s second novel, are constantly reminded of the distance that lay between them and their homeland. We also recall that several of these traits, particularly fear of abandonment and conservatism with regards to change, are known to have been major components of the author’s personality throughout his life.

Although Jean Peyral might not be another pseudonym for Julien Viaud, it becomes clear that the novel is primarily recounted through the eyes of the author. The fact that the thoughts of Jean Peyral resemble those of the protagonist, perhaps echoing what he would have done had he been that young soldier, is significant because it tends to make him the focus of the novel rather than Africa and its people. As Roland Lebel remarks,

*C’est bien ainsi que Pierre Loti, dans _Le roman d’un Spahi_ (1881) ne fait qu’arranger les feuillets de son carnet intime: il imagine une histoire où sont racontées ses aventures personnelles, il donne à son héroï un âme semblable à la sienne, et l’action n’est qu’un prétexte à décors. Ce procédé, évidemment, présentera plus l’image de l’auteur que celle du Sénégal, nous entendons l’image profonde, car les traits extérieurs touchant le paysage où les habitants sont rendus avec une couleur inégalée (cited in Fanoudh-Siefer 55).

Peyral/Loti, not Africa, is therefore the focus of the novel, which appears to be founded mostly on his general impressions and the way that the continent relates to him personally. The broad majority of the native peoples serves mainly an ornamental function as part of the scenery and interact little with the European, not permitting the reader to know them as more than objects to be observed. The image that Loti has created of the African people is superficial at best. Local customs are exterior to the
action, and the author is unable to represent the true spirit of the inhabitants because he
does not truly know them. What is “real” matters little in this setting; for with the white,
French protagonist as the focus, the surroundings are adapted to better depict his plight.
“Le spahi c’est l’Afrique et l’Afrique c’est la mort, par enlisement, par anéantissement de
la volonté, qui ne fait qu’annoncer la mort « normale » du soldat, au combat” (Vercier
22). As the continent held a certain mythological symbolism for the author, it could not
simply be; it has to carry meaning and a message.

With the knowledge that Le Roman d’un spahi is to a large extent based upon
Pierre Lori’s experiences in Africa, it might prove useful to examine the circumstances
surrounding them in further detail. As it turns out, one particular episode in the author’s
life seems to play a significant role in determining the lugubrious tone of Spahi and its
themes of abandonment and loneliness. He had not traveled to Senegal out of any
specific interest in the French colony but with the primary purpose of rejoining longtime
friend and fellow ensign Joseph Bernard, whom he had known since childhood and
regarded as a brother (a relationship that took on even greater importance to him after the
death of his beloved older sibling Gustave). It was there that their valued friendship
came to an end, partially because Bernard decided to leave the Marine but also for more
obscure reasons that were undoubtedly related to Loti’s passionate affair with the married
woman who was the inspiration for Cora. “Julien Viaud rentre donc du Sénégal dans un
état d’absolue détresse affective: Joseph Bernard ne veut plus le revoir, et la femme
aimée, protégée par sa famille, est devenue inaccessible; il doit même promettre de ne
jamais rien tenter pour revoir l’enfant né de ces coupables amours tropicales” (Vercier
17). Upon his return to France, he engaged in many different distractions in an effort to
forget what had happened (ibid). The climate of the text thus becomes bathed in the author’s overwhelming malaise that he came to associate with the time that he spent in Senegal. “…il a beaucoup souffert de cet amour; cette terrible épreuve sentimentale qui suivait sa rupture avec son grand ami d’enfance Joseph Bernard est sans doute une des nombreuses causes à la mélancolie de Loti, qui se crut à partir de ce moment condamné à un malheur perpétuel” (Fanoudh-Siefer 59).

The novel, however, does not directly entail his personal experiences but those of a semi-fictional spahi. It is possible that he chose to use this method to distance himself from such painful memories and express them through a younger, more innocent third party. Vercier alludes to this, suggesting that Loti needed to use the format of the novel in order to examine these issues: “L’aventure individuelle, si elle ne transparaît que très obliquement dans le roman, explique en grande partie le climat funèbre qui baigne le texte, et pourquoi Loti a dû avoir recours à une véritable transposition romanesque pour évoquer cette période de son existence, - lui qui invente si peu et si difficilement” (15).

Further contributing to Loti’s depiction of Africa as a land of sadness and suffering is the popular ideology of the time that viewed the continent in just such a manner. The author, Vercier indicates, deliberately chose to situate his novel in which the protagonist’s distress is the focus in Africa in order to examine the themes of emptiness and desolation to their fullest extent: “Et l’on comprend mieux alors pourquoi cette action prend place en Afrique plutôt qu’au Maghreb puisque Loti a choisi de commencer par une description de la côte africains qui installe, dès l’ouverture, une tristesse et un endormissement généralisés” (13). As we see once again, it is not Africa that is the most important element of the novel but the spahi and his sense of misery; yet as a result, it seems quite
likely that his many contemporary readers’ preexisting negative stereotypes about the continent become reinforced as a result of the novel.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH ATTITUDES ABOUT AFRICANS:
SCIENTIFIC AND RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATIONS FOR RACISM

In chapter 1, we had the opportunity to look closely at longstanding biases held by the French with regards to the Orient from the medieval period through the eighteenth century. Let us take that analysis into the nineteenth century before viewing Pierre Loti and *Le Roman d’un spahi* in more detail to witness the evolution of these attitudes as they relate to Africa, another Other to France. On the basis of these characteristics and through other African works that preceded *Spahi*, we will see the extent to which its author was influenced by contemporary popular stereotypes about Africa and blacks.

The general confidence in the superiority of peoples of European extraction over those from other, “third-world” territories continued into the nineteenth century, especially during its latter half, bolstered by the overwhelming belief in science as a means for determining what is and is not true. We recall from chapter 1 that science had served a role in asserting racial inequality prior to the 1800’s, but its influence was even stronger after the rise of industrialization. Since it was felt that science was objective, based not on religious and ethical judgments but on unbiased, unfalsifiable data, its findings were unquestionably accepted, disseminated, and quickly became rooted in Occidental culture. A result of the prominence of scientism was biological racism, which asserted that blacks were innately inferior to whites on the grounds of scientific proof.
The 1859 publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (originally titled *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*) was an important factor that contributed to the belief in biological racism, for several embraced his research as scientific confirmation of the existence of separate races and the natural favoring of certain races (i.e., European whites) over others (non-whites) in the struggle to survive. A system of hierarchical classification of humanity, which ranked each culture’s level of civilization on the basis of skin color, was part of the accepted ideology of the time. Compared to Europeans, who because of their technological achievements and great physical beauty were believed to be the most advanced of all peoples, African blacks were found to be wanting, more akin to children or animals in their behavior and appearance. Those with a lighter complexion and/or Caucasian features were viewed as being racially superior to those of darker skin color, since they more closely resembled the European norm that constituted perfection. The differences between the various races was felt to be so marked during the Age of Colonization that Polygenism, the belief in the separate origin of blacks and whites, was dominant. Because one’s civilization and social bearing were felt to be congenital, it would be impossible for a black African man to improve his standing and become “more European”; his baseness was directly linked to his skin color.

Despite the widespread belief in science over religion as a foundation for truth, Biblical rationales for the subordinate status of Africans continued to resonate throughout the nineteenth century with the well-known “curse of Ham” (Cham in French versions). In the story of the great flood, Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who are said to be the fathers of all present-day humans. Shem and his offspring gave birth to
Arabs and Asians, those of Ham to Africans, and those of Japheth to Europeans. According to the Book of Genesis, Ham was punished by Noah after viewing his father’s nakedness by condemning him to be a slave to Shem and Japheth; and as a perpetual reminder of his transgression, Ham’s descendents were to be condemned to eternal servitude to their Asian and European brothers as well as with black skin that was to serve as an outward sign of their sinful nature. The curse of Ham is significant for my purposes in discussing *Le Roman d’un spahi* when one considers the extent to which it influenced how Europeans regarded and eventually came to represent Africa and its people. The earliest European visitors to Africa, particularly missionaries, tended to attribute the decay and desolation that they saw to God’s will and to regard the native populations as children of the devil. Nowhere was it stated in the Bible that the Hamites (another name for the descendents of Ham) lacked basic aptitudes towards intellectualism and progress, yet this conclusion was reached during a period of strong ethnocentrism. Whereas the African climate, which was viewed as God’s curse upon the Hamites, was so hot that Africans did not need to work as hard as Europeans to cultivate their land and to clothe themselves, it was concluded that blacks had been endowed by God with laziness in comparison to whites, who by having been forced to become industrious and innovative have become the divinely appointed leaders of the world. Recourse to the curse was employed for centuries as justification for black enslavement and colonization, as whites saw it as their God-given duty to help blacks to become more like them.

The purpose for including the previous paragraphs has been to explore scientific and religious attitudes about Africa and black Africans that were prominent during Pierre Loti’s upbringing and that are prevalent in his 1878 novel *Le Roman d’un spahi*. 

94
However, Loti was not the first to explore these themes; and the body of works about Africa during the nineteenth century was an important tool in formulating, spreading, and substantiating discrimination against blacks in the minds of millions of readers, making the African myth a part of the collective subconscious of Europeans. Such works firmly establish the myth as a product of representations. Léon Fanoudh-Siefer writes that while these early novels may have been insignificant and mediocre for the most part, they “ne contribuent pas moins à fixer les premiers éléments du mythe de l’Afrique et du négro-africain, à fixer les premières erreurs qui encombreront plus tard la littérature coloniale, car on sait que dans ce genre de représentations, ce sont les premières images qui comptent le plus, qui sont les plus marquantes pour de nombreuses générations” (20). Although Loti may not have read any or all of the novels from this period, he appears to have been clearly familiar with the ideologies that spawned them, for their common themes reflect popular stereotypes that would later be found in Spahi.

REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICANS IN OTHER NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH NOVELS

The 1824 novel La chaumière africaine, ou histoire d’une famille française jetée sur la côte occidentale de l’Afrique à la suite du naufrage de la frégate « La Méduse » is based on the 1816 shipwreck of “La Méduse” off the coast of French West Africa and was written by Charlotte Dard, one of its few survivors. I have decided to introduce it based on the similarities that it bears to Le Roman d’un spahi in consideration of their shared verisimilitude in the minds of their readers and images of a bleak Africa in
comparison to their cherished homeland. The knowledge that Dard lived through the experience and spent some time in Africa, that the family mentioned in the title is based on her own family, and that the story is told in the first person may well have caused the readers of her novel to approach it as an accurate representation of the mysterious, dark continent that was little known to most people of the early nineteenth century and to view Africa through the author’s eyes. Her depiction becomes open to question, however, when one notes throughout the novel the echoes of common Eurocentric attitudes of the day that I have mentioned in the previous paragraphs, in particular many that constitute Loti’s Africa in addition to other works that were published during the intervening period. Both Dard and Loti, by evoking contemporary Western ideas about Africa that posit European norms as the standard for interpretation, have described Senegal as an arid, noisome wasteland unsuited for human life, populated by infernal beasts: in short, as hell itself, the terre de Cham that has been subject to God’s divine wrath. As Fanoudh-Siefer observes, Dard bemoans her stay in Senegal in much the same manner that Loti would over a half-century later. “Je donnai un libre cours à mes larmes et à mes chagrins. Le monde civilisé, me disais-je, est loin de moi… Que fais-je sur cette terre maudite?” (cited in Fanoudh-Siefer 22). While it is appears logical that Dard’s portrayal of Senegal is at least partially based on fact, it is also highly probable that as a storyteller, she chose to exaggerate the desolation of black Africa in order to more fully communicate to her readers the primary message of her novel, which is the hardships that her family experienced while they lived there. Her storytelling, writes Fanoudh-Siefer, “devait présenter la dureté des souffrances que sa famille eut à subir, et à ce titre son livre est un long réquisitoire contre la mentalité des colons du Sénégal, contre la méchanceté
foncière du gouverneur de la colonie; l’enlaidissement de la géographie ne fait pas donc qu’appuyer indirectement ce procès qu’elle a ouvert” (25). Once again, Chaumière bears some resemblance to Spahi, as we note that the main objective of the latter seems to be more about describing his protagonist’s mental state than Africa.

Whereas La chaumière africaine tells the reader much about Africa, it says little about the African people, who are generally absent from Dard’s account. We will therefore need to look to other works in order to examine the manner in which French novelists represented African blacks prior to the appearance of Le Roman d’un spahi. A highly successful novel from this period was Claire de Duras’s best-seller Ourika, which first appeared in 1824, was reprinted twice in that year and nine additional times over the next 50 years, and was published under a new edition in 1878 accompanied by a critical notice as part of the “petits chefs d’oeuvre” collection. As the first novel set in Europe to have a black protagonist as well as the first French novel narrated by a black female protagonist, it was a sensation at the time and continues to be hailed today as a ground-breaking work in its earnest attempt to humanize blacks and to promote racial equality. It is the partially fact-based story of a young Senegalese girl who, as an infant, is saved from the slave trade by the governor of Senegal and is brought back to Paris as a gift for his aunt, Madame de B., who is the most admired woman of her era. Ourika is raised by Mme. de B. as a wealthy French child with all the privileges associated with her aristocratic position in society and sees herself as no different than her peers, surrounded by love, affection, and a sense of security, in spite of her color. As she remarks, “ma couleur noire ne l’empêchait pas de m’aider.” It is only when she reaches adolescence and she wants to marry a white man that she realizes that her skin color marks her as
separate from everyone around her, after she overhears some comments made by Mme. de B. regarding her uncertain future. Evidently, an educated black woman has no place in France; it is against nature. As Mme. de B.’s friend remarks, “Ourika n'a pas rempli sa destinée: elle s'est placée dans la société sans sa permission; la société se vengera.” It is when Ourika becomes aware of her blackness that she falls into despair, eventually leading to seeking professional help and to killing herself.

Ourika’s thoughts on her blackness, which are presented in the form of the story that she told to her doctor (he is the one who tells her story after her death), communicate the stigma associated with black skin during the nineteenth century. She views herself as ostracized from whites, condemned to eternal loneliness because the divisions between races are indisputable. “J'épuisais ma pitié sur moi-même; ma figure me faisait horreur, je n'osais plus me regarder dans une glace; lorsque mes yeux se portaient sur mes mains noires, je croyais voir celles d'un singe; je m'exagérais ma laideur, et cette couleur me paraissait comme le signe de ma réprobation; c'est elle qui me séparait de tous les êtres de mon espèce, qui me condamnait à être seule, toujours seule!” In her own eyes, she becomes an ugly simian creature in comparison to the more perfect vision of her white-skinned contemporaries. The reader may also note that Ourika does not seem to have the capacity to make choices throughout her life. Things happen to her; she is not an actor in the story, she is a pawn in the hands of fate and the other (white, French) characters.

Writes Martine Delvaux, “Son sort est de demeurer à jamais dans l'état d'objet auquel elle était au départ destinée.” At the same time that Duras promotes racial equality and integration of Africans into French society during a time that intolerance of non-whites was elevated, she seems to recognize that it is impossible because of black Africans’
presumed inferiority to whites. Even Ourika is cognizant of this: “jusqu'ici je m'étais
affligée d'appartenir à une race proscrite; maintenant j'avais honte d'appartenir à une race
de barbares et d'assassins.” Ourika was one of many works of the early to mid nineteenth
century that contributed to the creation of the Africa myth, containing many Western
concepts about Africans that would later be reiterated in Le Roman d’un spahi.

PROMINENT IDEAS ABOUT AFRICA DISSEMINATED IN LE ROMAN D’UN
SPAHI

The lengthy background that I have provided consisting of the life of author
Pierre Loti, the intellectual climate of his time regarding the superiority of European
whites, and a few representations about Africa and black Africans from earlier in the
nineteenth century that play into and perpetuate the African myth will permit us to
analyze Le Roman d’un spahi in the most effective and thorough manner possible. While
it may be possible for the contemporary reader to regard the novel as a statement of pure
national pride and racial prejudice against blacks, it is more than anything both a product
of the author’s experience and of its time. Two of its dominant themes that I will spend
the remainder of this chapter examining in further detail are 1) the isolation and
abandonment experienced by protagonist Jean Peyral in the strange desert wastelands of
Africa, which appear to have been highly inspired both by Loti’s lifelong fears of
loneliness and change, not to mention the painful romantic and fraternal dissolutions that
he endured during his visit to Senegal, as well as contemporary beliefs about the
continent as a place of intense hardship; and 2) images of good, progressive Europe and
Europeans versus bad, backwards Africa and Africans that also serve to reinforce Peyral’s turmoil because he is separated from all that reminds him of home and that are accentuated by the Eurocentric myth which designates Africa as the opposite to the West, felt by many Europeans of the era to be the incarnation of perfection in the eyes of God. While it is possible to rationalize the observations made throughout the text as representative of the mind of a sheltered youth from a small town in France, the images that emerge from them are vivid and indelible. The resulting novel presents a distorted picture of Africa, partially based in fact and partially based in prominent misconceptions and subjective responses to the author’s experiences, but one which many readers have regarded as an accurate representation of life in Senegal during the late nineteenth century.

As the title of Le Roman d’un spahi indicates, the primary focus is not Africa: it is the white European spahi, Jean Peyral. While presenting an accurate image of the continent and its people was doubtlessly a concern for Pierre Loti, these elements remain secondary to Peyral around whom the entire story revolves. Much as in a centered binary system, Peyral’s needs and journey throughout the span of the novel serve as the signifier that determine the importance, meaning, and degree of verisimilitude of the concepts that surround him. What matters most is the function that they serve in relation to the protagonist. Peyral is much less concerned with learning more about Africa than with surviving his period of exile and bemoaning his fate, and in turn the purpose of the majority of the elements of the novel is to accentuate these emotions. Reality can be manipulated or exaggerated in order to better support these primary objectives. We are reminded of the author’s personal experience at the time that he went to Africa, which
likely was a catalyst in his perception of the continent as well as the disposition of his protagonist whose character, as we recall, bears many similarities to that of Loti. Among the components that intensify the protagonist’s sense of isolation and abandonment and that announce his death at the end of the novel are allusions to the unbearable heat and sun, the desert, aridity, strangeness, inactivity, and death.

AFRICA AS A LAND OF DESOLATION AND HEAT

*Le Roman d’un spahi* begins with images of emptiness and solitude as represented by the desert, a place which both frightens and fascinates the author. On the very first page, we read, “Les solitudes défilent, avec une monotonie triste, les dunes mouvantes, les horizons indéfinis, — et la chaleur augmente d’intensité chaque jour” (45). Within the space of the novel, the desert does not simply exist; it becomes fixed as a mythical symbol and means something for the protagonist. The city of Saint-Louis, which has no ports and therefore has no communication with the outside world, sleeps beneath the ardent sun. “Cet isolement de la mer est pour ce pays une grande cause de stagnation et de tristesse… On y vient quand on est forcé d’y venir; mais jamais personne n’y passe; et il semble qu’on s’y sente prisonnier, et absolument séparé du reste du monde” (47, emphasis in original). The city is thus personified as isolation itself. The narrator goes so far as to cry out, “Ô tristesse de cette terre d’Afrique!” (48). In this sentence, we notice a common characteristic to the African myth which is present in this novel, the association of a relatively small space of land with the entire continent, condemning it all equally with one sentence. On the basis of these negative descriptions, it will be easier
for one to understand the protagonist’s state of mind when he is introduced later. At the same time, it creates in the mind of the reader a frightening picture of Africa as a whole that, through repetition, becomes difficult to forget.

The most obvious technique by which Pierre Loti persistently reminds the reader of both Jean Peyral’s loneliness and the differences between Africa and France is by means of the iteration of popular stereotypical descriptors that set the tone right from its start. Both Peyral and the narrator seem to be obsessed by Africa’s heat and expanse of desert. As Fanoudh-Siefer has observed, the word “soleil” appears 78 times in *Le Roman d’un spahi*, often intensified by the accompaniment of adjectives including “brûlant,” “dévorant,” and “implacable” (60). “Chaleur” is employed 28 times, “chaud” 42 times (61), “sable” 74 times, and “désert” 51 times (64). The heat isolates him because it weighs him down, and the frequency with which these words are used strongly increases their impact. The heat is further stressed in order to emphasize the spahi’s internal struggles. The effect of the heat is mentioned with greater frequency when Peyral is undergoing significant emotional turmoil and particularly isolation, for example after he is tossed out of the brothel due to excessive drunkenness and violent behavior (92) and when he is sent to Gadiangué rather than Algiers, where he would have been closer to home and to being reunited with his loved ones (169). On several occasions the action takes place at noon, the hottest moment of the day when the sun is at its peak. These reprisals, which by creating the image of the heat pressing upon one’s shoulders like a lead cape reflect the mood of the protagonist, also serve to stress the myth of Africa as a place of suffering and loneliness.
The native populations of Africa play a very insignificant role throughout the novel and interact little with the protagonist who, for the most part, chooses to regard them from a distance. With a few exceptions, they are described as part of the setting around Peyral, more animate figures than human beings; and what he learns about them derives from what he sees and not from conversations with them. He is surrounded by significantly more things than people. The only characters whom the readers are permitted to hear and to know in more than passing detail are Jean, his mother, his fiancée Jeanne Méry, Fatou-gaye, Nyaor-fall and a few other fellow spahis, and Cora. While it is possible that the author has decided not to tell the reader much about the Africans in order to intensify Peyral’s feelings that he is alone, the resulting impression is that (with a few notable exceptions) they are meant to be seen and not heard. They rarely get the opportunity to share their observations about their own culture, which is almost exclusively commented upon by the Eurocentric outsider.

AFRICA REPRESENTED AS BIZARRE

Further stressing Jean Peyral’s isolation is the author’s insistence on the strange quality of the things that surround him, which are new and scary because they are so dissimilar from that of his home of les Cévennes and depart from both his and the reader’s usual expectations. Throughout the novel, various forms of the word “étrange” (including étrangé, étranger, and étrangement) are employed 33 times, “inconnu” (both the noun and the adjective) 17 times, and forms of “bizarre” (including “bizzarrerie”) 17 times. Much like the author, the protagonist has an implacable fear of that which is
different and prefers to stick with the world that he knows best, even when it is not to his best interest. He is apprehensive about going to Algiers, although it is closer to his home, because it is another place to which he would have to become accustomed; and he would rather stay in the service than start another new career. On many occasions, he becomes overwhelmed by his fear of the unfamiliar; and everything is unfamiliar in Africa in comparison to what he knows in France. “Tout cela sent bien la terre d’exil, et l’éloignement de la patrie; les moindres détails des moindres choses sont étranges” (141). When he arrives in Diakhallémé, he remarks that “toute cela était… original à l’excès” (181). It is true that he eventually becomes used to Senegal, so much that he does not want to leave it in favor of Algeria; but this realization comes only after many years of living there and feeling like an outsider. “Quoi de commun entre lui et ce pays?” (53-54).

His initial reaction to everything in Africa is the degree to which it deviates from his experience. One wonders if it was perhaps Loti’s intention to stress the discrepancies between the familiar and the foreign to his readers in order to shock them with the intensity of Africa to contrast with their relaxed attitudes towards home, and in the process the continent has an unrestrained, carnivalesque air. It becomes clear to the reader that the differences between Africa and France are so extreme that it would be impossible to find a single similarity between them, and the customary black/white, heaven/hell dichotomies are maintained. Occasional use of the word “notre” makes the divide even stronger, as in the following passage where the narrator makes a direct comparison between Senegal and France: “Le mois de mai! dans notre pays de France, le beau mois de la verdure et des fleurs! Mais, dans les campagnes mornes de Dialamban, rien n’avait verdi” (100). The narrator evidently regards himself as speaking to other
French citizens exclusively, asking his readers to identify with both himself and Peyral as well as with their opinions about Africa. By referring to the reader as “one of us,” the novel takes on a specific binaristic message of “us versus them.”

AFRICA AS A PLACE OF DEATH AND REPOSE

Loti’s Africa is characterized by death, a theme which remains constant throughout Le Roman d’un spahi. The words “mort” (both as the noun and the past participle) and “mortel” appear 63 times, and “mourir” 14 times. Around Jean Peyral, little is vibrant and alive. The city is dead, the streets are dead, the houses are dead, the earth is dead, the grass is dead, the trees are dead, the swamps are dead water, and people and animals frequently die of the deadly heat, skeletons the only reminders of their past existence. “C’était triste le soir, dans ce quartier mort, isolé au bout d’une ville morte” (129). The cemetery is visible from Peyral’s hut, keeping the ever-looming presence of death close in his mind. “Et tout était desséché et mort” (117). The colors black and white, which appear frequently, are also symbolic of death. Black represents darkness and absence of light and is mentioned as the color of vultures and baobabs (both of which also symbolize death\(^\text{17}\)). The following citation shows the manner in which white can allude to death: “Midi!... L'hôpital est silencieux comme une grande maison de la mort. Les longues galeries blanches, les longs couloirs sont vides” (83). The empty white hallways are a place of death and silence, and the indication of noon tells us that the sun

\(^\text{17}\) The baobab, a tree which is frequently associated with Africa, appears lifeless during much of the year. According to Arabic legend, the devil pulled the tree out of the ground and placed it back upside down, causing it to resemble the roots of a tree.
is at its apex in the sky. The color is also seen in draperies, dresses, and smoke, which as they move in the wind bear a resemblance to ghostly apparitions.

In contrast to previous stories about Africa that are filled with emblematic creatures such as lions, elephants, and hippopotamuses, the wildlife of Spahi are primarily symbolic of death and putrefaction. The baobabs, which Peyral regards as dead trees, are populated by vultures, lizards, and bats (64). Hyenas and coyotes are heard calling in the distance when Peyral is alone in the desert, filling him with a sense of horror and reminding him of his isolation. When he is feeling menaced and alone, the vultures fly overhead, and they are occasionally seen feeding off the dead in the desert. At the end of the novel, vultures are the only witnesses to Fatou-gaye’s death and then feed off the bodies of her, Jean, and their son.

Along with death, sleep and inactivity are important attributes to Africa as presented in the novel. The verb “dormir” (including “endormir” and “s’endormir”) is used 48 times, and “sommeil” 18 times. Those who live beneath the oppressive sun become lazy because it is too hot to move and resort to sleeping through most of the day, as we see in the following passage. The heat weighs upon him like an iron quilt and inhibits any activity. “Oh! ces heures chaudes du milieu du jour, les heures qui pèsent le plus aux malades! Ceux-là qui ont eu la fièvre au bord de ces fleuves d'Afrique les connaissent, ces heures mortelles d'engourdissement et de sommeil. Un peu avant midi, Jean s'endormait” (85). The heat is described as a poison that produces inertia and monotony in the African populations. It would seem that this is a symptom of living there that one cannot help but to experience, especially one who is from a much more temperate part of the world. “Une sorte d’atonie morale, des périodes d’indifférence et
d’oubli, une sorte de sommeil du coeur avec, tout à coup, des réveils de souffrance, c'est là tout ce que ces trois années ont pu faire” (119). Peyral eventually becomes accustomed to the death and lugubriousness that surround him, such that he lacks the strength to emerge from his present state. “Des effluves de tout ce qui l’entoure se sont infiltrés peu à peu dans le sang de ses veines; il se sent retenu, enlacé par toute sorte de fils invisibles, d’entraves ténébres, d’amulettes noires. …on dirait les puissances du sommeil et de la mort se débattant contre celles du réveil et de la vie” (163). The connection that Africa has to him is rather insidious and wicked and does not appear to have any positive characteristics. It seems that he only comes to love living in Africa because his mind has been corrupted by the heat. His love for Senegal, as Peyral explains, is similar to the attachment that one feels to a place where one has long suffered and forced to mature.

AFRICAN STEREOTYPES BASED IN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

One may notice the many occasions on which Biblical references are made in the narrator’s depictions of Africa and its native inhabitants, subtly suggesting that divine powers contributed to the ravaged state of the continent as well as the general debauchery of its people. As recipients of the curse of Ham (which the author cites twice), they have been “désérité de Dieu,” (64), “oublié de Dieu” (225), and condemned to eternal damnation, desolation, and sadness. Repeated with some frequency in reference to various locations in Africa is the adjective “maudit.” The following passage, in which Peyral’s friend Fritz Muller compliments Fatou-gaye, is a particularly good example that
stresses the absence of God in Senegal: “Si tous ceux des bois de Galam étaient pareils, on pourrait encore s’acclimater dans ce pays maudit, qui n'a sûrement jamais reçu la visite du bon Dieu!” (147). In addition, blacks are occasionally described as “endiablé” in their behaviors or as possessing devilish characteristics. The black men who kill Peyral in combat are “démon noir” (250); and after a series of descriptors that emphasize their inhuman appearance and comportment, this expression is repeated three pages later. At the same time that these men were likely depicted in this manner in order to make the death of Peyral seem as horrible as possible, the reader is presented here with yet another image of Africa as the devil’s playground.

DARKNESS OF AFRICA AND ITS PEOPLE AS A CONSTITUTIVE TRAIT

An additional word that takes on negative connotations when placed side-by-side with several of the aforementioned words is “noir,” which comes to describe not just the skin color of the people but also their spirits. Loti seems to suggest exotic overtones by creating an image in the reader’s mind of what most profoundly strikes him as strange and different and even shocking about Africa in comparison to his familiar French surroundings, and foremost among these differences is darkness. What matters is that it provides a noticeable contrast. Africa and black Africans are established from their first appearance as “bizarre” (46); and it is significant that they remain foreign to heighten the exoticism of the novel and interest his audience. Just as Peyral is preoccupied with the

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18 The masculine “ceux” is used rather than the feminine “celles” to speak of women like Fatou-gaye here because she had been compared to a singe (which is masculine).
desert, he also appears to be fixated upon blackness as one of the predominant characteristics of the dark continent: it is likely the most frequently employed descriptor in *Le Roman d’un spahi*, with 105 uses of variants of the word “noir.” In addition, the word “nègre” appears 46 times and “négresse” 23 times (Fanoudh-Siefer 80). Through their repetition, the reader is consistently reminded of the alterity of African people and cultures in comparison to those of Europe. The author finds it necessary to alert one’s attention to the race of Fatou-gaye and other blacks on numerous occasions, even after it has already been well-established and is no longer necessary, whereas the author apparently does not find it as important to stress Peyral’s whiteness except for those moments when he reflects upon his proud identity as a man “de pure race blanche” (49 and elsewhere), contrasting vividly with all that surrounds him. According to Loti, blacks are so unique that they require explanation to permit them to be comprehended and have particular traits that distinguish them from whites, who because of their relative normalcy are understood to be unexceptional. Universal characteristics such as perseverance and hospitality are specified as “nègre,” and they are also mentioned as having their own unique sweat, cities, springtime, and love. The scent that Peyral finds emanates from Africans is another of his recurrent preoccupations. In the “ville nègre” of Guet-N'dar, he perceives “[d]es odeurs de nègres, d’amulettes de cuir, de kouskous et de soumaré” (141), implying that blackness has its own peculiar odor in the same way that leather and food does, essentially ranking the African population alongside such inanimate objects as amulets and couscous.

A common belief of the time that dark skin is the marker for a dark soul and by extension for a sinister character is an underlying theme in *Le Roman d’un spahi.*
especially with regards to Peyral’s lover, Fatou-gaye. In general, “il ne se donnait guère
la peine de chercher à démêler ce qu’il pouvait bien y avoir au fond de cette petite âme
noire, noire, – noire comme son enveloppe de Khassonkée” (154-155). After Peyral
discovers that she has sold the treasured watch that his father had given to him in order to
purchase jewelry, he refers to her as “noire de figure et d’âme” (199). He has feelings for
her in spite of the fact that she is “méchante, menteuse, et noire” (164), insinuating that
blackness is a negative attribute comparable to evilness and falsehood. Whether or not he
truly loves Fatou-gaye is questionable – he stays with her more out of inertia, lack of a
better option, and her blind devotion to him than genuine attachment; and he denigrates
her more than a few times, both emotionally and physically. In fact, on the sole occasion
in the novel that the reader is permitted to hear a voice other than that of the French
protagonist, Fatou confirms that she is an evil person who has little value and deserves to
be hurt, even enjoying her beatings because Peyral rarely touches her otherwise. In this
passage, the reader is told of her thoughts while waiting for Jean’s return, at which time
he will certainly realize that his watch is missing and would likely kill her:

Elle comprenait bien qu’elle avait fait quelque chose de très mal, poussée par les
mauvais esprits, par son grand défaut de trop aimer la parure. — Elle savait
qu’elle était méchante. — Elle était fâchée d’avoir fait tant de peine à Jean; cela
lui était égal d’être tuée, — mais elle aurait voulu l’embrasser.

Quand il la battait, elle aimait presque cela maintenant, parce qu’il n’y avait guère
que dans ces moments-là qu’il la touchait, et qu’elle pouvait le toucher, elle, en se
 serrant contre lui pour demander grâce. — Cette fois, quand il allait la prendre
pour la tuer, comme elle n’aurait plus rien à risquer, elle mettrait toutes ses forces
pour l’enlacer, et tâcher d’arriver jusqu’à ses lèvres; après elle se cramponnerait à
 lui jusqu’à ce qu’elle fût morte, — et cela lui serait égal (200).

19 She is of the Khassonké tribe.
Fatou’s malicious nature, because the author suggests that it is linked to her skin color, may appear to the reader as innate to black Africans and particularly to females, as males are not belittled with the same frequency nor are they regarded as essentially wicked. The only other relatively significant black character, Peyral’s fellow spahi Nyaor-fall, is not judged in the same way as Fatou.

COMPARISON OF AFRICANS TO ANIMALS

Pierre Loti’s belief in the inferiority of black Africans to white Europeans is displayed in many additional ways. Primary among these is the association of blacks with various types of apes in particular as well as other animals such as dogs and cats throughout Le Roman d’un spahi. “[P]our [Loti] les nègres sont des singes tout simplement, ou en différent très peu” (Fanoudh-Siefer 86). The black population is first presented on the second page of the introduction, where the local workers are described as having “des faces de gorilles” and operate with “une agilité et une force de clowns” (46), creating what could be considered a humorous image of people who are not quite human. At first, Peyral regards all blacks with disgust as having a similar appearance; and while he eventually begins seeing individual characteristics among them and stops viewing them as monkey-like (106), this does not stop the narrator from making the same generalizations throughout the novel or from comparing them to other animals (young black girls, particularly Fatou-gaye, are often stated to be “jeunes chats” [133] and their movement portrayed as feline). An allied chieftain is described as perambulating through the trees “à la manière des singes” (182); and the black women who rob Peyral’s body
after his death are repeatedly called “femelles” and display behavior that is similar to that of monkeys (259). Loti occasionally makes the comparison between blacks and animals quite direct, as when he refers to Bafoufalé-Diop, the woman who is the head of the griote’s slaves, as “une macaque” (208) and to a khassonké as “une espèce de grand gorille noir” (192). Fatou-gaye, because she the most important black character in the novel, receives the brunt of the author’s attacks; and she is frequently compared to animals both in her appearance and her demeanor. In Jean Peyral’s eyes, there is no way that Fatou could be considered his equal. He regards her “comme un être inférieur, l’égal à peu près de son laobé Jaune” (154-155). His pet name for her is a yolof word that means “petite fille singe,” which he has clearly selected on the basis of her appearance and her bearing; and even though Fatou is mortified to be compared to a monkey on this and other occasions, her opinion does not stop him. Muller then confirms Peyral’s racist impression by stating more than once that she is a “très joli petit singe,” which Muller evidently intends as flattery (145-147). The pink coloring on her palms reminds Peyral of a monkey, and he is initially fearful of and disgusted by this characteristic which he deems has something that is not human (145). She is attracted to his watch, playing with it “avec des mines curieuses de ouistiti qui aurait trouvé une boîte à musique” (185). Fatou kneels before a standing Peyral, grabs his legs, and sleeps at his feet to show her subservience to him, consecrated to him with “ce dévouement de chien pour son maître” (155); and it is for the most part this devotion that the spahi cherishes the most in her.

20 A laobé is a dog.

Fatou is compared to animals even when other words would have sufficed, keeping the reader in mind of this affiliation. Her character, evidently composed of both innocence and raw sexuality, is described as a mix of “du singe, de la jeune vière, et de la tigresse” (156). In the same way as animals, blacks are appreciated for their trade value and are sold when they are no longer pleasing.

THE UNRESTRAINED NATURE OF AFRICANS

Much like animals, the black African characters in *Le Roman d’un spahi* have little or no control over their emotions and their sensual drives. It would seem that they are dominated exclusively by the limbic system, which is associated with impulse and basic survival and is present in the most basic species of mammals. Women of black origin, including the mulatto Cora, are generally described as seductresses who have magnetic powers over the white *spahis*. The narrator laments the fate of “[p]auvre Jean,” who was entranced by the luxury of the brothels and drunkenly amorous with the elegant and perfumed Cora, who “l’aimeait en effet, à sa manière de mulâtresse” (70). It is plainly indicated that “[e]lle avait pris Jean” (72), suggesting that he was a victim. “[E]lle avait désiré posséder l’âme de Jean en même temps que son corps; avec une chattering de créole, elle avait joué, pour cet amant plus jeune qu’elle, une irrésistible comédie d’ingénuité et d’amour. Elle avait réussi: il lui appartenait bien tout entier” (73). One comes to comprehend that the innocent Jean was a victim of the temptress; and if anyone is to be credited for the affair, it must be Cora. The manner in which Jean becomes the lover of Fatou-gaye is quite similar, in that the narrator frequently maintains that she has
used her seductive powers to pull him into her evil web; and his inability to leave her in spite of the frequent disgust that he feels for her implies that she has entrapped him against his will. One of the most significant episodes in *Le Roman d’un spahi*, Fatou’s suicide and murder of her son with Peyral after finding the *spahi*’s dead body in the desert at the end of the novel, may be possible to explain as a manifestation of her inability to reason. No explanation is provided for her sudden violent action; the underlying message is that there is no comprehensible justification for it. Nor, more significantly, is she mourned with the same intensity and detail in the text as following the passing of Peyral and his only child. She is remembered only by the vultures that circle over her. Other Senegalese women behave like uninhibited, animal-like seductresses. A group of females “entonnent un de ces chants obscènes qui les passionnent,” and the motions of the lead dancer are accompanied by “de gestes terriblement licencieux… on dirait les trémoussements d’un singe fou, les contorsions d’une possédée” (136, emphasis mine). The narrator observes that the older, childbearing women “se distinguent par une indécence plus cynique et plus enragée” and are abusive to their babies, having lost their childbearing instincts (136-137). In the eyes of the European, their actions can appear nonsensical and lacking common reason; and it is precisely through the eyes of the European that the reader is asked to regard them.

African music and art also tend to be regarded as proceeding from emotion. The celebration at a Senegalese wedding is described in the following manner: “Ces chants, cette gaieté nègre avaient quelque chose de lourdement voluptueux et de bestialement sensuel” (108, my emphasis). In addition, the inclusion of the words “nègre” and “bestialement” in the preceding sentence stress the connection between blackness,
animality, and sensuality. The griots, repositories of African oral tradition who often include music in their storytelling, are pronounced by the author to be loafers for failing to share the essential Western value of work. Loti appears to be more concerned with how poorly they fulfill European standards than the role that that serve in African society. “Les griots sont les gens les plus philosophes et les plus paresseux; ils mènent la vie errante et ne se soucient jamais du lendemain” (134). Their performance is likewise judged harshly in comparison to Occidental equivalents. “Mais, dans toute cette musique noire, la mélodie se ressemble; comme chez les peuples très primitifs, elle est composée de phrases courtes et tristes…” (134). Loti continues to fixate on the perceived “primitivism” of African music, making a value judgment from an exclusively European standpoint. “Autant la mélodie semble primitive, insaisissable à force de monotonie, autant le rythme est difficile et compliqué” (135). Later, he finds it “inferior”: “cet art – inférieur peut-être, mais assurément très différent du nôtre, – que nos organisations européennes ne nous permettent pas de parfaitement comprendre” (136). Here as on many previous occasions, Loti maintains the nineteenth century trend of representing Africans as objects of a Western gaze.

EXTOLMENT OF EUROPEAN CULTURE

Existing in strong contrast to the disdain for Africans and their culture is the glorification of all that is associated with France, serving as yet another example of the polarized binary categories which color Le Roman d’un spahi. Foremost among the romanticized representatives of European culture is Peyral himself. From the first time
he is introduced and on several occasions afterwards, he is depicted as the ultimate symbol of virility and beauty.

C’était un homme de haute taille, portant la tête droite et fière; il était de pure race blanche, bien que le soleil d’Afrique eût déjà fortement basané son visage et sa poitrine. Ce spahi était extrêmement beau, d’une beauté mâle et grave, avec de grands yeux clairs, allongés comme des yeux d’Arabe; son fez, rejeté en arrière, laissait échapper une mèche de cheveux bruns qui retombaient au hasard sur son large front pur. La veste rouge seyait admirablement à sa taille cambrée; il y avait dans toute sa tournure un mélange de souplesse et de force. Il était d’ordinaire sérieux et pensif; mais son sourire avait une grâce feline et découvrait des dents d’une rare blancheur (49).

On the next page, he is described as “ce beau spahi d’Afrique, qui semble taillé pour jouer les grands rôles d’amoureux et de mélodrame” (50). Physically, Peyral strikes the reader as the very image of Caucasian perfection: tall, proud, extremely good-looking (further stressing this quality, the words “beau” and “beauté” are employed ten times throughout the novel in reference to Jean), masculine, handsomely dressed, a mixture of strong and weak, with large and bright eyes and a fine forehead. One of the few Europeans in Africa, the exceptional spahi exists in sharp contrast with the animal-like and bizarre natives. Those who see him “supposaient dans sa vie quelque aventure de roman” (69). Another interesting detail in the description of Peyral is his racial purity. Twice in the novel, he expresses his “dignité d’homme blanc” (155 and 208, emphasis in original on both instances), which has been tainted by his contact with blackness and particularly with Fatou-gaye. He had not found it as shameful to bed the numerous mulatto prostitutes as to even consider establishing a relationship with the black Fatou, because he regards her as belonging to an ostracized class, a diametrically different race in comparison to himself. After he asks Fatou to meet with him, “Il lui semblait qu’il allait franchir un seuil fatal, signer avec cette race noire une sorte de pacte funeste” (112);
and the use of the demonstrative adjective “cette” lends an even greater sense of disdain to the “black race.” Fanoudh-Siefer writes that the author’s belief in diametric differences between blacks and whites is rooted in his religious upbringing. “[C]ette pureté métaphysique est mythique, mais elle fait partie des mythes personnels de Loti, de la métaphysique personnelle de Loti qui impose une division manichéenne du monde en races pures et races impures” (90).

Although Jean’s behavior may not always be admirable, as with his drunken escapades in the brothels of Saint-Louis, the narrator implores the reader to excuse it as symptomatic of the experience of spahis in Africa (making his licentiousness more a quality of evil blackness than virtuous whiteness); and he is respected even more as the novel progresses. The narrator remarks, after indicating that Peyral’s physical appearance provoked others to give him respect involuntarily, that “Un peintre l’eût choisi comme type accompli de charme noble et de perfection virile” (210). He is also rather immature and child-like for someone of his age and stature; and his lack of experience in the world tends to attract him to things that remind him of home. His outright preference for French customs and appearances over those that are radically dissimilar intensifies both the denigration of Africans and the idealization of Europeans. Traits that make characters seem more white or European appear to be more worthy of the narrator’s praise. Women selling Western toiletries “jetait une impression d’Europe dans ce pays d’exil” (69), and Cora initially attracts him due to the lightness of her skin “qu’on eût dit une Parisienne” (69). While he was initially disgusted by black women, finding that they resembled whites “lui répugnaient moins” (106). Peyral’s female companion Fatou-gaye, like those of Loti’s protagonists in his other novels, is beautiful;
and her beauty appears to be credited to the fact that her physical features are closer to those of the European or Asian than the typical African, who are clearly on the lowest end of the hierarchy in physical appearance. “Rien de ces faces épatées et lippues de certaines peuplades africaines qu’on a l’habitude en France de considérer comme le modèle générique de la race noire. Elle avait le type khassonké très pur: un petit nez droit et fin, avec des narines minces, peu pincées et très mobiles, une bouche correcte et gracieuse, avec des dents admirables; et puis, surtout, de grands yeux d’émail bleuâtre” (126). Her nose is more European than African, and her mouth is evidently “correcte” in that it deviates from the African norm.

This final paragraph will examine the descriptions surrounding the unnamed son of Peyral and Fatou-gaye, as the portion of the novel in which the child is presented not only makes one of the strongest statements on the contemporary beliefs in France regarding racial purity and binarism, it also incorporates many of the issues that have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Fatou introduces Jean to his son at the moment when he feels the most alone and forgotten. Pointing this out to the reader are the many references to endless solitude, dryness, heat, the sun, emptiness, strangeness, abandonment by God, *les fils de Cham*, and diabolic creatures as he crosses the Sahara (the ultimate symbol of abandonment for Loti) on the preceding pages. “Jamais… il ne s’était senti si isolé ni si perdu” (232). When he prepares to leave in the morning, he suddenly feels the arms of Fatou-gaye that wrap around his leg like two snakes, reminding the reader of her insidious animal nature. She speaks to him in a “petite voix bizarre” (233) and shows him his son. The first characteristic that he notices upon laying eyes upon the child is that “il est presque blanc!” (234). It seems apparent that hybridity
either was not accepted or was simply not considered as a possibility for Loti and for others of his time, as evidenced by the detailed physical description of Peyral’s son that follows. The narrator’s remarks also speak at length to the value attached to racial purity and particularly the superiority of whiteness over blackness.

The black mother is rejected and her role in the creation of her child denied, as it is stated directly that he (or his blood) is “tout entier celui de Jean.” Even this newborn is expected to acknowledge racial inequities, implying that these beliefs are regarded as innate and not learned. The narrator remains fixated on the boy’s racial identity and his resemblance to his handsome father throughout the remainder of the novel, making it one of his primary traits. While he wears a boubou like other African babies, his head is not shaved as theirs would be; “comme il était un petit blanc, sa mère avait laissé pousser ses cheveux frisés, dont une boucle retombait sur son front comme chez le spahi…” (241, emphasis in original). We have already witnessed Fatou-gaye’s subservience to Peyral, and we see it again, this time to the pairing of Jean and his son. “Et les dernières lueurs du jour éclairaient ce tableau d’un caractère singulièrement remarquable: l’enfant avec sa petite figure d’ange, – le spahi avec sa belle tête de guerrier, jouant tous deux à côté de ces sinistres musiciens noirs. Fatou-gaye était assise à leurs pieds; elle les contemplait l’un et l’autre avec adoration, par terre devant eux, comme un chien couché aux pieds de ses maîtres; elle était comme en extase devant la beauté de Jean, qui avait recommencé à
lui sourire...” (241). As a black woman, Fatou is a sort of pet controlled by her owners, among whom is her own son.
The second work that I have selected to examine in this dissertation is Eugène Fromentin’s _Une année dans le Sahel_, a fact-based travelogue which was originally published in 1859. It is most notably distinguished from _Le Roman d’un spahi_ of the preceding chapter in its choice of setting: whereas Loti’s novel documents the people and landscape of sub-Saharan Africa, primarily populated by dark-skinned black Africans, Fromentin has decided to write specifically about the present-day North African country of Algeria, which was among the first French colonial possessions in Africa and was primarily inhabited by lighter-skinned Arabs. Both peoples were regarded in a different manner by the French population, based on their skin color and perceived level of civilization; and North Africa was an ideological component of the “Orient,” distinguishing it from the rest of the continent. It is no coincidence, however, that both novels share some characteristics concerning their depictions of Africans. _Une année dans le Sahel_ will allow us to gain a better understanding of mid-nineteenth century French attitudes towards North Africa that contributed significantly to today’s dominant myths about the exotic Other in Western discourse.
Eugène Fromentin (1820-1876) was primarily known as an artist. His objective in his paintings was to present reality as accurately and personally as possible, as he had seen it. One of his favorite subjects as well as that of many other artists of his era was the Orient, especially the area of North Africa commonly known as the Maghreb. Algeria, France’s oldest colony in Africa and its closest African neighbor, was initially invaded in 1830 and became a part of France in 1847 (Orlando xix). One of the first artists to represent Algeria on the painted canvas, Fromentin traveled there three times during the 1840’s and 1850’s with the goal of gathering additional information to serve as subjects for his work. Each successive voyage allowed him to become further acquainted with the land and its inhabitants. His second trip, from September 1847 to May 1848, served as a turning point in the artist’s career as he decided to complement his paintings with a written account of his travels in his journal that was meant to serve as a commentary as well as to better represent reality and to supplement his income.

Shifting from paint to ink for the artist was a way to extend real depiction one step further, ‘exactitude pushed to the limits.’ His efforts to link the paintbrush to the pen aided the cause of la littérature pittoresque which Fromentin felt ‘took the art out of painting and writing out of their normal realms.’ The author’s new expression met somewhere in the middle of writing and painting by performing the new task of describing instead of simply telling (Orlando xvi), suggesting that his writing was able to expand the spectrum of the novel from a product of the printed word to something more visual in nature. It as also during this time that he met the Mauresque who was to provide the inspiration for Une année dans le Sahel’s female character, Haoûa, and visited many of the places that would be featured in his
Algerian novels (Hartmann 36). He was transfixed by the Algerian landscape, especially the desert, finding that it provided an ideal inspiration and a new, exotic perspective to enchant his artist’s eye. “He… confided to his mother that he preferred Algiers to Rome for inspiration, reiterating Gautier’s earlier claim that North Africa had now succeeded Italy in providing artistic impetus for France” (ibid). Fromentin wrote his first novel, Un été dans le Sahara, after his third voyage; and Sahel appeared two years later. Both enjoyed widespread popularity during his lifetime. Fromentin was recognized equally as an author and an artist, frequently praised for his ability to develop “a new sensibility and a new authenticity” on French thinking about the Orient in both mediums. His descriptions were considered so valuable, in fact, that his trips now comprise the popular tourist routes in Algeria that are found in Michelin’s Guides Bleus (Hartmann 35). Admittedly not very imaginative, his works were based almost exclusively on his direct observations (Lafouge 87); and, in contrast to many of his contemporaries who also wrote on the subject of Algeria, the lack of interference from his imagination produced works based more in reality than with the bizarre images populating many of the North African novels that preceded it. Yet, like Loti, Fromentin could not have helped but to have been influenced by the intellectual climate surrounding the Orient in 1800’s France.

NINETEENTH CENTURY ATTITUDES ON THE ORIENT AND THE EXOTIC

In a previous chapter, we examined literary stereotypes surrounding the representations of the Orient in French literature from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century. Common to the approaches taken in these novels was a binaristic,
essentialistic, and hegemonic stance in which the Other is analyzed categorically in direct
relation to the West, which is deemed the sole standard of interpretation. In spite of the
increased contact between Orient and Occident in the coming years, this was to remain
the primary attitude reflected by novelists throughout the nineteenth century. Many
authors in France during this period regarded the Orient and specifically North Africa as
a refuge from modernity, the ideal elsewhere that is constituted by a negation of disliked
aspects of their present-day society.

Au feu du rapport à cet Orient concret, et à ses hommes, nous [les Français] avons
testé, et parfois forgé nos mythes: progrès, libéralisme, égalité, laïcité…; nous
nous sommes révélés en usant l’Orient nord-africain comme d’un miroir…. La
référence orientale a servi à l’homme occidental moderne à répérer ce qu’il n’était
pas ou plus, à inventer son contraire, pour mieux dessiner l’image de son identité
collective (Henry 41).

The objective of these forthcoming paragraphs will be to engage in a general survey of
other Orientalist novels of the nineteenth century as well as to foreground the ways in
which Fromentin takes part in the formation and perpetuation of the Oriental myth
common to the period or works against it.

THE MAL DU SIÈCLE AND CHATEAUBRIAND’S RENÉ (1802)

Much of the nineteenth century in France was marked by a pervading sense of
malaise and dissatisfaction with the reality of modern life known as the mal du siècle. It
has been said that it was inaugurated and popularized in François-René de
Chateaubriand’s 1802 work René. In the novel, the eponymous protagonist is thoroughly
unhappy with the life that he has been leading in France and has been unable to forget his

124
troubles by spending time in his homeland or in the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. He bemoans that there is no beauty in the modern world and that it has been corrupted by materialism. In an effort to isolate himself completely, he escapes to the French possession of Louisiana on the other side of the Atlantic. In America, he finds a place of dreamlike calm populated by natives who, because their existence is viewed as analogous to Europe’s past, are seen as lacking the intellectual reason that has made him miserable and living happily with few worldly goods. He does not seem to be seeking new surroundings so much as a contrast to France, a location that embodies his ideals. His quest for personal fulfillment cannot help but cloud his perceptions, causing him to see more what he wants to see rather than what is real. Therefore, we are unable to view his observations as a faithful travelogue or cultural study; they rather contain a mix of fantasy and reality. While René fails in his quest, soon discovering that what had been new and exciting had taken on a tone of everyday familiarity, his contemporaries would seek similar solutions to shed their feelings of malcontentment. For many, North Africa, which was becoming better known in France at the time of colonial expansion into the continent, was to serve as their dreamlike, ultimate escape.

**HUGO’S **LES ORIENTALES **(1829)**

One of the first writers of the nineteenth century to exploit the new fascination with the Orient was Victor Hugo, whose extremely popular 1829 work *Les Orientales* was to inspire the Oriental fantasies of generations of readers afterward. Romanticism, to which Hugo was a primary contributor, stressed passionate and unrestrained expression
over what its adherents regarded as the staid, repressive philosophies of the Classicist school, and the simplicity of the past over the complexities of the present day. Hugo, in fact, was influenced by Chateaubriand. *Les Orientales* reflects this desire to move away from harsh reality in favor of that which is more visually pleasing. It is set in North Africa and the Near East and addresses subject such as the Greek war of independence, passionate love, and exotic cultures and can be regarded today as less a reliable portrait than a reflection of French ideology of the period that protested the materialism of Western society. The author’s own priorities remain the center of the text, stripping it of objectivity. If Hugo has a love for the Orient, “c’est parce que celui-ci réveille sa puissance d’imagination” (Lafouge 20). It serves a purpose, inspiring his fantastical visions and allowing him to escape from the logical and rational framework of Classicism. “Telle est l’originalité de la description exotic mimétique. Elle construit un espace – temps éloigné de l’expérience commune du lecteur – et donc susceptible de dériver vers la fantaisie, le bizarre, le merveilleux – bien que sa vocation fondamentale soit d’authentifier le récit” (Moura 125). More than pure reality, *Les Orientales* exceeds reality; and the Orient gains importance in the function that it serves as a symbol of an exotic land where one’s dreams can be explored. The words are chosen to awaken a particular desired effect in his readers’ minds and the descriptions meant to dazzle them; any link between Hugo’s images and North Africa is incidental, because it is the Frenchman who comes first. “[L]e sable qui est comme une mer, l’infinité que l’on a devant soi, la caravane, qui est d’ailleurs profanatrice ici, la solitude morne, la présence ou l’absence du divin. Mais est-ce encore le désert? Quel rapport y a-t-il entre ce poème
Gérard de Nerval was known as the best informed and the most sympathetic French author with regards to Islam during the nineteenth century, and his 1843 travels to the Orient (specifically Cairo, Beirut, and Constantinople) served as the basis for his 1851 work, *Voyage en Orient*. Like Hugo, Nerval was a Romantic; but his perspective differed from that of Hugo and other Romantics who took upon the Orient in their writings in many respects. He was interested in the land and its people in its present-day reality and sought to describe them in their daily lives instead of to use the Orient as a means to realize his any personal goals. He had a great deal of affection for the Egyptians in particular, who had not generally been regarded favorably by French travelers during the nineteenth century. Not only did he live among the local people, he learned Arab and adopted many of the local customs. Rather than viewing them in terms of “Other,” as many other authors had done, he found that he identified with them. Due to the author’s rigorous documentation, close observations, and faithful descriptions, *Voyage en Orient* has the appearance of a realistic portrait; and the autobiographical air of the novel (it is told in the first person) certainly gives his perspective even more credibility. Yet the diametric opposition between Orient and Occident based on the subjectivity of the former that had been part of the French literary legacy for centuries is also present in Nerval’s novel. More often than not, his image of the Orient was based on
a blend between his experiences and his fantasies, with some information culled from other books of the period. He was fascinated by what he perceived as the mystery of the Orient and focused on the bizarre to titillate his European audience, describing things as strange from the perspective of an outsider. The surprising aspect of these images allow the reader to escape the rational world dominated by sentiments of classicism.

“L’étonnement est la conséquence de ces bizarreries, c’est le premier degré de la mise en défaut de l’intellect, comme décalé par rapport à son objet” (Borderie). The underlying implication is that the Orientals are different from the norm, an aberration. Nerval was particularly enchanted by the veil, which he viewed as a part of a costume in a masked ball that captured his sense of curiosity. His identification with the people was not out of true knowledge of them but was borne out of a desire to find an alternative existence to that in which he presently lived. Like many of his Romantic contemporaries, Nerval regarded traveling to the Orient as a process of a “retour aux sources,” back to a time when life was simpler, melancholia was absent, and beauty could be found in all their surroundings. Explains the author:

Que notre vie est quelque chose d’étrange! Chaque matin dans ce demi-sommeil où la raison triomphe peu à peu des folles images du rêve, je sens qu’il est naturel, logique et conforme à mon origine parisienne de m’éveiller aux clartés d’un ciel gris, au bruit des roues broyant les pavés, dans quelque chambre d’un aspect triste, garnie de meubles anguleux, où l’imagination se heurte aux vitres comme un insecte emprisonné, et c’est avec un étonnement toujours plus vif que je me retrouve à mille lieues de ma patrie, et que j’ouvre mes sens peu à peu aux vagues impressions d’un monde qui est la parfaite antithèse du nôtre. La voix du Turc qui chante au minaret voisin, la clochette et le trot lourd du chameau qui passe, et quelquefois son hurlement bizarre, les bruissements et les sifflements indistincts qui font vivre l’air, le bois et la muraille, l’aube hâtive dessinant au plafond les mille découpages des fenêtres, une brise matinale chargée de senteurs pénétrantes, qui soulève le rideau de ma porte et me fait apercevoir au-dessus des murs de la cour les têtes flottantes des palmiers; tout cela me surprend, me ravit… (301, emphasis mine).
The reader can see how easily he is drawn into the Oriental myth as a source of pleasure, in contrast to his “origine parisienne” of “un ciel gris” and “[le] bruit des roues broyant les pavés, dans quelque chambre d’un aspect triste, garnie de meubles anguleux, où l’imagination se heurte aux vitres comme un insecte emprisonné.” Not gray, noisy, and unpleasant, the Orient is simpler, with unusual sounds that are fresh and new to senses that have been dulled by modernity, and the beauties of nature are able to penetrate his living quarters. Dressing in their costumes and enjoying the traditional aspects of their culture was a technique for him to become someone else. “Puisqu’ « en Orient tout devient conte », et que notre voyageur lui-même se trouve « la mine d’un roi d’Orient » après s’être couvert la tête d’un keffieh, il est prêt à changer d’identité et à devenir à son tour personnage de légende” (Hetzel 12). Wrote Nerval upon his return to France: “Triste impression! je regagne le pays du froid et des orages, et déjà l’Orient n’est plus pour moi qu’un de ces rêves du matin auquel viennent bientôt succéder les ennuis du jour” (cited in Hetzel 8). Despite his desire to regard the Oriental people in their daily reality, he was undeniably under the sway of popular stereotypes that raised them to the level of myth.

Another characteristic of Voyage en Orient that would become a prominent fixture in the genre is the fascination with the femme exotique. The marriage of the exotic and the erotic has a long tradition in Orientalist literature. The female character is constituted by a number of simple, easily identifiable traits that come to be associated with the mythical image of the mysterious Oriental woman in the West. As Nerval wrote in the chapter, “Les Femmes du Caire,” “il ne m'a pas paru indifférent d'étudier dans une
seule femme d'Orient le caractère probable de beaucoup d'autres” (379). In his eyes, one can stand for all, implying their essential, interchangeable character. Individual traits are not as significant when the important aspect of the woman is the relationship that she plays to the European male. “La figure de la femme exotique, sensuelle, et fatale, devient progressivement un stéréotype au XIXᵉ siècle, où elle constitue l’un des grands attraits du voyage en Orient (de Nerval à Flaubert ou Loti). […] Plus largement, le stéréotype culturel se compose d’éléments concrets ou moraux associés à l’étranger” (Moura 104).

As in other instances regarding French representations of the Orient, the femme exotique is less a real woman than a mythical figure that appeals to the European male’s senses.

LAMARTINE’S VOYAGE EN ORIENT (1835)

Also in search of a return to an earlier time was Alphonse de Lamartine, whose 1835 work Voyage en Orient recounts his travels to the region earlier that decade. While he did not journey to Africa (rather, the western territories of the Middle East), his beliefs on the Orient as a land that embodies an opposition to the France of his day strongly resemble those of Hugo and Nerval. Like them, he felt that his personal values, which were being ignored by the people of his day, continued to resonate in the Orient. A particular quality of Lamartine’s Orientalism that distinguishes him somewhat from his contemporaries is his belief that the Orient maintained ancient belief systems, especially those of the Bible, and emphasized a return to nature as a path to spiritual transcendence. He was also critical of the corruption and focus on accumulation of material goods among the wealthy, which he regarded as a symptom of modern civilization. Islam
primarily interested him, and he focused on the distance between its values and the Christian traditions that serve as the foundation for European culture and values. Lamartine admired the nomads because he felt that they lived “une vie plus proche des origines, notamment des origines bibliques, et plus proche de la simplicité que ne possèdent précisément plus les gens civilisés. […] Lamartine voyait dans la vie nomade une liberté plus grande par rapport à la vie sédentaire et compliquée des Occidentaux” (Lafouge 144-145). His presentation of the people and their culture therefore takes the form of an opposition to their Western equivalents and was likely to give his readers the impression that the Orient exists primarily as a point of reference in a Eurocentric assertion of identity.

THÉOPHILE GAUTIER’S UN VOYAGE PITTORESQUE EN ALGÉRIE (1845)

Théophile Gautier, like Fromentin, was attracted to North Africa as an inspiration behind his paintings and his writings, which many described as the written equivalent of his artwork. The Orient and the Islamic world served as a prominent focus of interest throughout his life, as he wrote several works on the subject years before finally traveling there. His first journey inspired a novel, Un Voyage pittoresque en Algérie (1845); and Gautier took credit for portraying the real Orient, moving beyond the fantastic images popular in Orientalist novels to date. Whether or not he indeed achieved this goal is, however, questionable. Present throughout his written works on the Orient is the strong influence of Hugo’s Les Orientales; and like Hugo’s novel, Un Voyage pittoresque en Algérie reflects a similar desire to emphasize the picturesque and the visual appeal of
North Africa as an escape from his habitual surroundings. The impressions produced upon the author are of prime importance, making him the center of the text. He wrote that Africa was intoxicating, a drunken reverie in which he could indulge his senses, and consistently enjoyed the unreal, carnivalesque aspects that surrounded him. Gautier regards them as representing his ideal image of how a civilization should be, in contrast to modernity, which has abandoned the simplicity of the past. In the chapter entitled “Les Aïssaoua,” he writes,

> Je regardais ces belles têtes, ces nobles poses, ces grands jets de draperies qui n’existent chez nous que dans les mirages d’art. Pour un oeil habitué aux laideurs de la civilisation, c’est un spectacle toujours attrayant que de voir des statues vivantes qui se promènent sans socle, et, l’on conçoit, à l’aspect de ces superbes modèles, comment les Grecs étaient arrivés à ce type suprême qui nous semble l’idéal et n’est, en effet, que la reproduction exacte d’une heureuse nature (cited in Hartmann 14).

In this passage, we learn more about the author than we do the Aïssaoua, particularly his respect for the ancient Greeks. Through this analogy, which would be employed many times afterward, African civilization is stereotyped as immobile and timeless, impervious to change. It is an image that many found appealing in light of what was perceived to be the nineteenth century Europe’s abandonment of traditional values.

VISIONS OF THE ORIENT IN CHARLES BAUDELAIRE’S LES FLEURS DU MAL (1857)

I intend to conclude my examination of French authors of the nineteenth century who explored the Orient in their writings with Charles Baudelaire, who was one of the most influential poets of his day. Unlike the previous writers that I have discussed,
Baudelaire was not consistently part of the Romantic movement, though he began his career as a Romantic, which is especially seen in his desire to rebel against his parents’ generation and his search for the *idéal* in the presence of the *spleen* of the rapidly changing society that surrounded him. In addition, one cannot say that he was truly disenchanted with modernity; he was in fact known for celebrating life in the city. Yet, analogous to the Romantics, he did seek measures to flee the boredom of everyday life. He was possessed by the search for beauty in art and in his work and denied the typical utilitarian purpose of writing, designating its primary goal as distraction and a feast for the liberated mind with a spirit that announced surrealism. It is therefore not surprising that he was drawn to the Orient as a source for inspiration, perhaps attracted to it through the fantastical images in the works of his contemporaries and predecessors; and it put him in a state of ecstasy similar to that produced by the hashish used by Baudelaire and many other writers of the period. Several poems in his master collection, *Les Fleurs du mal* (first published 1857), are replete with exotic imagery, exemplifying many aspects of the increasingly powerful Oriental myth and the theme of the voyage to a faraway paradise as a way to escape *l’ennui*. One of the few poems in which the Orient is mentioned directly is “L’Invitation au voyage”; and although many have suggested that the poem is indeed about the Netherlands, the mere fact that it speaks of the Orient likely convinced the reader that it was about the Orient. In the poem, the speaker calls on an unnamed woman to join him in dreaming of living in an ill-defined “là-bas” (ln. 3) where they may experience pure pleasure. The word “songe” (ln. 2) implies the dream state, as if this location does not or cannot exist in reality. Alluded to here is a common Orientalist concept that would also be employed by Fromentin, which is the association in the
narrator’s mind between the woman and the land. Both are “mystérieux” (ln. 10) and are there for his pleasure. The link would be made even more clear in “La Chevelure,” where the long tresses of an exotic, enigmatic woman remind him of his voyage to “[l]a langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique” (ln. 6); and her sole purpose is to serve as a channel for the vanishing memories of his travels and the realization of his exotic fantasies. Both poems are completely centered on the narrator’s experiences, and the place where they are going is less important than the effect that it produces in him. Other elements of the Oriental myth are present in “L’Invitation au voyage”: it is timeless; filled with polished furniture, rare and aromatic flowers, sensuous amber, glimmering mirrors, and “la splendeur orientale” (ln. 23); and is in short the ideal escape from reality that conforms to the narrator’s value system (“Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme et volupté” [ln. 13-14]). “[C]’est un univers idéal, abrité du spleen, qui est recherché. Ce rêve exotique se situe en un lieu originel, où rien encore ne s’est corrompu; c’est un paradis perdu.” (Moura 79). In such works, the Orient, a real place, becomes transported into the imaginary where all elements, including the native people themselves, are represented as existing for the pleasure of the Subject. Later authors, particularly Eugène Fromentin, are known for representing North Africans as multifaceted individuals with a vivid culture that is not for the benefit of the colonizer. His writings did not, however, completely avoid all characteristics of Orientalism.
Fromentin, in contrast to well-known fictional documenters of the Orient such as Baudelaire and Hugo, was more interested in presenting reality as he perceived it rather than the fantastical, verging on erroneous images that had been popularized in the literature of the earlier colonial period. Feeling a kinship with the Algerians, Fromentin wrote that they made them who he was and was highly concerned with describing them in a manner that would do them justice. Many authors and critics, including Gautier, Baudelaire, and Brahimi have praised him for doing just that, for being able to make the Orient live through the affiliation that he felt with them. Explained Philippe Jullian, “The Algerians of Fromentin are much more real Arabs than those of his artist colleagues” (quoted in Hartmann 38). While he was more successful at depicting the real Orient than Hugo, Nerval, Lamartine, Gautier, and Hugo, he did not reflect unadulterated reality as it truly existed, nor was this his ultimate goal. Because *Une année dans le Sahel* is a novel, it therefore does not need to obey the same strict faithfulness to reality that is associated with nonfiction. Fromentin makes it clear to his reader that his story is not true, which invites the presence of the imaginary or desire. More importantly, as Hayden White tells us, any use of narrative, whether in fiction or nonfiction, is associated with a particular ideology that tends to affirm the subject/author’s social system as the source of determining what is real within the sphere of the work through the manner in which he or she interprets the subject being examined (*Content of the Form*). What, therefore, is Fromentin’s goal, and to what extent were his Algerian portrait and representational practices influenced by Romanticism and its adherents?
Approximately three-quarters of the way through the novel, Fromentin directly expounds upon one of his goals in writing about the Orient. It is important to mention at this point that the author frequently uses the term “Orient” to designate the lands that he has visited. In doing so, he groups Algeria together with many disparate areas with which it shares nothing other than the fact that they are all Other to Western colonial powers, effectively denying its unique culture for the sake of categorization and a familiar reference point that was a popular subject in the literature of the nineteenth century. While the word “Orient” was not as controversial during the nineteenth century as it is today, and there is no reason why should not have employed it, the modern reader is reminded of the presence of the European superpower in relation to these lands, which depend on the former’s assistance to allow them to be represented in print culture. One of Fromentin’s essential objectives is to present Algeria to those back in France who are unfamiliar with it so that they might better comprehend it. As he writes,

La difficulté est, je le répète, d’intéresser notre public européen à des lieux qu’il ignore; le difficile est de montrer ces lieux pour les faire connaître, et cependant, dans l’acceptation commune des objets déjà familiers, de dégager ainsi le beau du bizarre et l’impression de la mise en scène, qui presque toujours est accablante, de faire admettre les plus périlleuses nouveautés par des moyens d’expression usuels, d’obtenir enfin ce résultat qu’un pays si particulier devienne un tableau sensible, intelligible et vraisemblable, en s’accommodant aux lois du goût, et que l’exception rentre dans la règle, sans l’excéder ni s’y amoindrir (186).

Two elements of this sentence strongly communicate the perspective undertaken by Fromentin with this novel. In the first place, the text is clearly directed towards the European outsider; and throughout the novel, the Algerians are represented in comparison...
to Europe. Fromentin strongly appreciates the contrast between West and East and does not seem to believe that the two cultures have much, if anything, in common. The Arabic world is strange and bizarre in the eyes of someone who is solely accustomed to Europe, and he views his task as writer to be similar to his task as artist: to capture difference, those elements that distinguish a particular location from all others that are unlike it, “ce qui le fait revivre pour eux qui la connaissent, ce qui le fait connaître à ceux qui l’ignorent; je vous dire le type exact de ses habitants, fût-il exagéré par le sang nègre, et n’eût-il pas d’autre intérêt que son extravagance, leurs costumes étrangers et étranges, leurs attitudes, leur maintien, leurs costumes, leur démarche, qui n’est pas la nôtre” (185).

Within this framework, the author places the focus upon the first scintillating impression that one receives as a traveler arriving in the country, that shocking splash of Oriental flavor onto the senses that have been dulled by modernity, which is one of initial judgments and is marked by lack of knowledge and perception of otherness or sameness. This is the moment of stereotyping, when perception of difference is at its greatest, when observers attempt to make comparisons of what they see with their own identity and experience and seek to identify this unknown in relation to them. As he explains, the general portrait that he has sketched reflects his wish to “indiquer par des traits d’ensemble ce qui frappe au premier abord tout nouveau venu qui débarque d’un pays d’Europe où ces qualités extérieures sont précisément les plus rares” (91). Exoticism therefore remains the focal point. Foremost is how Algeria matters to “us” (by that, I refer to the European audience whom Fromentin regards as his homogeneous body of readers), and his description is tailored to “our” particular interests and frame of reference as Westerners.
The second quality that springs to mind upon reading the aforecited sentence is Fromentin’s desire to incorporate those parts of the Orient that are perceived as “bizarre”\(^{22}\) into the collective concept of what his readers know to be familiar so that it does not continue to seem as peculiar. At first glance, this would appear to be quite an admirable and lofty effort, as it would tend to diminish the impact played by the exotic and in effect reduce the binaristic relationship between subject and object. However, an important distinction that prevents Fromentin’s Algerian portrait from taking this step is the clear dominance of the subject, or Western ideology, as the locus of knowledge. Its privileged place at the center of the system as generator of meaning is not challenged. In addition, Fromentin’s wish to “dégager ainsi le beau du bizarre” stresses the common practice among owners of the sign of converting the object, in this case the Orient, into part of its system of values that can be digested and comprehended in its own words (“des moyens d’expression usuels,” which suggests the universalism of Western phraseology and textuality) so that it can possess the concept of Orient and present it as a part of Western representation and means of expression. The Orient needs to be presented from a European frame of reference with the author acting as a cultural translator in order for it to be comprehended by a European (“d’obtenir enfin ce résultat qu’un pays si particulier devienne un tableau sensible, intelligible et vraisemblable, en s’accomodant aux lois du goût, et que l’exception rentre dans la règle, sans l’excéder ni s’y amoindrir,” where “sensible,” “du goût,” and “la règle” are unquestionably based on Western concepts of normalcy), and it exists for the European as part of an ontological unit with the West that

\(^{22}\) Although Fromentin does not employ this adjective quite to the same extent as Loti, the suggestion that Algeria deviates from the norm remains just below the surface.
is characteristic of the colonial link between colonizer and colonized. That which may seem threatening or different to the outsider becomes comprehensible and tamed through the medium of the novel, comparing it to established structures. Such an intent places Fromentin squarely within the Orientalist camp as a privileged observer and authority who has the ability to interpret Algeria for a Western audience. Writes Said, “The West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behavior” (Orientalism 109). I think, however, that one would be going to the extremes to refer to Fromentin as nothing more than an Orientalist, especially in terms of Said’s definition.

ORIENTALIST CHARACTERISTICS IN FROMENTIN’S NARRATIVE

How, then, did Fromentin choose to represent Algeria? While the land and people that he writes about are, on the whole, based upon undeniable factual information that persist in making his novel a valuable cultural and geographical resource in the present day, the author’s Eurocentric biases and sense of idealism have the tendency to produce a plethora of generalizations, judgments, and dreamscapes about France’s closest African neighbor which repeat those beliefs that were a prominent part of the Oriental myth in the nineteenth century and which continue to serve as the backbone for contemporary Western discourse on Arab North Africa. An overriding constant throughout Une année dans le Sahel is that the Western outsider/author remains the interpretive center of the textual universe and determines which elements hold the most importance; and his national culture as well as his particular interests, which are deeply
ingrained in the way that he views Algeria, serve to frame the window through which the reader is invited to perceive the foreign territory and its inhabitants. Fromentin states how significant the country is in his life in the following explanation that he gave to his mother in 1852: “C’est ce pays qui m’a fait ce que je suis” (cited in Cardonne 11). What is important to him is the relationship that he has with the country rather than strictly the country itself, and it appears that in his eyes they exist in a sort of inseparable coupling similarly to the colonial link between France and its colonial possessions. The self is the primary lens of interpretation.

ORIENT AND OCCIDENT AS BINARY POLES

The distinction that the author has established between “us” and “them” strongly impacts this reading. Where we are corrupt, they are pure. Where we are modern, they preserve their traditional values. Where we are normal, they are incomprehensible, exotic, strange. The Orient breaks the rules of everything that “we” as Westerners know. As Fromentin tells his French interlocutor as well as, at the same time, whom he regards as a primarily French audience, “Or, je vous l’ai dit, l’Orient est extraordinaire, et je prends le mot dans son sens grammatical. Il échappe aux conventions, il est hors de toute discipline; il transpose, il invertit tout; il renverse les harmonies dont le paysage a vécu depuis des siècles” (186-187). The repeated use of the word “tout(e)” and his employment of definite as opposed to indefinite articles stress the existence of only one group of conventions, only one sort of harmony, only one landscape; and anything counter to these so beyond one’s usual expectations that it requires explanation. Such a
distinction can only come from an outsider, who regards Algeria as foreign to himself. His earlier remarks on Arab and European architecture within the Algerian city of Blidah provide an example of the perceived incongruity of manifestations from both Occidental and Oriental cultures. Until its near-destruction in a catastrophic earthquake, it had been a paradisical city of unparalleled beauty; but now its wonders remain only in memory amidst the remains of destroyed buildings and a preponderance of new European constructions. In Fromentin’s eyes, it resembles a once-beautiful (Arab) woman wearing poorly tailored (French) clothes at the time of his visit, the *Mauresque* rendered all the more unattractive with European garments; “au lieu de la vie arabe, la vie des camps, la moins mystérieuse de toutes, surtout dans la recherche de ses plaisirs” (120). His clear preference for Arab architecture seems to come at odds with his vision for the future towards the end of this paragraph: “Le jour où Blidah n’aura plus rien d’arabe, elle redeviendra une très jolie ville; la nouvelle Blidah fera peut-être oublier l’ancienne le jour où ceux qui la regrettent auront eux-mêmes disparus” (120). It seems that it is the mixture of dissimilar cultures that makes Blidah unseemly rather than the mere presence of Western buildings; for although he generally defends Arab culture, he believes that the city will only be aesthetically pleasing again once its presence has been completely effaced. The conclusion that I draw from this passage is that it can only be one or the other; and considering that the Europeans would not be going anywhere, he would rather not see the beauty of Arab architecture tainted by a European influence. In his passion for the timelessness of Orientalism, it appears essential for him that Arab culture maintain its purity and remain the same, even at the risk of obliteration.
Much like other Orientalist novelists of the nineteenth century, Fromentin characterizes the Orient as a dreamlike place where one can sleep and forget one’s troubles. Many passages communicate a very relaxed, ethereal passage of time that seems more imaginary than real and has the ability to transport an individual to a sensual paradise. As in the case of other Oriental attributes, this myth focuses on the relationship that the observer has with the country. In contrast with Europe, it is a land of more sun, well-being, and peace in particular, an exotic paradise that produces a druglike sleep or dream state on those who choose to spend their time there in a manner similar to the hashish that enticed many Western travelers to this part of the world. “L’Orient, c’est un lit de repos trop commode, où l’on s’étend, où l’on est bien, où l’on ne s’ennuie jamais, parce que l’on sommeile, où l’on croît penser, où l’on dort; beaucoup y semblent vivre qui n’existent plus depuis longtemps” (91). To this he opposed “le monde des vivants” in the West where people were always in a rush to go somewhere and do something, again playing off the dichotomy between Orient and Occident. Where they sleep, we live; we are active, we move and progress. “[L’]Islam est opposée au dynamisme créateur de la mentalité européenne et se caractérise par un anti-civilisationnisme déclaré” (Lafouge 149). Fromentin disliked the concept of progress because of the detriment that it brought to what he valued and admired, the apparent laziness of Muslims whose rhythm of life was much slower than his own. He regarded silence as an integral part of the Arab character, associated it with wisdom, and excused himself for using the word “silent” on too many occasions in speaking of them (Hartmann 52), in a way contributing to the Arab
stereotype of the unspeaking mystic. As he explains in Été dans le Sahara: “On ne connaît pas en France l’effet de cette solitude et de ce silence sous le plus beau soleil qui puisse éclairer le monde….” (cited in Hartmann 46). Once again, it seems that he appreciates these values because they are very different from what he knows to be true in France.

FROMENTIN’S QUEST FOR BEAUTY

Most profoundly affecting Fromentin’s point of view is his unique perspective as an artist. As we know, the primary objective of his trips to Algeria was to seek subjects for his painting, and that of the novel to further describe experiences that could not be captured upon the canvas. Fromentin, like many fellow painters, was attracted to North Africa as the ultimate inspiration for artistic minds of his day, having surpassed their European homeland, which had since been tarnished by modernity, as the model for beauty incarnate. As he explains to Vandell, “Tout à coup, il y a quelque vingt ans, après avoir épuisé l’histoire ancienne, et puis l’histoire locale, de lassitude ou autrement, les peintres se sont mis en route” (180). Amazed by the spectacle of the fantasia in which Haoûa was to be killed, he remarks, “La Grèce artiste n’a rien imaginé de plus naturel, ni de plus grand” (222). In the eyes of his contemporaries, it was a living work of art; and the very idea of the Orient as a mystical concept with a specific meaning as inscribed in Western representations held great significance to them. He writes near the start of his voyage, “Si l’on demande où je vais, tu répondras que je suis en Afrique: c’est un mot magique qui prête aux conjectures, qui fait les amateurs de découvertes” (38). As an
artist, he was instinctually attuned to a desire to capture the visual in writing, more specifically the effect that the country produced upon him as an individual. The remarkable beauty of this part of the Orient most strongly appealed to his senses, to such an extent that he refers to it in terms of superlatives of physical and intellectual perfection that make his homeland seem lackluster in comparison. When one, presumably a European, enters the old section of Algiers, “tout d’abord on aperçoit du people arabe les meilleurs côtés, les plus beaux, ceux qui font précisément contraste avec le triste échantillon de notre état social” (50). It is a “paradis” (43) where “tout [lui] charme” (44), such that there do not exist enough words in his European linguistic repertoire to describe what he has seen: “Il n’y a malheureusement qu’un seul mot dans notre langue pour exprimer à tous les degrés imaginables le fait très complexe et tout à fait local de la douceur, de la faiblesse et de l’absence totale des bruits” (62). For the Occidental traveler who approaches the Orient primarily as an escape from a place that is considered to be its antithesis, it appears only natural for it to seem much more dazzingly vibrant in comparison; and it is precisely as a point of contrast, as the Other to the Western Self, that this dreamlike vision of Algeria gains validity.

The extent to which many of his descriptions, primarily those which are more subjective than objective, can be relied upon as authentic reflections of reality can become called into question when one considers the value that the artist placed upon aesthetics. While Fromentin believed that nature is subject to a certain level of realism and criticized Hugo’s lack of restraint in his use of Oriental imagery, he did not feel the need to be bound into creating a scrupulous imitation. “Fromentin ne rejette pas toute libéralisation, mais il répudie celle-ci lorsqu’elle prend un aspect tapageur, provoquant et
Finally faux” (Lafouge 21). Further heightening the subjectivism in the novel was the air of sensualism that surrounded the European depictions of the Orient as well as Fromentin’s fascination with it and desire to provoke in his readers an art of contemplation akin to beatification (more closely involving feelings than reason). Beauty, the concept of which varies from one people to the next, is always subjective. In addition, because he wrote the novel over four years after leaving Algeria for the last time, memory and sentiment would undoubtedly have to have played a major role in the composition process. The same practice was applied to his paintings, which were similarly completed on the basis of notes that he had compiled while on-site. His writing is characterized by a goal to emphasize “ce qu’on pourrait appeler un sobre enthousiasme, où se réalise cette sorte de merveilleux contenu qu’il veut plus réel que le vécu. Cette ‘alchimie’ s’opère grâce au rôle de la mémoire, une mémoire qu’il considérait lui-même comme spéciale et qui avait un caractère ‘essentialisant’” (Lafouge 77-78), a process of filtering the real through memory. He describes his philosophy regarding realism in his works of art in detail when he first visits the home of Haoûa:

Dans le tableau, le caractère est définitif, le moment déterminé, le choix parfait, la scène fixée pour toujours et absolue. C’est la formule des choses, ce qui doit être vu plutôt que ce qui est, la vraisemblance du vrai plutôt que le vrai. Il n’y a guère, que je sache, d’autre réel en fait d’art que cette vérité d’élation, et il serait inutile d’être un excellent esprit et un grand peintre, si l’on ne mettait dans son oeuvre quelque chose que la réalité n’a pas (134).

Considering that his novel is another piece of art, a reflection of his creative genius, does this mean that his writing also contains some elements that are not present in reality?

While I do not mean to throw doubt onto the factual portions of his Algerian portrait, I believe that it is also necessary to be aware of the influence that his search for beauty
might have had on even the most concrete information. When one considers the extent to which he was more impressed with perfection as opposed to reality, this can lead the informed reader to wonder how much of what he writes is idealized and how much is untainted reality. The uninformed reader, however, would likely not doubt his verisimilitude and regard it as truth.

UNIVERSAL JUDGMENTS AND THEIR RISKS

Another characteristic that plays a significant role in Fromentin’s Orient is his tendency to overgeneralize, particularly with regards to ethnic or national groups of which he is not a part. This effort shows an intent to define everyone in a collective based on the relatively small amount of people with whom he has interacted. While describing individuals whom he has met in Algeria such as Haoûa and Vandell, even to their detriment, is relatively inoffensive and proper, doing so to all members of a subgroup of Algerian inhabitants is reminiscent of categorization. Once again, we see evidence of the power of the sign accorded to hegemonic classes to label elements in their environment that are external to the self, which stresses the outsider perspective. Any effort to define a people within Occidental textual discourse almost always has to bring with it some intent to judge them against an imaginary standard imposed and comprehended by the culture and experiences of the Western author and his readers. As Said explains in Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism, such generalizations can effectively serve in illustrations and definitions to define and control the concept of Orient after having developed a set of knowledge about its people, which can be
employed to exert power over them and thereby deny their autonomy. These statements can be regarded as evidence of a pseudo-scientific will to understand what is unfamiliar to them in a sort of defensive reaction, to control that which is beyond their reach. He writes in the latter text, interestingly also referring to colonial art in which Fromentin made his living:

Despite their finesse and reticulation, then, the inclusive cultural forms dealing with peripheral non-European settings are markedly ideological and selective (even repressive) so far as ‘natives’ are concerned, just as the picturesqueness of 19th century colonial painting is, despite its realism, ideological and repressive: it effectively silences the Other, it reconstitutes difference as identity, it rules over and represents domains figured by accompanying powers, not by inactive inhabitants (166).

In the absence of evidence of direct intent on Fromentin’s part to manipulate popular sentiment or to repress the Algerians, this technique may have simply arisen from an effort to make it easier for his readers to understand Algeria or from his natural affinity to categorize peoples and things in terms of their constitutive groups and to distinguish the qualities associated with them, a method which was prominent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whatever his objective, the result appears to be the same, of inviting his readers to believe in Oriental stereotypes; and within a body of literature that has adopted similar procedures over the preceding centuries, such stereotypes can as a result become fixed within Occidental belief systems and passed onto future generations through general consent, making them appear natural and universal.

At the same time, he is cognizant of the risks implicit in generalizations arising in the process of interpretation, which can become complicated in the case of a culture that is so dissimilar from one’s own through the stirring of curiosity. “La question se réduit à savoir si l’Orient se prête à l’interprétation, dans quelle mesure il l’admet, et si
l’interpréter n’est pas le détruire. Je ne fait point de paradoxe; j’examine. Ce n’est pas une objection que je crée; je la signale. Et croyez qu’il m’en coûte de médire d’un pays auquel je dois beaucoup. […] L’Orient est très particulier. Il a ce grand tort pour nous d’être inconnu et nouveau, et d’éveiller d’abord un sentiment étranger à l’art, le plus dangereux de tous, et que je voudrais proscrire: celui de la curiosité…” (184). The paradox that he believes he has not made appears evident: interpretation of the Orient does not directly lead to its destruction but to its creation as a concept, which serves to contort it into an easily managed and comprehensible body of definitions, akin to destruction in this manner. It also anchors Oriental representations in Western perspectives and thus necessitate the overriding presence of Europe to permit it to be understood. Interpretation refers to the process of applying meaning to something, which is always rooted in the originating culture, thereby directly linking his Oriental interpretation to Western value systems and giving them the status of privileged cultural intermediary with regards to the Orient.

AN EFFORT TO ANALYZE AND DEFINE THE ALGERIAN

The meanings that Fromentin applies to Algeria and its people are most consistently rooted in his understanding of Western culture and his own beliefs about how the world should be structured. On many occasions, he directly draws his impressions from his cultural background, which is derived from his experiences as a French citizen. His frequent employment of qualitative adjectives serves as an understated reminder of the presence of the Western world and its Subject-based field of
signification in his interpretation of Algeria. In the following lengthy passage that I will subdivide in order to better analyze it, he attempts to develop a general definition of the Arab people on the basis of the Algerians whom he has seen, evidently seeking to categorize collectively the immense body of populations from many varied countries that he has never visited on the premise that they are all Oriental or Muslim. “La transition est si rapide, le changement de lieu est si complet, que tout d’abord on aperçoit du people arabe les meilleurs côtés, les plus beaux, ceux qui font précisément contraste avec le triste échantillon de notre état social” (50). As I have previously remarked, Fromentin is first impressed by the difference that they strike against bland normalcy and observes that those elements which distinguish them from Europeans are what make them beautiful. “Ce people a pour lui un privilège unique, et qui malgré tout le grandit: c’est qu’il échappe au ridicule.” They are a people without compare as well as without fault. “Il est pauvre sans être indigent, il est sordide sans trivialité. Sa malpropreté touché au grandiose; ses mendiants sont devenus épiques: il y a toujours en lui du Lazare et du Job. Il est grave, il est violent; jamais il n’est ni bête ni grossier.” They are paradoxical within a Western framework, and this characteristic is likely what makes them all the more worthy of his attention. “Toujours pittoresque dans le bon sens du mot, artiste sans en donner la preuve autrement que par sa tenue, naturellement, et par je ne sais quel instinct supérieur, il relève jusqu’à ses défauts et prête à ses petitesses l’énergie des difformités” (50-51). The many adjectives, adjectival phrases, and descriptive nouns in this sentence (pittoresque, le bon sens, supérieur, défauts, petitesses, difformités) are clearly based upon Western understandings of these words, which may not be the same in one region as they are in another. Only a reader who shares approximately the same cultural
experiences as Fromentin could make the sense of them that he intends. “Ses passions, qui sont à peu près les nôtres, ont un tour qui les rend presque intéressantes, même quand elles sont coupables. Il est effréné dans ses moeurs, mais il n’a pas de cabaret, ce qui purge au moins ses débauches de l’odeur du vin” (51). The use of the word “nôtres” in this sentence stresses the presence of the Western reader, the author seemingly assured that he is speaking to someone who understands his allusions to their shared culture. As in the previous citation, “intéressantes,” “coupables,” “effréné,” and “débauches” are culturally-based descriptors that anchor his characterization of the Arabs to the civilization in which it has originated. The association of debauchery with the drinking of wine, for example, might not carry the same meaning for the Arab as it does for the European. The text is, however, designed and directed at the European reader; so only one connotation truly matters in the reading. “Il sait se taire, autre qualité rare que nous n’avons pas; il peut par là se passer d’esprit.” Fromentin celebrates silence primarily because it is contrary to Western habit. It is also probable that he values this characteristic, rendering it all the more laudatory. How their ability to silence themselves allows them to do without reason is not clear, although it seems that the conclusion is made based on his argument that the Arabs are unlike Europeans (who have need of it as a result of their talkativeness). “Il a la dignité naturelle du corps, le sérieux du langage, la solennité du salut, le courage absolu dans la dévotion: il est sauvage, inculte, ignorant; mais en revanche il touché aux deux extrêmes de l’esprit humain, l’enfance et le génie, par une faculté sans pareille, l’amour du merveilleux” (51). As before, many of the words in this sentence are based in Western ethics, here concerning what it means to have a “natural dignity,” a “serious language,” a “solemn greeting,” and “absolute courage” in
devotional practices. In addition, Fromentin’s assessment of the Arabs as “sauvage, inculte, ignorant” appear judgmental and highly subjective. Writes Lafouge:

Fromentin ne projette-t-il pas cette vision senancourienne de l’homme simple sur ces Algériens lorsqu’il ne veut voir tout d’abord en eux que leurs qualités, c’est-à-dire leur capacité de renoncement aux choses auxquelles sont précisément très attachés les Européens, leur impression ‘fatalisme’, leur contentement en toutes choses, leur sérénité basée sur la religion et le dogme? Il se trouve aussi que Fromentin possédait lui-même d’une manière innée ces tendances qu’il pense trouver chez les Arabes, tendances en fait toute contemplatives. […] …Fromentin s’y révèle cependant suffisamment pour qu’on puisse voir le rapport entre ses propres tendances et cette ‘primordialité’ qu’il se plaisait à dépeindre chez les Algériens (214).

Fromentin was certainly not the only author to regard his own characteristics as the ideal for human behavior, as Loti did with regards to black Africans but in the opposite direction: rather than praising Africans for incarnating his image of perfection, he criticized them for failing to do so.

**DEFINING THE IDEAL**

The lengthy quote from the novel in the above paragraph also introduces a popular concept commonly used in representations of the Orient that I have not previously addressed, that of the Oriental as incorporating a mixture of the child and the genius. It recalls Chateaubriand’s myth of the *bon sauvage*, the idealized native who is innocent in the ways of the world because of his lack of contact with modern culture yet seems to have a natural understanding of the universe, as well as Rousseau’s myths of the noble savage and the purity of childhood. The entire passage does not tell us as much about the nineteenth century Arab or Algerian as much as it does about Fromentin’s
particular values and how these populations incarnate them, and it is difficult to rely upon statements such as these when one realizes the extent to which the author is impressed by difference and generally looks at the people in terms of their utility as subjects for his artwork or as examples of what he views to be the proper way to live. He further insists upon the image of Algerians as obedient children in the following citation: “comme les enfants, ils accepteraient l’obéissance, sans à désobéir souvent” (49) The belief in the childlike quality of North Africans serves two distinct purposes: it validates those values of the past surrounding the youth and innocence of Europe while establishing an image of them as not quite to the level of “our” advanced adulthood.

Two stereotypes commonly associated with the Oriental and with the Other in general that Fromentin sees in them are their lack of civilization and temporal immobility. As before, these statements are primarily made to praise the Arab in comparison to the Westerner, because they are believed to lack the qualities of commercialism, materialism, and modernity that have corrupted Europe. Unlike “us,” their sense of harmony with nature causes them not to disregard ancient tradition, and this existence keeps them at bay from contact with negative influences. “Si l’on raisonne à l’arabe, il n’y a pas de motif en effet pour que ce qui a été cessé d’être, puisque la stabilité des habitudes n’a pour limite que la fin même des choses, la ruine et la destruction par le temps. Pour nous, vivre, c’est nous modifier; pour les Arabes, exister, c’est durer” (64). As a painter, he resents that Europeans are more focused on utility than beauty. He often felt that he was viewing a sort of living past when he was visiting Algeria, seeing things that had long since disappeared on the scene in Europe with the rise of modern rejection of tradition, or the origins of Biblical times. “Fromentin, en
allant en Algérie, apprécie souvent le fait qu’il a l’impression de voyager dans les temps anciens. Ce qui rend l’Afrique et l’Orient incomparables, selon lui, c’est leur aspect d’anachronisme vivant” (Lafouge 206).

Fromentin continues this theme of cultural separation in his description of Algerian city life. He describes the Arabs as “éloigné volontairement du cours réel des choses, et rebelle à tout progrès, indifférent même aux destinées qu’on lui prepare, aussi libre néanmoins que peut l’être un peuple exproprié, sans commerce, presque sans industrie, il subsiste en vertu de son immobilité même et dans un état voisin de la ruine, sans qu’on puisse imaginer s’il désespère ou il s’attend” (51-2). Worth noting in this passage is the author’s suggestion that the manner in which the Arabs live is contrary to the lifestyle that he, as a European, takes for granted. Even if he finds it preferable, it is also, in essence, abnormal. The “cours réel” from which they are voluntarily distant appears to be the one in which “we” are currently living, leaving them in a state close to ruin because they are without business and practically without industry. Further supporting this hypothesis are additional passages where Fromentin describes some Algerian businesses. Old Algiers has “certains petits commerces risibles,” their commerce and industry “des plus simples” (52), and the poor, multiethnic neighborhoods occupied by “des enseignes ridicules et des modes inconnues, ces rues suspectes, peuplées de maisons suspectes, de matelots qui rôdent, d’industriels sans industrie… on retrouve ici les habitudes triviales, les moeurs bâtardes, la parodie de nos petites bourgades de province…” (50). The implication is that Europe has established a sort of cultural standard that others endeavor to emulate but fail, instead producing a primitive version, a “parody” that is a shadow of “our” existence. He has linked the Arab world to
the Western world as its lesser partner – no longer simply different, but hierarchically inferior.

It is worth noting that while Fromentin strongly defended Arab culture and their inherent spirit in the presence of a dominant Western influence that has brought devastation and destruction to peaceful Algeria, he also believed in the positive contributions that a nation as estimable as France could bring to the North Africans. His thinking appears similar to that of Toqueville, the humanitarian political thinker who denounced slavery in the Americas and acts of violence against Algerians (“Nous avons rendu la société musulmane beaucoup plus misérable, plus désordonnée, plus ignare et plus barbare qu’elle n’était avant de nous connaître,” he wrote in his “Rapport sur l’Algérie” [cited in Nous et les autres 265]) yet was one of the primary defenders of the maintenance of colonies under the conviction that their conservation contributed to France’s sense of national pride and formidable strength on a global scale. He regarded the intention behind colonization as benevolent, but the means in which it was accomplished excessively abused the inhabitants’ rights. For him and many others, it was a battle between individual liberty and national ambition that ended by championing inequality. “Qu’est-ce qui nous a conduits à cette apparence de contradiction? C’est la référence à l’appartenance nationale, et le rôle hiérarchiquement supérieur qu’elle occupe par rapport à l’appartenance commune à l’humanité. …la domination des autres, illégitime sur le plan individuel, devient acceptable dès qu’on a affaire des collectivités” (ibid. 270). Fromentin echoes Toqueville in his sentiments of nationalistic pride that indicate ways that France could serve as a guide to Algeria yet simultaneously decries the negative effects of colonialism that he sees during his visit. He describes the French and
Arab neighborhoods of Algiers: the French took possession of everything that they deemed useful, then took the best buildings and razed the rest, keeping every aspect of life in the French district under their control; in the Arab quarter, “on l’oublie; ne pouvant pas supprimer le peuple qui l’habite, nous lui laissons tout juste de quoi se loger” (47), filled with feelings of near-pity for the oppressed people of Algeria’s capital. Despite the animosity between both groups, Fromentin appears to assert that it is all for the greater good and that domination suits them.

He seems to accept the French occupation of Algeria as fact and does not recommend the cessation of colonial rule, suggesting the best way for them to coexist. Belief in the natural submissiveness of the Algerian people certainly aids to justify the necessity of the presence of a nation that knows how to rule in order to assist them.

FROMENTIN ON THE MOORS AND BLACK AFRICANS

In general, Fromentin looks upon the Algerian people with nearly unwaveringly strong favor. There are, however, several groups that he does not regard as positively. The first of these is the Moors, whom he frequently contrasts with the Arabs to their disadvantage. Whereas the Arabs are “nombreux, plein de ressources, très grand de toutes manières, par ses origines, par son histoire et par ses moeurs; héroïque à la façon
d’Alexandre, aventureux comme père d’une religion qui a failli couvrir le monde… et toujours portant sur son visage, comme un air de noblesse, la beauté même de sa destinée;” the Moors are “un petit peuple d’artisans, de boutiquiers, de rentiers et de scribes, très bourgeois, un peu mesquin dans ses moeurs, comme il est étriqué dans son costume; élégant, mais sans grandeur, joli plutôt que beau, tout juste aisé, jamais pauvre, et qui n’atteint au splendide ni par le luxe ni par les misères” (93). He praises the Arabs on a somewhat superhuman scale, as beautiful, adventurous, and great in all aspects, but the Moors, who consider themselves very different than the Arabs, do not quite match up in his perspective. Foremost among the defects of Moorish men is their perceived lack of virility, which he finds diminishes them. “Efféminé, voilà, je crois, le mot qui convient, car il définit leur caractère, s’adapte à leurs goûts, précise exactement leurs aptitudes, les résume au physique comme au moral, et les juge” (94). They perform household chores that are normally completed by European women, ride mules rather than horses which they are unable to ride effectively, and are physically as pretty as girls. Fromentin blames this on mistreatment in their culture, in which women had been relegated to such a subordinate status that they wreaked vengeance on the men by emasculating them, effectively punishing the entire species. The Arabs, on the other hand, are real men – they have earned the right to be lazy, unlike Moorish women who flaunt their baubles undeservedly when they should be engaging in the menial household tasks that have been taken on by their husbands. (The laziness of Moorish women is a theme that reappears on several occasions throughout the novel.) It seems apparent that this judgment is based on the clear gender demarcations of the day between what it meant to be male and female, the greater and lesser sexes respectively, which are not expected to overlap or
intertwine; and the presence of elements of the inferior sex in the superior sex marks him as degraded. Fromentin presumes Eurocentric categories of sexual identity to be universal. Elsewhere, he comments that the Moors “n’ont aucun style…. Tout autour d’eux est petit et contribue à les diminuer” (93), a quality which is not lacking among the Arabs. He acknowledges that his background as a painter prejudices him somewhat in this respect (94); perhaps they are not as magnificent an inspiration as the Arabs in that they do not wholly incarnate his concepts of perfection in the same manner. One characteristic shared by both Arabs and Moors is that the author seeks to classify them in terms of a number of set characteristics that he feels define them as an ethnicity.

Fromentin’s depiction of the black African people of Algeria recalls that of Pierre Loti in *Le roman d’un Spahi*, which was examined in the previous chapter. The complexion and demeanor of dark-skinned Africans places them on a lower biological rung than the Arabs and Moors, closer to animals than human beings. Many of the popular stereotypes concerning blacks that we saw in *Spahi* are also employed by Fromentin. He describes them as “ce peuple joyeux” (158) and “sauvages” (160); “vif et alerte, la chaleur l’excite, le soleil qui ne mord pas sur lui l’agite à la façon des reptiles. Étrange race, inquiétante à voix comme un sphinx qui riait sans cesse; pleine de contrastes et de contradictions; à l’état de nature, aussi libre que les animaux” (161). Like Loti, Fromentin reminds us of the common image of the laughing black African, and their physiognomy seems that of a small rodent. He continues, referring specifically to black women: “…à l’état de nature, aussi libre que les animaux; partout transportée, acclimatée, asservie, j’allais dire – que l’humanité me pardonne! – apprivoisée comme eux; patiente sous la chaîne et portant avec ingénuité le poids d’une destinée abominable,
belle et repoussante à la fois…” (ibid). While he seems ashamed to compare them to animals, this does not stop him from making the remark and commenting on their docility and combination of beauty and repulsiveness (much like Loti’s Fatou-gaye, whom Jean Peyral could not help himself to love and then become disgusted for feeling that way). In the following paragraph, he transitions from making fact-based observations with which he succeeds in so many other areas to loading his descriptions with biased sentiment. It is important to note in the last sentence cited that Fromentin praises the blacks, crediting them with more philosophical sense than the French (whom many at the time considered to be among the world leaders in the production of philosophical thought). Fromentin was not one to view everything around him in strict binary categories, able to find merit in a group that he otherwise criticize. “Comique même en étant sérieux, et risibles qu’ils sont rieurs, le véritable élément de ces pauvres gens, c’est la joie. J’ai vu là en quelques heures plus de dents blanches et de lèvres épanoïues que j’en verrai de ma vie dans notre monde européen, où l’on a beaucoup moins de philosophie que chez les Nègres” (161).

He seeks to characterize all black women on the basis of those he has seen, inferring that their skin color rather than their national origin causes them to share the aforementioned qualities. Lafouge writes that the author found the blacks’ essential characteristic to be that even though they were the most subjugated race of the world, they were still able to be the happiest, “ce qui est un comble, ou plutôt une leçon, pour l’Européen si vite insatisfait” (66). He sees an ideal in their behavior, providing a model for the Western reader, the subject of his narrative, to emulate.
Fromentin’s character Haoûa occupies a special place in *Une année dans le Sahel*. She is one of the first, if not the first, Algerian female protagonist in Western literature; and it is quite plausible that through this novel, its readers were introduced to an Algerian woman for the first time. Previous representations of women from this part of the world widely employed disempowering stereotypical concepts that persist through this day, as introduced in the immensely popular *Mille et une nuits* during the early eighteenth century, of the mysterious, sensual seductress whose life is beset by savagery. Haoûa, on the other hand, largely escapes this tradition and appears to be based more in real experience than Occidental fantasy and desire. There are, however, several fantastical elements to her character. In comparison to the many female protagonists of Pierre Loti’s novels, including the Oriental Aziyadé, she is considerably more complex and believable. Unlike Fatou-gaye, Haoûa has an independent life outside of the existence of the male lead; she is powerful and draws the European into her orbit rather than the other way around. She does not depend on him for survival. Yet at the end she is still conquered by the (Arab) male, as Algeria has been with regards to France, through her death at the hands of her ex-husband in a *fantasia*. Fromentin describes the ceremony of the *fantasia*, which he states “ne vaut pas la guerre, mais qui lui ressemble, est aujourd’hui le spectacle le plus propre à consoler les vétérans qui ne le font plus, ou des gens qui ne l’ont jamais faite” (209), in full detail, giving the reader a thorough visual image of the *fantasia* as witnessed through the eyes of the narrator. Haoûa participates in the ceremony as a *cavalière*, unveiled and mounted on horseback. One of the other combatants, Ben-Arif,
attacks her, knocking her to the ground and running her over with his horse. Mortally wounded, the comatose Haoûa is taken to a tent in an attempt to save her, but it is too late. She regains consciousness only long enough to cry out, “ô mon ami! je suis tuée. […] Il m’a tuée!” (227). It is explained to the narrator that Ben-Arif, Haoûa’s most recent ex-husband, had murdered her first husband in order to marry her. Once she found out what Ben-Arif had done, she divorced him; but he had exacted his revenge by killing her out of passion. The power of the male has sealed Haoûa’s fate.

The stereotypical aspects of Haoûa are at their peak with regards to her physical description. The perception of her appearance through the narrator’s perspective is emblematic of the relationship that the outsider/observer has with the Orient of which she is a primary symbol: it is to a significant degree through her that he develops a greater understanding of Algeria. The theme of the veiled Arab woman has been common in Orientalist novels about the Muslim world. In contrast to other authors such as Nerval, who describes the veil as if it were part of a costume in a masked ball and is fascinated by the air of mystery that it imparts to the spectator, Fromentin is much more sensitive to Muslim practices. He appears to have respect for the significance of the social role of the veil in women’s daily lives. At the same time, he acknowledges the fascination that the Westerner can have for the veil upon first sight through Haoûa’s initial appearances in the novel. When she is introduced, the European protagonist learns very little about her, which intrigues him all the more. The veil takes on a more romantic aspect with Haoûa, as he is not permitted to see her face but can hear her voice, with which he is enchanted. “Ce que j’admirais le plus dans cette escrime très curieuse de la grâce avec le sang-froid, du pathétique avec la ruse, c’était le charme de la voix si nette, si acérée et si
constamment musicale de cette femme suppliant. …J’écoutais comme on écoute un virtuose, d’abord étonné, puis ravi, en ne me lassant pas d’entendre ce rare instrument” (69). The veil is not an obstacle for him, as her voice reveals intimacies to him without him seeing her face. However, because he can barely understand what she is saying, her voice merely provides a beautiful sound without language, similar to a songbird. “La voix d’Haoûa est une musique… plutôt une musique qu’un langage. Elle parle un peu près comme les oiseaux chantent” (150). Lack of comprehension provides another element of mystery about her character. He comes to identify her musical voice with her character, as it allows him to discern her from many otherwise identical Algerian women covered from head to toe in traditional flowing garments. Cardonne observes similarities between the manner in which the author refers to Haoûa and to geographical features around Algeria, including Algiers and Haloula (which also resembles her in name), both of which are perceived in some other way before being seen (Algiers by its florid odor, Haloula by its sound). “La métaphore (oiseau, fleur) qui enferme le personnage en une qualité unique et inhumaine, est aussi le véhicule par lequel la femme prend place dans un ensemble de significations qui l’associe non seulement à la ville et à la terre, mais au narrateur et à son projet littéraire” (24-25). Exposed here is the time-honored link between the feminine/erotic and the exotic land, which would also be recognized and used by postcolonial authors over a century later to connect issues of European violence against Africa to masculine violence against Muslim women. “La métaphore de la « peuplade à la langue douce » qu’on va « surprendre » permet de superposer dans le même réseau de significations, outre la chasse et le meurtre d’Haoûa, la conquête du pays” (ibid. 24). Haoûa’s death in the fantasia can equally be regarded as part of the traditional
imagery surrounding the blind jealousy of African or Oriental men that originates with Othello and Usbek, which also appeared at the end of Théophile Gautier’s *La Danse des Djinns* with the murder of dancer Ayscha (*ibid.* 21).

Haoûa’s behavior, as described by Fromentin, goes against the image of the customary Oriental woman that can be seen in other novels of the period. She seems to have no sexual interest in the protagonist whatsoever and goes on living her life even when he is not with her. She does not depend on him for her survival. In addition, he remarks that she is not the traditional female, as she seems condemned never to be a wife and mother. “Elle a les séductions de la femme, mais sans le vouloir et moins les intentions de séduire” (148). The typical seductive nature of the Arab woman is absent with Haoûa. The distance that the author is able to maintain with regards to her actions, as opposed to her physique, is likely due to the fact that he was uninterested in having a relationship with her. He is therefore permitted more objectivity, because he has no emotional bond with her. On the physical level, however, as a painter especially, he sought out a visual link to her and to the Algerian land through her corporeal being, creating a level of subjective interest.

FROMENTIN’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO LITERATURE ABOUT ALGERIA

Despite the many Orientalist tendencies that Fromentin’s writing shares with that of Hugo, Nerval, Lamartine, Gautier, and Baudelaire, *Une année dans le Sahel* has made several contributions to the body of French literature about Africa that resist classifying it as neatly among similar works in the genre. Most notably, the author’s documentation of
many Algerian geographical features, daily occurrences, cultural practices, and political events that he witnessed during his visit are largely factual and unbiased. He provides lengthy descriptions and information regarding the justice system and the functions served by the various figures; the harvest during the rainy season in January; Blidah prior to the earthquake and French occupation; Haoû’a’s furniture, wardrobe, jewels, clothing, and bedding; the Fête des Fèves; the rituals involved in Muslim death and interment; his hunting trip to Lake Haloula; and Arab life and customs surrounding the jour du sebt. These straightforward accounts would likely serve as an effective foundation for his artwork, as objective phrases appear to be much easier to visualize than emotion or opinion, which tends to be more idiosyncratic. When he gives these verifiable, fact-based descriptions, there is no outside cultural reference point involved, which removes the overriding presence of the colonizer in representation of the Other within these many passages. Fromentin seems to have a sense of reverence and respect for the natural surroundings and uses the local language almost as if it is his own, with a native ease and sense of familiarity, and intersperses his French with Arabic words that are included to communicate meaning, not to impart Oriental flavor23. The reader learns by association, even though the narrator does not say so directly, that “oued” means some kind of river (144); he does not need to translate it, making the word seem somewhat less foreign. He immersed himself among the people from all classes and places, allowing the reader to get to know a variety of Algerian people. He is on an even level with them. On several

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23 The latter can be seen in Loti’s Le Roman d’un spahi, where expressions that Peyral heard in African ceremonies are not translated and contain little context. Transmitted to the reader are sounds without meaning, and these words impart little more than an exoticist image of Africans who speak a curious language that cannot be understood.
occasions, Fromentin repeats Arab maxims and chivalric tales that are rooted in Algerian values and history. Similar methods would be used over a century later in postcolonial literature by Djebar and Mechakra among others, who aimed to connect their present-day narratives to their historic origins and emphasize maintenance of traditional principles in the modern world.

Fromentin’s positive contribution to French literature about Africa has been recognized by many supporters of textual subjectivity for Africans, including African author Assia Djebar whose novel, *L’amour, la fantasia*, is the subject of chapter 6 of this dissertation. She acknowledged him in particular for representing the humanity of Algerians at a time when others portrayed them as indistinguishable and subhuman savages. She cites a passage from *Une année dans le Sahel* at the very beginning of *L’amour* in which Fromentin describes himself as emotionally affected by the suffering that he sees around him. Fromentin’s words contrast significantly with those on the following page from the Baron de Penhoën, who in an account on an African expedition relates the sounds and footsteps of Arabs with those of the animals of Algeria. This approach is somewhat reminiscent of Loti’s frequent association of black Africans with animals and inanimate objects, a trend that Fromentin did not embrace. Near the end of her novel, she mentions Fromentin on two further occasions. First, she praises the author’s depiction of Haoûa, “la Mauresque mystérieuse qui s’exprimait par les couleurs de ses costumes, par le murmure indistinct de sa voix d’oiseau… Première Algérienne

24 “Il y eut un cri déchirant – je l’entends encore au moment où je t’écris –, puis des clameurs, puis un tumulte…” (*L’amour, la fantasia* 7).

25 “L’expérience était venue à nos sentinelles: elles commençaient à savoir distinguer du pas et du cri de l’Arabe, ceux des bêtes fauves errant autour du camp dans les ténèbres” (*L’amour, la fantasia* 9).
d’une fiction en langue française à aller et venir, oiseusement, première à respirer en marge et à feindre d’ignorer la transgression…” (253) and compares her death, preceded by her call of, “O mon ami, je suis tuée!” to that of all inhabitants of the Sahel after the combat has ended. In the final chapter, she recalls a visit that Fromentin made to Laghouat in June 1853, at which time he picked up the detached hand of an unknown Algerian woman that had been lying in the dust during the six months after a brutal siege and later tossed it onto the ground. Djebar says that she takes this living hand, “main du mutilation et du souvenir et je tente de lui faire porter le « qalam »26” (255). Here, she recognizes him once again for acknowledging Algerians and especially Algerian women as individual human beings rather than a faceless group, a task which many postcolonial women writers in Africa would take on in the late twentieth century.

26 A “qalam” is a type of writing instrument.
CHAPTER 5
MARIAMA BÂ’S UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE AND WOMEN WRITERS IN
SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

In chapter two, I spoke at length about the works authored by people in Africa and the Caribbean from the early nineteenth century through the 1960’s and engaged in a thorough examination of the pan-African cultural movement known as Négritude. As I remarked, this writing was almost exclusively the domain of men. It was generally typified by nonstandard linguistic and poetic structures and appealed to the qualities of tradition, lack of reason, emotion, intuition, orality, music, and rhythm in a near-direct inversion of those that were emphasized in European culture. As a result, Négritude and similar movements maintained the binarism of Western representations, defining an essential African character and African-ness in terms of a fixed set of characteristics. These traits, as well as African values, tended to favor male domination. The call to maintain ancient traditions that had been taken from them by the colonizer privileged paternalistic conservativism as well as the glorification of the benevolent but silent Mother Africa. This stereotypical symbol of African femininity whose inherent role is to nurture her children was one of the most common images of women in works by male Négritude authors, giving womanhood a purpose in relation to masculine roles. African
women were expected to uphold the image of Mother Africa by taking care of their families and the household, kept in their place as it were, while the men took on active positions in the world and were the primary mouthpieces for the African continent. African women did not emerge on the literary scene until the middle of the twentieth century, but when they did, their works were just as politically engaged as those of African men with a primary thrust to denounce those who had suppressed them and to celebrate their own existence. For the males, the attack was directed almost exclusively against the colonizer; but for African women, who had been doubly repressed by patriarchal structures and, for some, Western hegemony, their perspective was more complex. The novel that will be the subject of this chapter, Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* (1979), examines the life of an African woman and her attempts to declare her subjecthood in a paternalistic society that insists upon her object status.

AFRICAN WOMEN IN LITERATURE WRITTEN BY AFRICAN MEN

In *Women Writers in Francophone Africa*, Nicki Hitchcott delineates the basic character “types” that have been assigned to African women in francophone works by African men, which after those primarily exotic or nationalist writings by Europeans in the preceding centuries served as one of the most significant sources of representations of African women until they themselves took up the pen to speak on their own behalf. They had been primarily seen as subservient, passive, prepared to serve their family, with no status of their own and dependent upon the more powerful men in their lives for survival. As we will see, these female characters tend to be archetypal and serve to fulfill some
greater purpose within the male’s particular vision of the world surrounding him, as either the victim or the long-suffering heroine. “[B]y omission or commission, most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalisation of women. In this context, female characters are made marginal to the plot of the fiction, while only a few emerge as powerful and credible protagonists” (Fonchingong 140). They tend to fall into three broad categories. The first is “the ‘pride of Africa’: a selfless woman with a heart of gold” (Hitchcott 56), which echoes the woman in the Mother Africa myth. Examples that exemplify ancestral images of African women are Queen Pokou of Bernard Dadié’s partially fact-based “La légende baoulé” (1945), a mother who sacrifices her infant son for the good of her people; and the generous, wise mother of the young narrator in Camara Laye’s *Une vie de boy* (1953) who serves as a nurturing, influential guide to him throughout his life and in many ways is symbolic of Africa as a maternal, protective land of security and essential values. Elsewhere in Laye’s novel, other women (his grandmother and aunts) take on this role. In none of these works is the woman further examined to discover her motivations; her selfless nature seems to be an integral part of her character, aligning this trait with femininity. Of prime importance is the relationship that the woman has to the true center of the tale, whether it be the Baoulé people or the son who narrates the story. The second type is “the woman marked by the suffering of colonization/civil war” (*ibid*. 56). One example from Ousmane Sembène, who generally depicts women in a realistic manner, is the maid Diouana in the short story, “La Noire de…” (1967). She is presented as very innocent and obedient, speaking few words of French in her childlike voice which are primarily limited to “viye [oui] Madame/Missié” and “merci Madame.” Her employers, a French family living in
Senegal, decide to return to France with her; and Diouana is thrilled by the prospect. She dreams of riches, greater freedom, and a new life based on fantastical images of the faraway country that she has created in her mind. However, she comes to discover that this is little more than a façade. The freedoms that she had come to rely upon are taken from her; she is demoralized and does more work for the same amount of money. While she never thought of her skin color in Dakar, she is now painfully aware of it as it separates her from everyone around her, leaving her alone and unable to connect with others. She misses the warmth of her “brousse natale” and being a part of a community. Feeling imprisoned, she takes her life, the only means of escape. “La Noire de…” seems less the story of a black girl as it is about the drama surrounding her, the sad fate of those blacks who believe France to be the promised land. Hitchcott’s third type of character is “the diligent active woman, working hard for change” (56). One particular instance is Nafissa of Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer* (1962). Nafissa, wife of the narrator, is active in the war effort and is killed. She is presented as the hero due to her active role, her involvement in the “masculine” sphere, her lack of subservience in contrast to the preceding generation, and the power she has in the new postapocalyptic world that her husband does not possess. The center of the novel is, nevertheless, her husband. The reader is not permitted to know much about Nafissa: to her husband, she is a mystery, a stranger; “Je ne sais rien d’elle” (63). She slips in and out of the narrative like a ghost, the narrator’s voice the only one heard by the reader. After she dies, he has to learn to survive without her. She contributes to his happiness, and not vice-versa. Other stereotypes include the concubine, the sterile woman who is unable to fulfill her destiny as mother, the subordinate woman, the girl who suffers because she does not
enjoy the same privileges as her brother, and the wife who fails to obey her husband causing emasculation of the male. There are, of course, exceptions that present multifaceted women who speak on their own behalf, but they are far from the rule.

AFRICAN WOMEN’S LONG ABSENCE FROM WRITING

Women have generally been latecomers to most means of literary expression throughout the history of the written word, primarily due to their lack of education and absence from positions of power within society. Traditionally, the masculine has been associated with the center of power, the possessor of the sign, the operator of discourse; and the feminine is that which is acted upon in relations of power, knowledge, and language. Perhaps nowhere is the divide between masculine subject and feminine object more prevalent than in subsaharan Africa, where conventional male-dominated standards and sexual divisions have served to prohibit women’s access to writing. A significant hindrance was the simple belief common to most highly phallocentric social groups, based on centuries of reinforcement, that the territory of writing is meant to be occupied by men. Women carried a negative self-image that oppressed them internally and caused them to keep any instances of authorship to themselves. Regarded as communicating in a language of reason and truth that was not suited for speaking of women’s experiences, writing was felt to have been reserved to an exclusive clique of educated men. It is similar to what black Africans and Caribs confronted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who believed that they could not represent themselves or, like René Maran, created a scandal for doing so, because literature as it was understood and
accepted at the time existed exclusively within the confines of the Western logocentric tradition. Africa women, however, faced additional hurdles associated with their secondary status and position in society. Unlike the founders of the *Négritude* movement, who were strongly inspired by their French educations, schooling was often forbidden to African girls. Their place was in the home, and the acquisition of knowledge was not believed to be conducive to the formation of a good wife and mother. Most African women (as well as men) were uneducated and illiterate, thus mentally incapable of producing literature. Mariama Bâ was one of several exceptions: she attended French school and later entered the École Normale de Rufisque, where she obtained a teaching degree. Because of their many responsibilities in the household, it was unlikely that women would be able to engage in leisure activities such as writing, which takes lots of time and concentration that they were not afforded. Finally, women were not permitted to enter the public sphere in Africa and were expected to be silent and submissive to the male in their lives. Legally and politically, in several areas, women were regarded as little more than property that passed from her father to her husband on her wedding day, virtually invisible as an independent human being with no feelings and priorities outside of her many wifely duties (Amrane 5). “Dans cette logique, il paraît évidemment inadmissible qu'elles occupent le devant de la scène par l'écriture, d'où les réticences auxquelles elles font face, de la création à la diffusion de leurs œuvres” (Ouédraogo).
African women’s fate was, however, starting to change by the late 1950s. Explains pioneer author Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury\textsuperscript{27}, about whom I will speak more thoroughly later, for the first time, African girls were permitted to dream about a better future than the ones that their grandmothers, mothers, and even their older sisters came to experience as adults. Their life was no longer condemned to follow along a prescribed path. Couple relations were becoming more relaxed and less based on conventional values. Rather than being resigned to a polygamous marriage with a man whom she possibly did not love, young girls could now fantasize about meeting her Prince Charming, marrying him, and living a monogamous relationship with a man who loved her and only her rather than other co-wives. They had more choice in their partner and did not necessarily have to stay within their social group or wed someone of a superior standing to profit from his protection (potentially making women dependent on their spouses for survival). More equal than subservient, she was able to be his friend more than his daughter and did not need to address him as “Monsieur.” At this time, girls were no longer prohibited from taking school examinations, although their mothers and older sisters were likely not as lucky. When entering the world of work, they were not limited to the customary underpaid jobs that had been reserved strictly for women and were able to do almost anything they wanted for a living, including in the medical and technical fields, because their additional education permitted them to take on a variety of

\textsuperscript{27} The factual information in this paragraph is culled from interviews that Kuoh Moukoury held with Amina (A.B.D.) and Identités Francophones (see bibliography for references).
professions. Their understanding of freedom had taken new heights as a result of less social opposition to bending traditional mores, bestowing them with a sense of happiness and joy that had been previously unknown to generations of African women. This new climate surrounding them would undoubtedly open the path to liberty of self-expression and self-representation in written discourse.

The first novels and short stories written by women of subsaharan Francophone Africa small in number and did not receive much attention until decades later. It had been widely believed that women were simply incapable of analytical thought to such an extent as to produce a novel, and many were of the conviction that “il n’existe[ait] pas de femme […] qui ait pensé sa propre condition et donné à sa réflexion la forme d’une fiction romanesque” (Chemain, cited in Volet, 765). As late as the mid-1980’s, eminent critic Jacques Chevrier claimed that “it was too soon to talk in terms of women’s writing in francophone Africa” (Hitchcott 1), indicating the lack of consideration that their already fairly numerous works received in the rest of the world. While many of the earliest works produced by African men, as we recall from chapter 2, employed some of the same discursive methods as the colonizer due to the extent to which their Western-educated authors identified themselves as French citizens, the novels produced by African women in French as early as the late 1950’s signaled a distinctly new way of approaching writing that, while not attacking the patriarchy which they regarded as confining them to object status, sought to construct a new space in which to explore issues that were important to them as African women, using techniques that would be adopted by later authors such as Bâ and Djebar. They are viewed as comprising a
“feminine” style which opposed itself to the traditional “masculine” style and resisted
direct comparisons to works that had been authored by men.

THÉRÈSE KUOH MOUKOURY

Recognized by many as the first subsaharan African female novelist in French is
Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury. Born in 1938 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, Moukoury’s role model
was her grandmother, who had founded one of the first schools for girls in the country;
and education was considered to be important for both boys and girls in her family. Her
father, Jacques Kuoh Moukouri, was the administrator of Overseas France and the author
of the autobiographical work “Doigts noirs.” She completed her secondary and
university studies in France and pursued a law degree, which was to become her career.
A well-traveled journalist and activist, she lived in Paris for a number of years and
returned to Africa where she served as president of the Union des femmes africaines et
malgaches. Her background, her political involvement, and the issues that she would
explore in her novel are consistent with those of other African women authors, Bâ
included.

Moukoury’s first novel, the romanticized autobiography Rencontres essentielles,
was completed in 1956 but not published until 1967, at the time that several other works
written by African women began appearing. She credits the 11 year delay to a lack of
interest from editors, who thought that it was not sufficiently exciting and would not
appeal to people outside of Africa. However, she explained in a recorded interview with
the Center of European Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, it
explores universal themes that would speak to women around the world. Its title refers to the variety of African women who populate the novel, based on people whom she has known throughout her life and about whom she continues to have fond memories.

Women play a role in each chapter. Moukoury states in the same interview that one element that makes *Rencontres* unique for its day is that it is one of the first, if not one of the first, book in which the protagonist is a woman. “Généralement, les hommes, quand ils écrivent, …les héros sont toujours les hommes; s’il y a une héroïne, elle est la femme ou la mère du héros. Ici, c’est Flo qui est la narratrice, donc elle raconte sa propre histoire, et elle est celle sur laquelle elle raconte l’histoire… qu’elle raconte l’histoire elle-même, et elle raconte elle-même.” Flo’s story, written in the first person, is about a young African woman who marries, miscarries, and can no longer have children; the pain that she experiences as a result of her sterility leads to the collapse of her marriage.

Sexuality is an important theme, and it would continue to be so in future novels by African women. In speaking to the readers, Flo adopts an intimate tone and speaking style that allow us to know her on an personal level, almost as if she is a friend. This effect is heightened by the fact that it has been written in the present tense, which give it a sense of immediacy that could not have been achieved as well with the standard imperfect and compound past. The use of the present tense also suggests that the struggles which had been experienced long ago continue into the present day. Flo may not be a hero in the usual sense, but she serves as a figure whom others could regard as a sort of model for African womanhood. At the same time that the novel tells about Flo’s life, it defends the value of education in the life of a young woman. One of Moukoury’s objectives was to communicate in a subtle manner her own beliefs on the potential
advancement of women with regard to men within African society through the means of education, so that people could become more aware of the situation and decide to do something about it. She states, “Cela a encouragé beaucoup les femmes à aller étudier. Et dans le livre, vous vous souvenez, les mères, elles disaient, ‘Allez plus loin que nous!’, ‘Faites ce qu’on n’a pas pu faire!’, ‘Allez!’, etcetera. Alors, cet encouragement était général.” She also wanted to encourage other women to write in order to express the thoughts that they had kept hidden to themselves so that they would be able to share them with the world and to spread the message about the importance of schooling. Many of the characteristics and themes that she employed in her novel were later to be seen in the works of other women, francophone and non-francophone, linking them together in this manner into a corpus of feminine literature. Perhaps these women did not endeavor to imitate Moukoury, but the amount of recurring characteristics tends to suggest that there is a particular language and thematic to these authors’ literary ventures. Explains Moukoury in a recorded interview,

Sur mes propres travaux, il n’y a pas eu d’un ‘pacte’ très nette de ce que les autres [femmes] ont fait après moi. Mais une grande joie. De voir que les thèmes que j’avais mis dans le livre Rencontres essentielles ont été repris par d’autres femmes et amplifié, des femmes francophones, mais aussi des femmes qui n’étaient pas francophones ont souvent eu à se référer, à faire référence à ce livre parce qu’il résumait presque toutes les problématiques de la femme en Afrique” (Kuoh Moukoury 2003).

MARIE-CLAIRE MATIP

While Moukoury is frequently acknowledged as the first subsaharan African woman to write a novel in French, the first to have one published was Marie-Claire
Matip. Like Moukoury, she was born in 1938 in Cameroon. She was initially educated at home by a tutor, then attended school in Esé and at age 13 went to the Collège moderne de jeunes filles in Douala. It was about this time that she wrote Ngonda (which means “young girl” in her native language of Bassa), a romanticized childhood autobiography of 47 pages. Published in 1958, it is primarily the account of her youth in Eséka, Cameroon from birth to age seventeen. It also contains elements of African oral tradition, which had been a major influence in childhood education at the time. Orality, in the form of songs, poetry, and onomatopoeia, had played a significant role in works by male pioneers in the Négritude movement, who regarded spoken language a more appropriate tool for articulating the African voice than rigid Western writing as it was the more popular means of communication and stresses the roots of their indigenous culture. Many women also acknowledged the importance of orality by including it in their works, and it was to become associated with African women’s writing. Written in the first person from Matip’s point of view, Ngonda relates African life and values through a child’s eyes, providing an intimate look into her existence.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS APPROACHED BY AFRICAN WOMEN

Many other autobiographical works by African women appeared during the 1970s, among them Nafissata Diallo’s De Tilène au Plateau, une enfance dakaroise (1975, the first novel published by a Senegalese woman), Aoua Kéïta’s La Vie d’Aoua Kéïta racontée par elle-même (1976, which unlike many autobiographies of the period did not speak of her childhood but of her vibrant career in politics and unions), Simone
Kaya’s *Les Danseuses d’Impé-eya, jeunes filles à Abidjan* (1976, the preface of which was written by Cheikh Hamidou Kane of *L’aventure ambiguë*), and Lydie Dooh-Bunya’s *La Brise du jour* (1977, a love story). Compared to future years, there was not much literary production by African women during the 1970s; it was not until the early 1980s that their work would start to gain international attention and interest. These memoir/novels are not stories of repressed women imprisoned within a domestic universe, weighed down by responsibility, children, and marriage, as one might ordinarily consider the African woman’s tale. As with Moukoury’s *Rencontres essentielles*, most of these works do not simply tell the story of one particular woman but endeavor to call the reader to ponder the rights of women and their place in society, the female condition, their tenacity, and their self-reliance. Mariama Bà’s *Une si longue lettre*, the novel which is the subject of this chapter, is not an autobiography in that she and narrator Ramatoulaye are not the same person. However, its structure and subject matter are certainly autobiographical in nature, making it seem like a believable, true story enunciated by Ramatoulaye herself; and therefore it is worth examining characteristics of women’s autobiography to gain a greater understanding of the literary legacy that foregrounds it and to take a closer look at those elements which distinguish it in its genre. While the masculine concept of autobiography stresses the strict focus on the adventures of one individual, feminine autobiography tends to identify the individual who is the author of the narrative as the component of a much larger group, thus reconciling the conventional opposition between individual and collective by establishing the true subject of the narrative as representing both one woman who struggles and all women who deal with the same struggles (Hitchcott 49). Women find their value as
being considered part of a community of people who share ideals and experiences, such as family, tribe, and ethnicity, and therefore are disposed to represent themselves in this manner.

African women’s autobiographies of this period also challenge expected Western and “masculine” textual standards through the rejection of conventional aesthetic criteria. (One must not assert unflinchingly that “masculine” writing is exclusive to males and that men only write in a “masculine” way; the word here strictly refers to a group of unquestioned, logocentric techniques which comprise a category of expression that opposes itself to the less orthodox and supposedly less rational “feminine.”) Because their works are seen to be a written manifestation of their innermost thoughts, which lack the structure and format of the traditional novel, a looser use of language lends them a sense of authenticity. “Masculine” writing is regarded as possessing control, forethought, permanence, and distance from the subject being analyzed. “Feminine” autobiography, however, is about immersion in the visual and emotional universe of the speaker, requiring a much less conscious artistic structure composed of run-on sentences, tangential emotions that interfere with narration, poems where they are not expected, and other nonstandard practices such as repetition and tactile language, to name a few. It is more a confessional than a carefully constructed presentation of one’s conscious thoughts. We recall from chapter 2 seeing several of these characteristics present among the writings of African men on the cusp of independence; one could certainly make the observation that much of the literature written by the disenfranchised, by rebelling against it and creating a voice to replace their traditional silence, share a certain number of commonalities.
Undoubtedly, one of the most significant accomplishments of these African women’s autobiographies and of the whole body of literature composed by African women was in voicing their subjective experiences in their own words, rather than serving in the usual capacities as a love interest or exotic fantasy for the Western male or one of the more common African female stereotypes of Mother Africa or long-suffering victim as they had been most commonly represented in the past. This was an incredible step for many women, whose silence had been maintained for generations through restrictions on education and on involvement outside of the home. These restrictions had indeed been easing, although Muslim society in general (which serves as a backbone for the majority of the African continent and for the home cultures of both African women novelists who will be discussed in this chapter and the one following) taught women that their voices should only be heard by other women, in small groups in which they could whisper in seclusion, and usually only in old age. They took to writing for many of the same reasons as their male counterparts: to tell others about their lives, to examine prominent issues, and to define themselves, among others. However, their works differ from those of men in several ways. Where many authors of the Négritude philosophical movement chose to exalt Africa, as they tended to identify themselves in terms of their African-ness and blackness, women were much more likely to celebrate the woman as a foundation for their self-image. As their identity was generally derived as members of a larger social group of women, so would the issues that they chose to explore reflect interests that touched or troubled women in general, particularly African women. Often their writings sounded a call for change in the face of repressive patriarchal practices, such as polygamy, emotional and physical abuse, and lack of access to schooling and
similar opportunities. Others decided to explore the problematic relationship in Africa between tradition and modernity. Some advocated not straying from tradition as this would lead to destruction of their identity as Africans and their roots to the past, alienating them from the people of their village, while others recommended embracing modernity for the contributions that it could make to advancing their situation in a male-dominated world. Many times, they chose to examine both sides of this divisive issue, recognizing the pros and cons of either extreme, and arrived at a sometimes tenuous amalgam of contentious value systems.

AMINATA SOW FALL AND AFRICAN WOMEN’S FICTION

Autobiography was not the only genre to be taken on by subsaharan African women writers in francophone prose, although it was likely one of the most prolific due to their desire to communicate the female experience. Some of the best-known works written by these women were fiction, and in 1976 Aminata Sow Fall was the first subsaharan African woman to publish a novel that was not inspired by an autobiographical episode. In fact, due to lack of recognition accorded to her literary predecessors, Sow Fall has frequently been recognized as the first African women to publish a novel in French (d’Almeida 180); and she remains largely unknown in the West. Born in Saint-Louis, Senegal in 1941, she finished her secondary schooling in Dakar. After a long stay in France during which she studied at the Sorbonne and earned a degree in modern languages, she returned to Senegal to work as a teacher. Sow Fall deliberately chose to disassociate herself from the authors of the autobiographies that
have previously mentioned in this paper by not leaving any traces of her personal experiences in her writing. However, in the same spirit as their works, her political novels combine a desire to promote women’s interests and to call attention to what she regarded as the miserable situation of Africa’s poor and downtrodden. This is an issue that did not concern women exclusively, which distinguishes her. As she explains, “J’écris non pas parce que je suis une femme mais parce que je suis une citoyenne”; her objective was not to attempt to prove herself to men and to speak of issues that interest all people, not just women (Kiba 1979). The protagonist of her first novel, *Le Revenant*, is a young African man who is sent to jail for stealing money from his employer, attempting to finance the extravagant needs of his family and friends. He is released from prison to discover that the social conditions of the post-colonial Senegal into which he has emerged constitute a larger kind of prison. His plight represents a conflict between family loyalty and the materialism of the bourgeoisie in Dakar, and the author uses this as an opportunity to make a social commentary on the negative effects that outside influences have brought to her culture which ignore its intrinsic beliefs. In addition to its theme of investment in social change which likens *Le Revenant* to nonfiction works by subsaharan African women, the language used by her characters symbolizes a shift away from Western standards. Her written words capture the spoken French employed in Senegal, recreating their speech patterns and reflecting their local identity. She also incorporates Wolof philosophy into the novel. These efforts seem to respond to the omnipresent struggle in francophone literature not to rely on the former colonizer for representation. She stated, “Ce qui m’étonnait beaucoup, c’est que chaque fois qu’on voyait un livre, le nègre se posait toujours en référence à l’occidental... je me suis dit que
nous n’avions pas besoin de dire cela, nous devions nous voir vivre à travers notre littérature... Nous devions essayer nous aussi de présenter notre littérature aux autres pourqu’ils nous voient et nous comprennent” (cited in Bobia 529). The intention of these authors to separate themselves from standards set by the Western world was just as much a concern with female African authors as it was for their male counterparts.

ABOUT MARIAMA BÂ

These above chapters have allowed us to establish a background upon which to better comprehend the work of Mariama Bâ, the first female francophone subsaharan writer to gain international recognition for her work as well as for other African women authors. Her seminal novel, Une si longue lettre (1979), appears to recount her own experiences (grouping it with the nonfictions by Moukoury and Matip among others); but the author did not identify herself as its narrator and rejected this classification as applying to her novel (aligning her with Sow Fall). We will see how Une si longue lettre destabilizes standard expectations for what might appear to be the author’s personal story and, in a manner similar to all of the writers in the previous paragraphs, calls the reader to consider social issues that were important both to women and to Africans in general. While the novel is not autobiographical, knowledge of her life informs us of the extent to which its protagonist was inspired by Bâ and espouses her views on the world. She was born in Dakar in 1929, making her older than the earlier published authors mentioned in this chapter by nearly ten years. After her mother died at a young age, Bâ was raised in a traditional Islamic fashion by her maternal grandparents, who were fairly affluent. Her
father, a colonial administrator who later became the first Minister of Health, taught her how to write and insisted that her education not be traditionally Muslim, against her grandparents’ wishes who preferred that she fulfill her feminine destiny as strictly a mother and housekeeper. She therefore entered the French school, completing her education at the École Normale to which she was accepted with exceptional results. Once again, her traditional family did not want her to continue schooling; and it was largely due to the decisiveness of her schoolteacher, who told her that she was incredibly intelligent, that she was able to attend. Her instructor at the École Normale was likewise an important influence in her life. In a 1979 interview with Amina, Bâ extols this teacher for encouraging tolerance in her classroom and belief in Africa’s future. It was in school that she first began writing, and some of these early attempts were published in local magazines and textbooks. One of these texts, “Enfance à Dakar,” which tell stories of her own childhood, gained attention through her refusal of assimilation. Here and in her novels, Bâ regarded writing as a political act. After her schooling, she became a teacher and was active in both Senegalese and women’s solidarity movements, a strong believer in African women getting involved behind the scenes to promote causes that mattered to them as they were often not invited to join largely male political party activity, were hesitant to do so, or had little free time outside the home. She asserted that women could make many contributions to the building of modern African society. The mother of nine children, she later divorced her husband, Parliament member Obèye Diop. Her first published novel, Une si longue lettre, received the Noma award, which recognizes outstanding literature published in Africa, in 1980. Her second, Un chant écarlate, about
the hardships that a woman faces when she is abandoned by her husband for a younger wife, was released posthumously in 1981.

ABOUT UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE

Une si longue lettre is a story about the life of an African woman in a society constituted by traditional mores who, by resisting classification as a second-class citizen, intends to inspire her readers to consider a new African future that allows women more opportunities. Its protagonist, Ramatoulaye Fall, is but one woman; but in several ways her situation epitomizes that of many others. The novel takes the form of a letter written by Ramatoulaye to her childhood friend, Aïssatou Bâ, whose life has been nearly parallel to hers. They grew up together, attended school together, practiced the same profession of teaching, married friends, and took vacations together. Both of their husbands also took second wives, but with different results. At the moment of the novel, Aïssatou lives in the United States; refusing to live in a polygamous marriage with her husband, Mawdo, and his much younger cousin, Nabou, she divorced him. Likewise, Ramatoulaye’s husband Modou took on a new wife, a friend of her daughter’s named Binetou, after 25 years of marriage. Although Ramatoulaye does not choose divorce (one of the aspects whereby she differs from the author), she and her many children are practically abandoned by the male supporter; and she is thereby required to take on his responsibilities in order to ensure her family’s survival. In the process, she learns that it is possible for her to be independent in spite of Islamic society’s unshaken belief in feminine weakness. The story begins with Ramatoulaye reacting to her husband’s death,
at which time she reflects upon their marriage. At the end of the lengthy mourning period, she is proposed to by her brother-in-law, Tamsir, and an old friend, Daouda Dieng. To the surprise of most people around her who felt that any woman in her position would be foolish not to want to have a man in her life to protect her, she refuses, unwilling to enter a marriage without love or to usurp the position of another woman by becoming a co-spouse. By the close of the novel, Ramatoulaye remains unmarried, and the beliefs that she has fostered in her children seem to point to a future built on equality between the sexes and family stability that will serve as a foundation to a strong Africa.

A MIXTURE OF GENRES

It may seem contradictory that Bâ’s work is a novel, which according to its title is a letter, that reads like a journal. It is a novel in that it is a fairly lengthy work that speaks of a fictitious protagonist and the secondary and tertiary characters that surround her. However, it closely resembles an autobiography when one considers that narrator Ramatoulaye, whose philosophy melds so closely with that of the author herself, seems to exist in the real world and tells of veritable events and intimate thoughts. At the same time, it is a letter composed to a friend, Aïssatou, that is phrased in the first person and addressed consistently to someone to whom she is very close. The text escapes the letter category when one considers that it is over 100 pages in length, appears to have been written over a period of several days, incorporates other letters from years before, and was likely never sent (considering that Aïssatou was to arrive for a visit shortly after the close of the novel). Indeed, this mixture of genres is a deliberate mechanism that the
author employs to subvert traditional literary categories and to fashion a text type that communicates Ramatoulaye’s words in a manner that best suits her feminine experience. It is possible that, as a woman from a Muslim country who has respect for many traditional values, she did not feel free to expose her private thoughts to a group of strangers who would comprise her reading public, thus she chose to structure it as a letter to a “friend” who understands her. I place “friend” in quotation marks because Aïssatou is akin to another version of Ramatoulaye – with few exceptions, their lives have been almost identical. Indicates Larrier, “One could say that for Ramatoulaye writing [sic] to Aïssatou is like writing to herself. Consequently, in this novel the narrator and the narrataire can be considered one in the same.” (Correspondance 748). In this aspect, Lettre is akin to a fictitious diary that allows her to bare her soul; but one in which the narrator speaks to the reader with a sense of familiarity that make her seem like an old friend, urging us to comprehend her point of view. She tells the story to herself and to someone else simultaneously, once again challenging usual expectations about the identities of author/self and audience/other.

SPEECH CAPTURED IN WRITTEN LANGUAGE

I have already spoken on several of the nontraditional techniques used by postcolonial women authors in a general manner earlier in this chapter, but allow me to apply them specifically to Une si longue lettre. Her use of language in particular mimics speech and gives it the feel of a story that is being told in person. A sense of dialogue is created through addressing Aïssatou by name as if she is speaking to her directly: “Être
femme! Vivre en femme! Ah, Aïssatou!” (94). This citation provides an example of another trait of spoken language, that of such punctuation as the exclamation point. Here, Ramatoulaye communicates her sensation of panic as she rushes to the hospital. “Un taxi hélé! Vite! Plus vite! Ma gorge sèche. Dans ma poitrine une boule immobile. Vite! Plus vite! Enfin l’hôpital! L’odeur des suppurations et de l’éther mêlés. L’hôpital!” (8).

The author’s use of run-on sentences which lack verbs and repetition cause her words to resemble a sort of free association and stream of consciousness, tying the reader directly into her protagonist’s thought processes. The sense of immediacy generated through her language make these emotions current and real, not truly distant from the present moment which is more characteristic of the novel. Bâ’s playful use of time also contributes to the text’s orality. Ramatoulaye’s memories of when she heard of her husband’s death are told entirely in the present tense (8-9); and the reader notices a melange of present and past tenses throughout, not simply through the use of dialogue but in the narration itself. For example, Ramatoulaye will occasionally interrupt her recollection of past events to ask herself a question, or to speak directly to her addressee, in the present tense, which is more characteristic of a letter or journal entry. Before relating an episode that is a difficult memory for Aïssatou at the beginning of chapter 11, she remarks, “Je sais que je te secoue, que je remue un couteau dans une plaie à peine cicatrisée; mais que veux-tu, je ne peux m’empêcher de me resouvenir” (42). The very format of the letter binds the past and present in a continuum maintained by their correspondence, denying the exclusivity of either. Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou continue the feminine communication on daily events that had been carried out by their grandmothers nearly a century earlier; their death does not mean the end of the storytelling. By starting her letter to Aïssatou with,
“J’ai reçu ton mot” (7), it gives the appearance that her words compose one link in a chain that has no distinct beginning or end; and the final sentence, “Tant pis pour moi, si j’ai encore à t’écrire une si longue lettre...” (131), she implies that she will write again and thus that the story will continue.

SEEKING A NEW FUTURE FOR AFRICAN WOMEN

Within the space of the novel, Bâ presents two worlds: one based on traditional, Islamic, and paternalistic values that reinforce gender inequalities and repress women, and another that she visualizes coming into fruition through the efforts of strong African women who test the boundaries that society takes for granted and through a new generation of educated youth. The experiences that befall her characters promote the realization of the latter while calling upon the reader to question the unquestionable and take on an active role to enable change. Yet while representing an African reality, it also speaks to womankind throughout the world by stressing the common links between all people despite national boundaries, an intention to position her voice within a body of non-African literature and experience that is present in many feminist postcolonial novels. In a 1979 interview, she referred to Une si longue lettre as “a cry from the heart of Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, women constrained by religion and other social constraints that weigh them down. But it is also a cry that can symbolize the cry of women everywhere. [...] ...there is a fundamental unity in all of our sufferings and in our desire for liberation and in our desire to cut off the chains which date from antiquity” (Harrell-Bond 396-7). This
characteristic is common in postcolonial literature, which sees links between all people who are subjectified throughout the world and, through the promotion of one group’s cause, can help to bring about freedom for all.

AFRICAN MEN AND WOMEN’S ROLES UNDER TRADITIONAL VALUES

Of primary importance to the author is the relationship between men and women. At the time of her novel, men definitely have the upper hand, their position reinforced by a faith-based social structure that favors both males and members of families descended from royalty, including Aïssatou’s mother-in-law Tante Nabou. Ramatoulaye reminds us that these principles are outmoded in the modern world. “[Tante Nabou] vivait dans le passé sans prendre conscience du monde qui muait. Elle s’obstinait dans les vérités anciennes” (42). They are based on a fervent belief in fatalism, the assurance that things happen for a reason and that one’s life has been predetermined to follow a specific path; and once something has come to pass, nothing can be done about it. It is God’s will. Ramatoulaye explains that those whose lot is improved through traditional values use religion to justify actions that without divine provenance would be deemed contrary to His creed, such as her and Aïssatou’s husbands’ “calling” to wed younger, more desirable and fecund women. As the Imam, the local religious leader, explains to her (more than simply explaining, he “attaqua”): “Quand Allah tout puissant met côte à côte deux êtres, personne n’y peut rien” (56). In actuality, it was Binetou’s mother who made the decision in the selfish interest of permitting her and her family to live more comfortably, but this makes no difference in the grand scheme of things. The voice of tradition and
religion overwhelms personal choice and renders people powerless to make their own decisions when the decision has already been made for them; it seems that this voice frequently speaks against women. She does not portray men in general as “evil” or working to suppress women. Rather, the present structure of society permits their negative instincts to win out over reason, encouraging selfish behaviors that fail to consider their many long-term repercussions on the family unit.

In such an environment, where masculine ideologies play the greatest role in determining what is valuable, it is not surprising that the divide between the sexes is broad, those with privilege on one side and those without on the other. As Aïssatou writes in her goodbye letter to her husband, “Les princes dominant leurs sentiments, pour honorer leurs devoirs. Les « autres » courbent leur nuque et acceptent en silence un sort qui les brime. Voilà, schématiquement, le règlement intérieur de notre société avec ses clivages insensés” (50). Men are kings, the dominant heads of household, the wage-earners. They are set in their ways and will not budge; and why should they, for they rule African society. At the same time, they are pushed around by their mothers and aunts and ordered to behave as they wish, apparent masculine strength exposed as indecisive weakness. Women, on the other hand, are mothers, housekeepers, maids, servants, baby-makers. The world of women is different from that of men, filled with noise and talking as they interact with one another, but filled with silence as soon as a man enters as they feel unable to express themselves as freely in a male’s presence. They are encouraged to be docile, submissive, giving, selfless, to accept whatever occurs and smile, recognizing the wisdom inherent in fate and honoring their husbands as their better half. Bâ does not necessarily seem opposed to the split between sexes but rather seeks equality between
them, suggesting that women can be considered the better half and help their husbands to succeed.

VICTIMIZATION OF AFRICAN WOMEN THROUGH MARRIAGE

Marriage marks the occasion when socially sanctioned sexual inequality begins in earnest. Once women marry, they are encouraged to submit themselves to their new husbands and resign themselves to their new secondary role. “C’est le moment redouté de toute Sénégalaise, celui en vue duquel elle sacrifie ses biens en cadeaux à sa belle-famille, et où, pis encore, outre les biens, elle s’ampute de sa personnalité, de sa dignité, devenant une chose au service de l’homme qui l’épouse, du grand-père, de la grand-mère, du père, de la mère, du frère, de la soeur, de l’oncle, de la tante, des cousins, des cousines, des amis de cet homme” (11). Most women’s options are extremely limited, requiring the presence of a man in their lives without whom they cannot survive. Love does not matter; the couple bond of traditional society appears to be little more than economic and child-bearing. Although women want love, it is simply not a possibility in this world. Ramatoulaye’s mother, one of the many representatives of ancestral values throughout the novel, believes that it is best for a woman to marry a man who loves her but whom she does not love as the secret to a durable happiness. Evidently, women who love want more out of the relationship than is possible within African society. Ramatoulaye’s friend Jacqueline sought the advice of a psychiatrist due to her husband’s lack of respect for her and their children, who advised her, “Les conditions de la vie que vous souhaitez différent de la réalité et voilà pour vous des raisons de tourments” (68).
Women come to take upon object status within a masculine system of exchange, much like any other trinket in a man’s possession that he can decide to abandon as necessary. Polygamy is the foremost characteristic of traditional society that irks Ramatoulaye. Women lose their worth with age, replaced with younger models, victimized, and turned against one another in competition for a male. “Je comptais les femmes connues, abandonnées ou divorcées de ma génération” (61). In addition, husbands are not satisfied with two wives and end up in search of a third or fourth or even more, in effect disrupting the happiness in the family home which the author regards as the very foundation of the nation itself.

Three years after Mawdo leaves Aïssatou, the same happens to Ramatoulaye; and those around her act as if it is a natural and expected part of life. Her brother-in-law Tamsir says after he, Mawdo, and the Imam reveal to her that her husband, a man whom she loved, has married a second wife, “Modou te remercie. Il dit que la fatalité décide des êtres et des choses: Dieu lui a destiné une deuxième femme, il n’y peut rien. Il te félicite pour votre quart de siècle de mariage où tu lui as donné tous les bonheurs qu’une femme doit à son mari” (57). She learns about what has happened only afterward, as if there was no need to consider her. The words that Tamsir employs seem like those given to an employee who has been fired rather than a wife to whom he has been married for many years. Even after Modou has re-wed, she is expected to take care of the house, pick up after him and greet visitors, all the while concealing her internal turmoil. She describes her tasks as if they are her duties and expected of someone in her position. “Remercier ma belle-famille, l’Imam, Mawdo. Sourire. Leur servir à boire” (58). As the co-marriage continued, new wife Binetou becomes jealous of Modou’s continued
mentions of Ramatoulaye and fakes illness to monopolize his attention; he soon forgets about his first wife and her twelve children. “Je n’étais pas divorcée… J’étais abandonnée: une feuille qui voltige mais qu’aucune main n’ose ramasser, aurait dit ma grand’mère” (77). The reader learns through these accounts that polygamy does not lead to a blissful life shared by a multitude of people; rather, a woman and her offspring are discarded for the benefit of the husband, who is unable to limit himself to only one woman once he has lost interest in her. Nor does the new wife live in happiness: Ramatoulaye estimates that Binetou’s lack of education and employment makes her into a victim who needs to oppress others to get what she wants and that she has been dead inside since she married Modou.

Binetou is very different from Mawdo’s new wife, Nabou. Ramatoulaye describes her as a good and wise woman as a result of her job and the French education that she encouraged her to take, turning her into an adult with the skills that she needs to survive. As she describes her in her letter, “Responsable et consciente, la petite Nabou, comme toi, comme moi!” (72). These tools that have made her a stronger adult, however, are generally discouraged in women among the conservative, primarily older ladies, in the narrative. They believe that allowing girls to attend school would inevitably lead to the disintegration of the family unit because an educated woman’s divided attention would leave her unable to put her husband, family, and home first. Remarks a local citizen after Aïssatou, who had just completed medical school, marries Mawdo, “L’école transforme nos filles en diablesses, qui détournent les hommes du droit chemin” (30). This lack of opportunities, as the reader can conclude through Bâ’s text, make women victims of fate and things to their husbands, who would drop them without
question as soon as the next good thing comes along. It is one of the many chains that enable the repressive traditional mores to function because it keeps women “in their place.” “Trapped by ignorance, a woman would have no choice but to accept a traditional, second-class status” (Hayslett 145). They can easily find happiness within this environment because they find no need to question it or expect that it might change. The women who preach against schooling, however, have no need of an education to give them more power; because as members of clans that are favored by traditional society, they already derive it from their elevated position (thus, if traditional values were to lose hold, so would their dominance). Note that even though Ramatoulaye detests the situation whereby a younger woman can take the position of her or her friend Aïssatou within the family home, she does not show hatred towards the new wives; she is not willing to allow the masculine institution of polygamy to turn herself against other women. She feels a connection with all women who are victimized by someone more powerful than them; in Binetou’s case, she has been asked to sacrifice her youth and to leave school in order to permit her mother to live in ease, her life sold as if it had a monetary value.

THE BENEFITS OF A WESTERN EDUCATION IN THE LIVES OF AFRICAN WOMEN

A significant distinction between women who willingly submit themselves to the masculine doctrine of traditional values and those who are dissatisfied with their current degraded situation and demand change, according to Bâ, is education, which permits
them to become more aware of the world around them and desire to improve themselves. With the reasoning, reading, and writing skills that they gain in school, they are able to live independently and not need a man for survival. Both Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye, through their additional education in the French school, are symbolic of the new active African woman who is more than the stereotypical housewife. “Nous étions de véritables soeurs destinées à la même mission émancipatrice. Nous sortir de l’enlisement des traditions, superstitions et moeurs; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts; faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle” (27-28). Once again, the narrator’s experiences closely resemble those of the author, who praised her secondary school teacher for having freed her from a fate like that of naïve victim Binetou who must use others to get what she wants because she is unable to do it herself. Ramatoulaye speaks with affection on the memories of her old school with a sort of misty-eyed reminiscence that bring it to life and give it an almost majestic feel, establishing it as the root of liberation. Now that these women are no longer in school, they continue to learn on a daily basis through books and films, which carry them through difficult times when their sense of self is at the greatest risk of disintegration, as when their husbands take on second wives. Reading and movies serve as a new teacher. Ramatoulaye reminds Aïssatou of the important role that books played during her divorce: “…plus que ma présence, mes encouragements, les livres te sauvèrrent. Devenus ton refuge, ils te soutinrent. Puissance des livres, invention merveilleuse de l’astucieuse intelligence humaine. […] Les livres soudent des générations au même labeur continu qui fait progresser. Ils te permettent de hisser. Ce
que la société te refusait, ils te l’accordèrent” (51). In a similar manner to schooling, reading gives her strength. These instruments of knowledge should not be exclusive to women, believes Ramatoulaye; they serve to improve the whole of the nation, turning them into responsible and educated citizens. It is through reading newspapers that the African people become aware of the colonizer’s mistaken intent to shape them into a Westernized image and develop their own images of Africa’s future (39-40). She also encourages her children to enlighten themselves and spends much time discussing their schooling, insisting on its importance in their futures.

CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL VALUES AND EXPECTATIONS

The choices made by Ramatoulaye and other women when faced with troubling situations in their relationships convey more modern attitudes that challenge the status quo by expecting that women be given more rights. They make their own decisions, going where few others before them have gone and facing the unknown. Rather than simply doing what is expected of them in accordance with the desires of the patriarchal elite, they have hope for the future by taking it into their own hands. In showing how little freedom is granted to women within traditional African society, Bâ likely aims to inspire her readers to demand equality on both a local and political level and continue to defy conventional expectations in their daily lives, whether or not they live in Africa, with regards to the structures that restrict their subjectivity. The most abrupt split is made by Aïssatou who, rather than living in shame and being degraded as a co-spouse, divorces her husband and goes towards an uncertain but independent future in the United States.
She denies his belief that love and sex can be placed into separate categories and that their years of happiness can be discarded as if they meant nothing to him. “Je ne m’y soumettrai point,” she declares in her letter to him. “Je me dépouille de ton amour, de ton nom. Vêtue du seul habit valable de la dignité, je poursuis ma route” (50). Ramatoulaye expresses the difficulty involved with making this sort of drastic decision when Modou remarries: although she might be happier living on her own, after 25 years of marriage she would have to deal with the disgrace of not having a husband in a society where women are expected to have a man by their sides and face the unknown. She knows of others who attempted the same and never got to experience newfound happiness because loneliness drove them to an early grave. “Tourner une page où tout n’était pas luisant sans doute, mais net” (61). Aïssatou was a model for her, giving her courage. She decides instead to continue living in her home, physically present yet emotionally absent from her link to her husband. “Devais-je me renier parce que Modou avait choisi une autre voie? Non, je ne cédais pas aux sollicitations” (73). Ramatoulaye learns for the first time in her life that it is possible to be happy outside of a couple and takes part in a world that was generally restricted to males, eventually ridding herself of the shyness she developed at the weight of attention focused upon a mature woman with no husband. “Je mesurais, aux regards étonnés, la minceur de la liberté accordée à la femme” (76). Discarding her fears, she learns how to drive with the encouragement of Aïssatou, taking her place in the driver’s seat in more ways than one. She is proposed to on two occasions following her husband’s death. Her first suitor is Tamsir, whose proposal is less heartfelt than perfunctory. The day after the forty day mourning period ends, he tells her, “je t’épouse. Tu me conviens comme femme…” (84), as if to imply that it is his choice only
in the matter. He does not ask her if she will marry him but says simply, as if it is a matter of fact, “I marry you.” Her reply rejects not only him but all men who seek to view women as objects and want marriage without love with the anger that she had been restraining ever since Modou and Binetou married. “Je ne serai jamais le complément de ta collection,” she says to him (85), portraying him as an ineffectual king who rules over his household poorly. The Imam, who was witness to her declaration, chastises her, taking God as his witness: “Quelles paroles profanes et dans des habits de deuil!” (86). He serves as the representative of religious authority, which regards her act of speaking out as inappropriate. She likewise refuses the proposal of her old friend Daouda Dieng. Even though his reasons appear more sincere and she is extremely touched, she turns him down because she does not love him and he is already married; she does not want to do to his wife as Binetou has done to her. If she were to marry him, it would be out of her duty as a citizen rather than love, she explains, which she regards as a very masculine way of approaching something that means much more to her. The griote Farmata advises her to accept, telling her that he is a good man who can support her and clearly loves her, and is shocked when she does not follow her advice. She believes that Ramatoulaye, a woman who is old with many children, has to settle for whatever comes her way, with or without love. In refusing to go along with her expected path, Ramatoulaye declares that she will never compromise another woman’s happiness and that she has the ability and strength to live on her own. Bâ does not, however, completely forswear marriage, even though most couple relationships are portrayed pessimistically. The primary exception is that of Ramatoulaye’s eldest daughter, Daba. She and her husband possess modern attitudes about the roles of men and women in society, and it is clear that the author regards this as
the secret to a successful marriage. As Ramatoulaye remarks, “Je sens mûrir la tendresse de ce jeune couple qui est l’image du couple telle que je rêvais. Ils s’identifient l’un à l’autre, discutent de tout pour trouver un compromis” (107). Similarly, when daughter Aïssatou (named for Ramatoulaye’s friend) becomes pregnant by Ibrahima Sall, he does not abandon her as would have been the expected reaction and instead decides to wed and support her, stating that she is his only love. Ramatoulaye instinctively regards him, through the lenses of her negative experiences with men, as a thief who committed a crime by defiling her daughter but learns after meeting him of his genuine nature, educating her on the fallacy of stereotypes and providing a lesson for the reader. At the end of the novel, the narrator continues to live independently and has hope for the future, one that most likely will be rooted in redefinitions of the couple relationship in Africa as represented in the values that she has passed down to her children and that will continue through the generations to come.

THE AFRICAN COUPLE AS A FOUNDATION FOR THE NATION

The status of the African couple is especially important to Bâ in consideration of her belief that the family is at the root of the nation itself, a sort of microcosm that both indicates and determines the status of Africa’s future. The two are described as existing hand in hand. Explains Ramatoulaye, whose political convictions closely reflect those of the author, “C’est de l’harmonie du couple que nait la réussite familiale, comme l’accord de multiples instruments crée la symphonie agréable. Ce sont toutes les familles, riches ou pauvres, conscientes ou irréfléchies qui constituent la Nation. La réussite d’une nation
passe donc irrémédiablement par la famille” (130). By intertwining her stories of African
women with those of the nation, she associates them in the reader’s subconscious and
implies that the successful independence of the second should come with that of the first.
Daouda Dieng, who works in the National Assembly, argues, “La femme ne doit plus être
l’accessoire qui orne. L’objet que l’on déplace, la compagnie qu’on flatte ou calme avec
des promesses. La femme est la racine première, fondamentale de la nation où se greffe
tout apport, d’où part aussi tout floraison” (90). Bà’s novel provides her with the
opportunity to address the role that, in her opinion, women can and should play in the
new Africa, reminding us of her own political activities as described earlier in this paper.
They should unquestionably be involved and show interest on what is happening in the
country, Ramatoulaye tells Daouda, who states that there should be few women in the
National Assembly because of their tendency to disrupt the body’s orderly operation:
“Mais nous ne sommes pas des incendiaires, plutôt des stimulants! […] Nous avons
droit, autant que vous, à l’instruction qui peut être poussée jusqu’à la limite de nos
possibilités intellectuelles. […] Le droit de vote est une arme sérieuse” (89). She
believes in equality on a political level as well as the level of the couple; however,
women are often not able to take part in a significant way due to longstanding biases
against their capacity to perform in the political arena. She continues,

Mais Daouda, les restrictions demeurent; mais Daouda, les vieilles croyances
renaissent; mais Daouda, l’égoïsme émerge, le scepticisme pointe quand il s’agit
du domaine politique. […] Presque vingt ans d’indépendence! A quand la
première femme ministre associée aux décisions qui orientent le devenir de notre
pays? […] Quand la société éduquée arrivera-t-elle à se déterminer non en
fonction du sexe, mais des critères de valeur?” (89-90).
Because there are no women involved in decision-making efforts that affect the future of the country, their interests have the potential of being overlooked; yet they frequently choose not to get involved because their primary concern is the family and children, the small-scale as opposed to the large scale. Such is the case with Ramatoulaye, as Daouda reminds her; and this might explain why she and her daughter Daba seek a compromise. They recognize that men will continue to be a dominant presence within the government and suggest that women should get involved in protests and organizations that promote their interests on the local level, and their actions will filter up through the system and affect the choices made by those who are in power. “[L]a cité, chacun le sait, est l’affaire de la femme” (107). This activity is based on cooperation rather than competition, thus according more closely with Bâ’s image of the woman. It is also her duty to pass on her values in order to ensure a future Africa that concords with her own vision of equality. “Ce sera votre choix qui dirigera ce pays et non le nôtre,” she tells her children.

PRIDE IN THE AFRICAN WOMAN

It is possible to regard Une si longue lettre as a statement on the author’s belief in the amelioration of the African woman’s situation, which starts to take root in the women of her age. Through the words of her narrator, Bâ denies that womanhood is a damnable fate, declaring it rather worthy of celebration. Ramatoulaye is proud to be a woman in a society where women are not treated as equals. This effort to develop of a sense of self-worth is clearly an important step in permitting women to stand on their own two feet as individuals. There are several occasions on which she exults the woman as a powerful
force in African society, in spite of what might be its belief to the contrary. Here, she
applauds women and other victims who are generally whipped by fatalism: “Votre
stoïcisme fait de vous, non des violents, non des inquiétants, mais de véritables héros,
inconnus de la grande histoire, mais qui ne dérangent jamais l’ordre établi, malgré votre
situation misérable” (22). Like other authors in the postcolonial feminist genre, she seeks
the recognition of those who do not figure in the canonical version of historical discourse
(we will see this further insisted upon by Djebar in the next chapter). She also speaks on
the importance of housework, which many women likely considered a daily
responsibility that is part of their lot as the inferior sex, spending paragraphs in the
detailed discussion of the many complicated and difficult duties involved that never end,
are not compensated, and are primarily overlooked. She concludes this with the
declaration, “Être femme! Vivre en femme! Ah, Aïssatou!” (94). What makes the
woman so worthy of estimation according to Ramatoulaye is her tenacity and inner
strength to play such an important role in the household and in African society in spite of
the restrictions that have been weighed upon her within a paternalistic culture.

AFRICAN SISTERHOOD

In the same way that Bâ aims to celebrate the African woman, she speaks at
length about feminine friendship as a support system and source of nurturing throughout
her protagonist’s life and those of other female characters. Her narrator asserts that
friendship is much stronger and more durable than love: “L’amitié a des grandeurs
inconnues de l’amour. Elle se fortifie dans les difficultés, alors que les contraintes
massacrent l’amour. Elle résiste au temps qui lasse et désunit les couples. Elle a des élévations inconnues de l’amour” (79). A range of female relationships – between friend and friend, mother and daughter, teacher and student – and their positive impact are explored, which were likely not the subject of many previous masculine novels. Within the novel, these friendships become a significant part of the female universe. The central message communicated is that by helping another woman, they are also helping themselves: she stands for all women, and her circumstances in relation to the body of men are common to them as a group. Ramatoulaye and her friend Aïssatou supported each other during their marriage troubles as does Ramatoulaye with Jacqueline, and she revels in their accomplishments to advance themselves as they do for her. Aïssatou is delighted when Ramatoulaye chooses a car that she offers to pay for. The novel in itself represents the importance of their friendship, as they continue to communicate one another over the years much as their grandmothers had also done on a daily basis years before. In addition, she receives support from her neighbor, the griote Farmata, to split from her husband, and she helped la petite Nabou to acquire an education. There is a sense of sisterhood among these women that is not determined by blood but by emotional affiliation. Ramatoulaye’s traditional mother supports her decisions even if she does not always agree with them, and Daba encourages her and stands behind her. Daba urges her mother to leave the family home when Modou remarries and reminds Binetou’s mother that she has caused Ramatoulaye to suffer, asking her, “Comment une femme peut-elle saper le bonheur d’une autre femme?” (103). She endeavors to serve as the voice of a new generation of African women. Ramatoulaye similarly helps her second eldest daughter, Aïssatou, when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. The white high school
headmistress to Ramatoulaye and the elder Aïssatou, who inspired them to continue their education, played an extremely important role in their lives by enabling them to be the liberated women that they became. As she writes to Aïssatou, “…notre épanouissement ne fut point hasard. Elle concorde avec les options profondes de l’Afrique nouvelle, pour promouvoir la femme noire” (28). This form of friendship, by crossing racial boundaries, once again communicates a sense of international sisterhood. It is interesting to note the apparent conflict between the author’s fervent belief in a feminine community and in their ability to act in accordance with their own desires, as the former promotes a group identity and the latter, individual. As we may recall from earlier in this chapter, the two concepts are not antithetical in women’s autobiography, as they tend to regard themselves as individual beings with individual wants and needs who share in a sense of belonging to a larger group to which they contribute. The choices that Ramatoulaye makes are done with the consideration of all African women in general; her decision not to remarry, while done of her own accord, is also described as a statement for all those women who have felt compelled to obey prescribed rules in the interests of traditional values.

Bâ stresses this message of a community of women active in the advancement of feminine causes throughout Une si longue lettre, as in Ramatoulaye’s description of her fellow educated African women: “Car, premières pionnières de la promotion de la femme africaine, nous étions peu nombreuses. Des hommes nous taxaient d’écervelées. D’autres nous désignaient comme des diablesses. Mais beaucoup voulaient nous posséder. Combien de rêves avions-nous alimentés désespérément, qui aurait pu se concrétiser en bonheur durable et que nous avons déçus pour en embrasser d’autres qui ont piteusement éclaté comme bulles de savon, nous laissant la main vide?” (26). Her
repetition of the word “nous” alludes to a collective identity shared by educated and independent African women, feeling pain and success as one group. Such an assertion can appear rather problematic: similarly to the efforts to define African-ness in works by Négritude authors, it might seem that her identity as a woman is relative, derived as the opposite of the group ideology that represses them. However, there are some differences between the Négritude search for identity and that of African feminist authors as exemplified by Bâ. Both sought to restore a feeling of pride in themselves since those characteristics that distinguish them were marked as inferior in relation to the colonizer/male. Where Western reason and science were favored over African instinct and art, Négritude philosophers appealed to the dominance of their native values in a near-reversal, giving the underdogs the upper hand. Likewise, feminine sentimentality that is criticized by the male characters in Une si longue lettre comes to be construed positively through the words of the narrator. What differentiates Bâ’s effort from those of the Négritude movement is that her sense of self does not need to reside upon the self/other dichotomy; rather, she seeks equality among all people irrespective of their social identity or gender in a desire to rid discourse of the hierarchization that leads to human suffering. “Les mêmes remèdes soignent le mêmes maux sous tous les cieux, que l’individu soit noir ou blanc: Tout unit les hommes. Alors, pourquoi s’entretuent-ils dans des batailles ignobles pour des causes futiles en regard des massacres de vies humaines? Que de guerres dévastatrices! Et pourtant, l’homme se prend pour une créature supérieure. A quoi lui sert son intelligence? Son intelligence enfante aussi bien le beau que le mal, plus souvent le mal que le bien” (116). Her identity rests on her understanding of herself and those people who are like her, without the relativist
imperative to put down the Other in an effort to raise herself above him as is characteristic of Orientalist discourse.

It is only after her husband’s passing, the event which opens the novel, and the forty-day wake which follows it that Ramatoulaye feels free to speak her mind without the restraints that had kept her previously confined. “Ma voix connaît trente années de silence, trente années de brimades. Elle éclate, violente, tantôt sarcastique, tantôt méprisante” (85). It is only once she emerges from the couple relationship, in which she has been designated as the inferior and certainly the silent and self-effacing party, that she is able to speak in her own words. This also appears symptomatic of the position in which she regards herself as an African female writer, that she becomes capable of self-expression when she is no longer the inferior part of a gender-based dichotomy. Walker observes a parallelism between the narrator and the Senegalese nation, in that both are conventionally viewed as being in a state of regression or decline (Ramatoulaye through her menopause, and Senegal having severed its colonial ties with France) and are wrestling with their “emancipation from subjugation” (250). What may appear to be a backwards step ends up leading towards the liberation of subjecthood by experiencing the trials of emerging from object status. She does not reject marriage so much as the inherent submission of women that is an integral part of traditional relationships, and one might say the same for her relationship with the Other (be it patriarchy or Europe) – she seeks not elimination, but equality, and a modification of the present situation. “Je reste persuadée de l’inévitable et nécessaire complémentarité de l’homme et de la femme” (129). Unlike the authors who supported Négritude, she finds that she does not have to reject the Other (for women, it is most often the traditional male; for the collective Africa
of the *Négritude* movement, it is the colonizer) completely in order to become the subject of narrative. She also does not reject the colonizer, because she and other educated Africans (including Assia Djebar) were to profit from the opportunities it provided for them to advance themselves from their reduced position in society in the form of education. Bâ thus avoids the binary discourse in which previous centuries of writers in both Europe and Africa had found themselves confined in literary representations, fashioning a liberating novel.
In chapter 5, we talked about the struggle undertaken by Mariama Bâ and several other female authors of subsaharan Africa who wrote in French against a patriarchal Islamic system of values that classified them as secondary and dependent upon males for representation. For those francophone authors of northern Africa, specifically of the geopolitical area known as the Maghreb, their battle for discursive independence has tended to been more complex. This chapter will examine Assia Djebar’s 1985 novel L’amour, la fantasia and her attempt to find a new space for North African women to express themselves through the francophone novel. The introduction to this chapter, in contrast to the ones preceding it, will allow me to expound on the task many authors have undertaken to deconstruct Western discourse, as I have not had occasion to do so previously and believe that such information is a necessary complement to discussion of Djebar’s novel.
TENSE RELATIONS BETWEEN FRANCE AND ALGERIA

While the entire continent has had to contend with emerging from over a century of colonial subjugation by a Western power that regarded it as territory to be conquered and possessed, the opposition between the largely matriarchal roots of Arabo-African culture (Yoder 95) and Western ideologies (as based upon phallocentric authority over the subject as well as its signifying system) was especially heightened in the Maghreb. Much of the colonial contact between Algeria and France was marked by violence and mutual incomprehension. Algeria’s conquest was long and difficult, with unsettled territories pacified through the régime du sabre and the native Algerians’ civil and political rights severely inhibited to solidify colonial control and in response to local resistance. Indigenous Arabic society was invalidated by colonial officials, supplanted by contrary Western values in an insidious form of intellectual control. Future generations of Algerians would become gallicized through the introduction of French schooling, and Arabic studies were deliberately minimized. The histories that students learned were based on the Occidental model, structured around the presence of Western powers and absence of the autochthonous peoples, even when it came to that of Africa, their own histories primarily preserved through word of mouth. While the illiterate populations maintained oral communication in their local languages, they were excluded from taking part in the elite by being unable to read or write in French. Despite the detriment that the colonial education system had with regards to indigenous values, it had a positive influence in the lives of many Muslim girls, who, like Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou of Une si longue lettre, were able to liberate themselves.
from their otherwise inevitable secondary status within African society. Those women who did not profit from European schooling became enclosed within a double wall of silence, by Islamic tradition and Western hegemony. The long and arduous Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) was a major turning point in the country’s history and solidified its scarred relationship with the West as based on a tradition of suffering and intolerance. As the Maghrebi people emerged from over a century of subservience to the West, they attempted to redefine themselves and to assert representational power. Would their new identity be described in an essential manner, a positive in relation to the negative definition assigned by the colonizer, as many African thinkers had evoked in the fight for independence, or would they seek a less diametric, subjective, and centralized means of representation? Many writers from the Maghreb wanted to speak on their own behalf, in their own language; to resuscitate their national histories; and to represent people who had tended to be absent from narrative. The region’s tumultuous history was frequently reflected in their works through evocations of violence and war, which had come to be an important aspect in their sense of self as a people.

HYBRIDITY AS A COMPONENT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Directly impacting the manner in which many of these authors wrote was their sense of hybrid identity, influenced by their upbringing in an Arab society and the French culture that they had inherited as a product of the colonial system. In previous chapters, we saw how identity has generally been defined in essentialist terms, of a purity of Frenchness or Africanness, rather than of a mixture; and we recall from chapter 2 the
character of Samba Diallo in *L'Aventure ambiguë* who serves as an example of the incompatibility of African values and French values. Within conventional binary discourse, there is no middle ground between two identities that are mutually exclusive. Fanon wrote that it is impossible to be French and Arab at the same time, because the colonial situation has established them as opposites, negations to one another (*Les damnés de la terre*). The nationalistic currents that flowed through many of the works mentioned in chapters 1-4 were not as prominent in the novels written by North Africans in the period surrounding their nations’ independence, as they aimed to express their post-colonial identity as composed of a multiplicity of the different cultures that had formed them. (This was, however, not always true in the political world, as seen with the increasing militancy of such protest movements as the pro-Islamic intégristes during the 1980’s.) Many authors, including the focus of this chapter, Assia Djebar, aimed to describe African society in pluralistic terms, more concerned with a variety of individuals or with communities than monolithic collectives. This would allow them to open their perspectives to the lives of those who are ordinarily restricted from discourse because they are not part of the power majority, especially women, the bi-cultural Beurs, and the Kabylie. Their philosophy is one of inclusion as opposed to exclusion, an act of resistance against the predominant conceptual paradigms that have classified them as Other. Even though they did not figure in the essentialist definitions that served as the foundation of *Négritude* identity, they felt that this did not negate the fact that they were

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28 *Beurs* is a French slang term that refers to immigrants from North African descent who were born in and live in France.

29 The Kabylie are a Berber people who live in a mountainous region in eastern Algeria. Djebar considers herself of Kabylie descent.
Africans; and the assertion of their identity involved departing from established
definitions. The techniques that they employed serve to question the basic tenets of
Western civilization which, writes Cameroonian critic Thomas Malone, *Négritude* was
incapable of doing because its principles were too closely aligned with them (Yoder 93).

DECONSTRUCTION OF BINARY DISCOURSE

The process of establishing a new African identity by these authors from North
Africa involves moving away from Western, hierarchical and binaristic methods of
representing one’s relationship with the rest of the world. Their sense of self would be
derived from a deconstructed system of meanings rather than a centralized one in which
all elements gain significance by how they relate to the center. One of the first theorists
to speak to this endeavor was Jacques Derrida. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the
Discourses of the Human Sciences,” he states that the notion of a centralized system is a
fallacy, based on a desire for centeredness. The center functions to provide a fixed origin
and to limit play within the system. His doctrine of decentering breaks up binaries and
what is thought to be the “natural” relation between signifier and signified. Decentering
is important to postcolonial representations in discourse, which would remove the
privilege from an unquestioned center of reference (or Europe) and dissolve the binaries
which posit the native peoples as constituting what is considered to be negative. This
search for a different structure results from the realization that certain elements escape
the binary system, which would seem to argue that they do not exist; but because they do
exist, we must realize that a privileged center of reference is not self-evident. Traditional
concepts no longer hold any stable meaning within a new system, the structure of which is flexible depending on its contents. The signifier cannot be classified because it is not finite and is rather overflowing in abundance, impossible to limit to the narrow confines of any particular category for every single user and circumstance. In “Introduction to Derrida,” D.C. Wood contributes additional information regarding Derrida’s theories on deconstruction. Logocentrism is based on the presence of some textual authority; and by tracing back conclusions which are viewed to be natural, it is possible to expose the textual power given to authority by the metaphysical privilege of presence. Assia Djebar has done this in L’amour, la fantasia by examining the historical archives of Algerian history in texts that were written by French soldiers, as we will see in more detail later. Deconstruction involves displaying this privilege and then transforming it. In the first step, the binary oppositions which are the basis of the system of Western thought are reversed, arguing for priority of the opposite of what is privileged in order to fully consider its possibilities. In the next step, transformation, neither is privileged to prevent the formation of old oppositions. This reorganization of the conceptual field permits new concepts to emerge. Wood concludes that Derrida’s theories can help to illuminate authority structures and to deconstruct systems where a hierarchy exists that privileges one side over another. “By reproducing the changing cultural practices of this majority as it negotiates the conflicts between tradition and modernity, [postcolonial] writers create a space for themselves within the dominant discourses while simultaneously articulating a problematic that is increasingly becoming accepted as a quasi-universal process” (Lionnet 6-7). Such an enterprise allows them to write back to the West, simultaneously making manifest the errors implied in binary practices and devising a
conceptual space for themselves that permits them to establish an independent sense of identity that reflects their heterogeneous background.

ISSUES ON USING THE LANGUAGE OF THE COLONIZER

The break that North Africa made from France can be seen in the textual approaches that the authors from this region employed in their novels, as they endeavored to negate the standard grammatical and ideological constructs associated with the West’s domination in discursive practices. Writing had long been used by the colonizer to assert their authority over its colonial possessions in order to silence the indigène and ensure that only one version, their version, of events should be known for generations to come. The approaches seen in Maghrebi novels aim to rob the traditional oppressor of some of their power by removing their presumed control over the sign. Many of these methods have been employed by proponents of écriture féminine, a set of theories first referred to by the Algerian Hélène Cixous, who espoused techniques for the oppressed feminine to “speak itself” and escape from its secondary status with regards to the masculine through using nontraditional linguistic structures that subvert the phallocentric system. It is possible to see the influence of écriture féminine in works by many of those who have traditionally been excluded from writing through the presence of unconventional styles, particularly in adopting a new way of approaching the very language with which they write. The usage of French to speak back to the people who had objectified them and to question their hegemonic supremacy is perceived as an act of revolt and symbolizes the Algerians’ tormented history, as the Algerians did such violence to the language that the
reader can hear the oppressed African voice speaking out from behind an apparent veneer of French grammatical civility.

This step was particularly necessary in the face of the conundrum felt by many authors from this region about using the French language, the voice of the colonizer, to bring the colonized to speech. This was the language of the civilization that had removed them from discourse for centuries, victimized them, and attempted to assimilate them into embracing “superior” practices. Language is more than simply a code: it carries along with it a set of cultural symbolic values associated with its native speakers, and to employ it involves communicating these values. Frantz Fanon, certainly one of the most preeminent theorists on decolonization during the period of African independence, cautions African novelists on using the language of the colonizer to speak for their own people in Les damnés de la terre: “L’intellectual colonisé dans le moment même où il s’inquiète de faire œuvre culturelle ne se rend pas compte qu’il utilise des techniques et une langue empruntées à l’occupant. Il se contente de revêtir ces instruments d’un cachet qui se veut national mais qui rappelle étrangement l’exotisme. L’intellectuel qui revient à son peuple à travers les œuvres culturelles se comporte en fait comme un étranger.” Even though the author may add dialects to show how close he is to the people, “les idées qu’il exprime, les préoccupations qui l’habitent sont sans commune mesure avec la situation concrète que connaissent les hommes et les femmes de son pays…. Voulant coller au peuple, il colle au revêtement visible” (167). Djebar herself was unquestionably conscious of these dangers, as she writes, “[T]out exil porte dans sa décrée la trace de la brisure ancienne, particulièrement chez des femmes quand elles écrivent” (Ces voix qui m’assiègent 190). She speaks at length to these issues in L’amour, la fantasia, as we will
see later. The desire to share their ideas with as wide an audience as possible compelled a majority of writers to use French in spite of the many problematic concerns that it entailed. Argues Memmi, “S’il obstine à écrire dans sa langue, il se condamne à parler devant un auditoire de sourds” (128). For those who wish to communicate with a large variety of people, no matter what their native language, use of the French language was likely considered the easiest means to ensure this result. There remains the issue of the education level of those who figure within the postcolonial francophone author’s reading public, since it is primarily restricted to those who can read French; and its use can be particularly controversial in Algeria, where the replacement of French with Arab has been a political priority since the nation’s independence.

In their desire to remove their national expression from identifying with French culture, many authors took the language into their own hands and distended it so that it could best express their thoughts and experiences.

Cédant à la convoitise d’un symbolique étranger, l’amant de la langue-autre ne se veut pas ‘emprunté’ mais affirme sa différence avec force, dans la violence et la transgression par quoi se manifeste une position ambiguë de révolte et de désir. Le renversement poétique qui se donne comme v(i)ol de l’outil linguistique devenu instrument de domination de l’Autre branche le texte sur un scénario quasi prométhéen. Le sujet parlant qui s’approprie la langue des maîtres pour l’offrir aux siens comme instrument de revanche et de connaissance lui donne essentiellement une fonction de communication. Mais l’étrangère langue de rupture, dévoie l’expression de la révolte (Djaïder).

This was frequently achieved by inscribing elements of orality into the written language of the novel, which can tend to lack the immediacy and vibrancy of spoken expression. Djebar, in fact, refers to her writing in Ces voix qui m’assiègent as a “mise en écrit de la voix” (26) and says that she hears her characters speaking in Arabic and attempts to find the French equivalent without translating, which can often distort the message of the
original (29). African storytelling is based upon a tradition of speech; and its presence in modern African literature reflects the continent’s root identity, which was especially important in works that fall under the Négritude movement but remains a common characteristic in African literature to this day. In the same manner as oral tales, the novels which incorporate its traits tend to lack formality in contrast to what is normally expected in European literatures. One might also be reminded of the exchange of language between speakers by structuring the telling of a story in the form of a conversation, full of interruptions, questions from listeners, and other sounds. L’amour, la fantasia combines historical narrative with autobiography, both of these with poetry, song, and operatic accompaniment, all of which is presented as a fiction. She occasionally uses the present tense when referring to a past event and narrates stories from her own life in the third person, both of which are elements in several of her novels.

One will also encounter a multiplicity of voices speaking in the first person in much postcolonial francophone literature. In employing more than one narrator, the author denies one party’s absolute status as source of truth (much like that of the West within discourse) and asserts that there is more than one version of reality. As we saw with Une si longue lettre in the previous chapter, many postcolonial women writers identified themselves within their literature as a member of a community of others who share values as well as joys and sufferings.

Many African writers, including Assia Djebar, encountered a multitude of difficulties about using French. Aside from the fact that it was the voice of the colonizer, it was not their native language. It did not properly belong to them and would not be able to carry the full reality of the African experience as well as the language that was spoken
by the people about whom they were writing. This disparity meant that the usual natural
correspondence between the characters’ thoughts and words would be noticeably lacking.
African literatures in European languages, writes Irele, tends to present itself as elitist and
not connected to popular sentiment and tradition. In addition, the authors themselves
may not possess the same intimate relationship with French as they do with the language
which they speak the most, inhibiting their flexibility and creating a sense of self-
consciousness. While one of their purposes of writing might be to communicate their
affiliation with those who are like them by relating their stories, the act of doing so in
French potentially serves to alienate them from this very group due to the fact that it is in
a foreign language in addition to its members’ possible perception of French as elitist and
extrinsic to their values. Despite these hurdles, the imperative of capturing otherwise
ephemeral oral stories in a written form that would be read by a mass audience of
readers prompted African authors to engage themselves in francophone literature. This
endeavor also aims to inscribe its tellers into the historical discourse from which they had
so long been denied entry due to their alterity and to preserve their cultural values for
generations to come. Djebar makes it clear that this is her goal: “J’écris la langue des
morts ou la mienne qu’importe… J’écris vos voix pour ne pas étouffer vos voix” (Ces
voix qui m’assiègent 258). As she writes in the stead of other Algerian women and in a
language that was not theirs, avoiding the silencing of these women was of a prime
concern.
A theme examined by many postcolonial novelists concerns the importance that the past, or a sense of their common history, plays in the lives of contemporary Africans. Several aspects highlight the significance of their past. Postcolonial and historical theorists stress the link between past and present, that one’s conception of past serves to explain how the present came to be and informs the future. In many ways, it is the foundation for their beliefs in the people that they have come to be. Edward Said writes, “How we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and view of the present” (Culture and Imperialism 4). However, there exist many obstructions that have inhibited Africans from developing knowledge of their history, especially the more recent past during the colonial occupation. Because nearly all printed colonial African historical narrative and fictional accounts have been authored by Europeans, the existing texts focus on the foreigners as central characters, with the Africans themselves primarily portrayed in contrast to what is known about the European, either in stereotypical terms or as an unnamed, homogenous group of victims subjugated by the force of the powerful Westerner. In addition, the Africans themselves often want to forget the hardships that they and their ancestors have endured at the hands of Europe. Several postcolonial novels in French explore the problematic aspects of this issue in the lives of North Africans. To cite one example, the main female character of Myriam Ben’s Nora appears to say nothing about her experiences in the war in order to maintain her sanity, but her inability to speak (in a parallel manner referring to the situation of so many women in the post-war period) may have served to drive her insane. After her death, her story will be
forgotten. Similarly, when the unnamed protagonist of Yamina Mechakra’s *La grotte éclatée* loses an arm and her son is blinded after yet another instance of violent combat, she wants to live a normal life and forget about her involvement in the resistance. She turns inward in an effort to “me libérer des autres, de moi, du souvenir” (94). She finds, however, that the only way for her to move on and to survive is to share her memories with others; and in the same time that she tells her son about her life, she tells it to Mechakra’s readers, as well, ensuring that others will know that she existed. In *Le premier homme*, Albert Camus explored other perils involved with forgetting one’s past. Jacques, the main character whom some have called an alter ego of the author, is “le premier homme” because his ancestors have not left behind any traces of their lives, as they do not want to concern themselves with “le malheur d’autrefois” (73). In a world where violence is commonplace, the focus of his family in Algiers cannot extend beyond the immediacy of the present. In order to live today, they must not let the past remain alive. His family members dead, unwilling, or unable to speak, he spends the novel in a search for his roots; but by the end of the uncompleted novel (the manuscript was among Camus’s possessions when his body was found), his quest does not seem to have been satisfied. Without an understanding of their past, North Africans similar to these characters would be fated to lack a deep understanding of who they are and their common goals as a people, which would inevitably be passed onto the next generation if the fervent belief in ignorance being bliss were to continue.

In response to these concerns, a number of African writers used the novel as a tool for establishing a connection between their present day and their past. This was predominantly achieved by fashioning new versions of history in which they are the
heroes rather than the supporting players, and the events that are seen to occur assert the Maghrebins’ identity as a people. Mouloud Mammeri’s *L’opium et le bâton* (1965) documents the effects of Algerian War of Independence in a Kabylie city from the perspective of a humanist intellectual, who ends up participating in spite of his leanings. The novel is marked by its realism and violence, effectively raising the misery and suffering of the Algerian people to an admirable point of pride. “[C]’est l’Algérie, notre pays, le pays de la misère, de la morne et des larmes, des pieds nus, des femmes tristes et des hommes condamnés. C’est ça notre pays, c’est l’Algérie!” (69). We see again how their tortured history becomes one of their constitutive characteristics. Their history as a people is a concern throughout the novel. Several passages in the text emphasize Algerian traditions, their ancestors, historical continuity between past and present, and the imperative to memorialize their lives so that they be remembered by future generations. They aim to show the French that their civilization and history can be considered comparable to those centuries-old conventions in Europe. Contrasting with the realism of *L’opium* is the surrealist imagery that Mohammed Dib employs to represent life during the war in *Qui se souvient de la mer* (1962). The spectre of death is so overwhelming to the person who lives through it that his surroundings take on a nightmarish appearance, and “normal,” everyday occurrences and concepts have no place. In both of these novels, women are active in the war effort, although Mammeri’s *Algériennes* are primarily accessories to the males. They assist and have value, but they do not initiate action through their own accord. Fanon refers to the woman as part of the “couple” relationship with the male, “maillon, essentiel quelquefois, de la machine révolutionnaire” (*L’An V* 41); and he denies that young women were involved in the war,
although they were. Likely, the idea of females sacrificing their lives for the freedom of their country was unthinkable. It was not until the 1980’s that the contributions of women in the Algerian resistance were more openly recognized, taking place of the silence that had previously engulfed these women in the same manner as the eponymous character of Nora. Djamila Amrane-Minne’s *Des femmes dans la guerre d’Algérie* (1996) contains the stories of tens of women whose contributions in the resistance movement contradict traditional conceptions of women. Her work stresses the importance that they held of sharing their stories so that they might be remembered and the personal nature of suffering that they experience through their families and friends, an aspect of war that is often forgotten in Western accounts. As we saw in *Une si longue lettre*, the evocation of humanity is a prominent characteristic in “feminine” postcolonial war literatures, going against the standards that repressed expressions of emotion in a more impersonal, “masculine” genre that traditionally addresses both heroes and victims in a more numerical context or is primarily concerned with physical might or weakness.

**ABOUT ASSIA DJEBAR**

Allow me at this point to move on to Assia Djebar in order to examine her 1985 novel, *L’amour, la fantasia*, in more detail. I will begin with an autobiographical sketch of the author, since her life experiences figure so prominently within her work and especially in *Fantasia*. She was born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen in Cherchell, Algeria in June, 1936 to a traditional, middle-class family. She descended from Mohammed Ben Aïssa El Berkani on her mother’s side, who participated in a resistance effort one century
earlier that she was to document in her novel. Her father was the only Algerian Muslim teacher in the French school in Mitidja. Passionate about history and nineteenth-century literature, he inspired his daughter to read at a young age. She attended both the French and Coranic schools, the former due to the insistence of her father (who also permitted Djebar and her sisters not to wear the veil) and the latter that of her mother. At the age of 10, she left her hometown to attend the collège in Blidah as the only Muslim student and, at the age of 18, was accepted to engage in advanced studies in Paris where she focused on History. At the same time, the Algerian War of Independence commenced, changing her path. During an Algerian student uprising, she boycotted taking the final exams; and to pass the time, she decided to write. Her first novel, La Soif, was published in June 1957 under the pseudonym that she maintains to this day. Conserving her propriety to the outside world was an important concern, as it would remain in her later novels, against the tendency of the novel to reveal the writer’s soul to all who were to read it.

While it was favorably reviewed in Western Europe and the United States, its themes of feminine eroticism, death, and adultery caused it to be condemned in Algeria for losing sight of the tempestuous political climate of the day. Her second novel, Les Impatients, appeared the following year and addresses the repression of women by Islamic society. She then married an Algerian man (they divorced in 1975) and escaped France via Switzerland for Tunis, where she worked as a journalist in collaboration with Frantz Fanon and met Kateb Yacine. She also participated in the resistance along the Tunisian border through the Red Cross/Red Crescent during the late 1950’s and continued studying history in Rabat, which she taught as part of her graduate assistantship; she later became the only Algerian woman to teach history at the University of Algiers. In
Morocco, she published her third novel, *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (1962). Like her other works, it speaks of the lives and status of women, but this time during the Algerian War; and her fourth novel, *Les alouettes naïves* (1967) also depicts the position of women within a patriarchal society. After Algeria declared its independence, she was criticized for using French in her novels rather than the national language of Arabic. During her self-imposed exile from writing, she returned to France and began studying classical Arabic with the goal of amplifying her written French. As she explained, “J'ai le désir d’ensoleiller cette langue de l’ombre qu’est l’arabe des femmes” (Biography). She also turned to film, directing *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1979) and *La Zerda et les champs de l’oubli* (1982), which allowed her to examine spoken language in a more intimate way than is permitted with writing. She returned to literature in 1980 with *Les femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, a collection of short stories. Her next novel, intended to be the first of a tetralogy, was *L’amour, la fantasia*. Djebar has received many honors throughout her life, perhaps most notably her 2005 election to the Académie Française; she is the first African Muslim to become an “immortal,” or lifetime member of the Academy.

**DJEBAR’S HISTORICAL PALIMPSEST**

Assia Djebar has used *L’amour, la fantasia* to explore a multitude of different issues that have long plagued the Algerian people and Islamic African women in particular, not only those resulting from colonization, but ones that have existed throughout their history. Among these issues is their absence from historical
representations. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, this theme has been examined by a number of African authors including Mammeri and Mechakra, who wanted to tell their own stories that could be used as a basis for their sense of self rather than that of the Western world. Djebbar was to do the same in her novel. I would like to begin, however, by discussing her effort to rewrite Algerian colonial history as it currently existed in the official record. This would not be an easy task, primarily because the official record is the product of the French officers and other senior officials who regarded the African continent from little more than a military perspective, as a land to conquer; and their writings, as Djebbar reminds us, reflect their desire to immortalize themselves as heroes through scriptural propaganda. Therefore, the only possible subject is the French male, reducing the Algerian people to objects. As we recall from earlier discussions on nationalistic writings from this period, they are frequently based on the dichotomic pairing of self and other, the self being the Western world and the other those who are regarded as civilizationally and culturally inferior to them. Once classified as other, the Algerians are seen, but they have no right to observe for themselves, to make observations, to have an opinion or feelings. There is simply no room for humanity here. To consider the subjectivity of the Algerians might lessen the resolve of the French people to support the colonizing mission. Djebbar, however, aims to empower the object by bestowing a gaze upon it. She introduces this quite subtly on the second page of her historical tale after establishing the mind-set of the French invaders as they looked upon the Algerian people of *la Ville Imprenable* for the first time: “Des milliers de spectateurs, là-bas, dénombrent sans doute les vaisseaux. […] Parmi la première escadre qui glisse insensiblement vers l’ouest, Amable Matterer regarde la ville qui regarde” (15). The
inhabitants of the city look directly at Matterer and his troops, taking these foreigners into their thoughts. The center has been relocated, allowing the marginalized to step into it. The reader of *L’amour* who may be well versed with the history of the Maghreb sees something completely different now – the voiceless mass of people have a presence. They have become human. No longer is it simply the story of the brave French soldiers discovering the Algerians; it is a “double découverte” (16). It is interesting to note the inclusion of the word “sans doute” in the previous passage. Djebar does not assume anything that does not appear, at least indirectly, in the materials she has studied. This characteristic is seen elsewhere in the historical part of the text. Despite her distrust of the words contained within, she appears to have a certain amount of respect for them as primary resources. This is undoubtedly rooted in her background as a historian. She does not take the risk of creating stories from nothing; the tales she relates are always based on the evidence. Djebar does, however, occasionally express her opinion about a situation; and she always phrases it as such. For example, on the following page: “Je m’imagine, moi, que la femme de Hussein a négligé sa prière de l’aube et est montée sur la terrasse. Que les autres femmes, pour lesquelles les terrasses demeuraient royaume des fins de journée, se sont retrouvées là, elles aussi, pour saisir d’un même regard l’imposante, l’éblouissante flotte française” (16). This perspective, through the female gaze, had never been witnessed beforehand. The author depicts herself as revisiting these spaces and imagining what likely occurred so that there is more than one account, that of the colonizer. “Je rêve à cette brève trêve de tous les commencements; je m’insinue, visiteuse importune, dans le vêstibule de ce proche passé, enlevant mes sandales selon le rite habituel, suspendant mon souffle pour tenter de tout réentendre…” (16). In the midst
of an historical text focused on the colonization of an African nation which generally chronicle the implementation and aftermath of major tactical endeavors, the image of these women in their daily activities is a breath of fresh air. It helps offer a more complete vision of the past, leading the reader to wonder precisely how accurate the historical record is.

In the manner of other postcolonial and Marxist theorists, she exposes the subjective intent that lies behind the primary resources upon which researchers have been taught to rely unquestionably by reminding us of the individuals who authored them and their specific objectives in writing. Similarly, she employs the first person singular pronoun frequently in her history, which would normally be forbidden in such a text; to do so both emphasizes the biases inherent in historical representations and corrupts Western textual methodology. A proper historian never lets his or her opinion interfere and relies exclusively on the evidence that has been left by preceding generations. However, when the evidence is incomplete, compensation is necessary; and this is what the author attempts to provide. Djébar frequently interrupts the colonizer’s words to interject her own comments. Two officers maintained a correspondence during the war for colonial control, and “[l]a publication posthume de ces écrits entretient le prestige de ces auteurs, alors qu’ils décrivent le ballet de la conquête de notre territoire.” Inquires Djébar, “Quel territoire? Celui de notre mémoire qui fermente? Quels fantômes se lèvent derrière l’épaule de ces officiers qui, une fois leurs bottes enlevées et jetées dans la chambrée, continuent leur correspondance quotidienne?” (63). As Mary Jean Green writes, “[T]he text itself thus creates the possibility of dialogue absent from the historical record. By constantly disrupting the hegemonic perspective of the colonizing discourse,
by literally breaking it apart, Djebar exposes the mechanisms of Orientalism” (962). Throughout the aforecited passages from the novel, the reader will also note that they are related in the present tense. In addition to giving these events a sense of immediacy as if they were being witnessed in person, this characteristic insists upon their importance in the people’s present day in contrast to the separation and “death” that are generally associated with “masculine” history (a history of violence, conflict, and destruction which is said to omit domestic scenes and relegate events to a forgotten past that is not linked to the present).

**PRESENCE OF ALGERIAN WOMEN IN COLONIAL RESISTANCE**

On the rare occasions when there exists documentation of women’s involvement in resistance against the French, Djebar is sure to incorporate it in her novel. Two women in particular were mentioned in a report filed by the baron Barchou, one of whom lay next to the body of a French soldier whose heart she cut out, and the other sacrificed her child after she was mortally wounded rather than allow him to be taken by the French. For their bravery, Djebar states that “ces deux héroïnes entrent ainsi dans l’histoire nouvelle” (29). At the same time that she brings these new heroes to the awareness of her readers, she reveals the men who have customarily been depicted in heroic terms, the French invaders, not as valiant defenders of French civilization but as cruel and heartless invaders who committed unforgivable acts out of lust for possession. On several occasions she refers to the French soldiers as “meurtriers” and “bourreaux,” implying that killing was not necessary for their goals and was performed in an overly
abusive manner. In addition, she has included direct quotes from certain colonizers that further expose their brutality. She recounts Colonel Bugeaud’s written order to his troops regarding the Ouled Riah, who were later to be decimated by the French, “Si ces gredins se retirent dans leurs grottes… enfumez-les à outrance, comme des renards!” (78). Once one is forced to acknowledge the presence of their victims, as was not customary in the official record, a different version of events emerges. It is likely that these citations did not appear in the history books. Montagnac expressed a particularly morbid fascination at watching people die: “« Ce petit combat offrait un coup d’œil charmant. Ces nuées de cavaliers légers comme des oiseaux, se croisent, voltigent sur tous les points, ces hourras, ces coups de fusil dominés, de temps à autre, par la voix majestueuse du canon, tout cela présentait un panorama délicieux et une scène enivrante… »” (67). All of these efforts have helped chip away at the superiority of the colonizer and give more voice for the colonized Algerians to talk back. The French colonizers’ mission was not peaceful and selfless, the term that is customarily used to refer to the French conquest of much of Africa; rather the intention that these men showed was malicious, their goal to plunder with interest in no one other than themselves. “Et le silence de cette matinée souveraine précède le cortège de cris et de meurtres, qui vont emplir les décennies suivantes” (17), she remarks on the French troops’ arrival in Algeria. Those who had been celebrated for their bravery in previous historical accounts are shown to be cruel executioners.
INTERSECTIONS OF NATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL HISTORY

The novel is, however, much more than a relatively straightforward restructuring of the conquest of Algeria as told by the colonized instead of the colonizer. Intertwined with the historical accounts are first person recollections from the author’s childhood and a story, perhaps passed down through oral communication, contemporary to the colonial seizure of Algeria about a young girl named Badra. While this arrangement might appear accidental upon first glance, Djebar has put diligent efforts into combining these separate tales into one cohesive unit. Let us start by examining the structure of part I. The first chapter, titled “Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l’école,” is autobiographical; whereas the second, simply titled “I,” suddenly travels over a hundred years into the past to witness France’s first arrival in Algeria. It is followed by another autobiographical episode titled “Trois jeunes fille cloîtrées…”; and after this is chapter II, which chronologically succeeds the time of the story in chapter I. There are, however, several links that unify them. The last word of the modern chapter (or a form of it) frequently starts the narrative of the historical chapter. For example, at the end of “Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l’école” Djebar has written “…je suis partie à l’aube” (13). Turning the page, the next chapter begins, “Aube de ce 13 juin 1830…” (14). This transition gives the impression that the speaker’s thoughts of her country’s past have been prompted by present-day events, and therefore that the past continues to live today. More importantly, she seems to derive her modern existence through an understanding of the history of her country and of her female ancestors.
Djebard also uses part 1 to examine the power of the written word in French, which functions in a very different manner for the French senior officers and for young Islamic girls such as the author and her childhood friends. The former primarily used writing to propagate their own perspectives on the Algerian campaign which, as Djebard insists, may not reflect the complete truth (she refers to writer J.T. Merle as a “directeur de théâtre” [43] and his works as “la fiction de Merle” [45]) due to their desire to sway the opinions of their readers and to be the first person to write about a particular incident, in the manner of a publicist. In the eyes of the Algerians, this writing collectively silences them through an act of textual possession and became justification for further colonization. Djebard and her friends directed their words to a much smaller audience, in the form of letters that they addressed to Arabs in other countries while they were cloistered indoors over the summer, an activity that was considered dangerous. This allowed them to escape from their prison, at least figuratively, because they could influence others through their words. As the oldest girl declares, “Jamais, jamais, je ne me laisserai marier un jour à un inconnu qui, en une nuit, aurait le droit de me toucher! C’est pour cela que j’écris!” (22). Elsewhere, the letter becomes a tool for communicating marital equality when Djebard’s father addresses an envelope directly to her mother, which produced a crisis because public acknowledgement of the female as an individual was simply not done. She is to be regarded as a part of “la maison,” headed by the eldest male; and mail should be addressed to him, even if he is only a child. The author is delighted by these changes in Islamic society, giving her promise for a brighter future. Djebard portrays all these people as writing in French, showing that the same language that was used to accord secondary status onto Algerians and especially women can
potentially be employed to liberate them from their metaphysical prison and promote equivalence, in opposition to the categorization and hierarchization than has traditionally been accomplished through the act of naming in European representations. She speaks of the French superior officers’ intense desire to publish their memories of the war, sparking her to reflect on her own experiences with writing:

Une telle démangeaison de l’écriture me rappelle la graphorrhée épistolaire des jeunes filles enfermées de mon enfance: écrire vers l’inconnu devenait pour elles une manière de respirer un nouvel oxygène. Elles trouvaient là une issue provisoire à leur claustroph…

[…] Le mot lui-même, ornement pour les officiers qui le brandissent comme ils porteraient un oeillet à la boutonnière, le mot deviendra l’arme par excellence. Des cohortes d’interprètes, géographes, ethnographes, linguistes, botanistes, docteurs divers et écrivains de profession s’abattront sur la nouvelle proie. Toute une pyramide d’écrits amorcelés en apophyse superfétatoire oculerà la violence initiale.

Mes jeunes amies, mes complices du hameau de vacances, écrivaient même langue inutile et opaque parce que cernées, parce que prisonnières; elles estampillaient leur marasme, pour en surmonter plus ou moins le tragique. Les comptes rendus de cette intrusion d’hier décèlent a contrario une nature identique: envahisseurs qui croient prendre la Ville Imprenable, mais qui tournoient dans le buissonement de leur mal d’être (56-57).

Djebar herself undoubtedly pondered this double function of writing as she went about committing her ancestors’ history to paper, as her ruminations as to whether writing truly produces good or evil fill the latter part of the text.

INTERSECTIONS OF LOVE AND WAR

Further uniting the first few chapters of L’amour, la fantasia are the author’s efforts to examine the similarities of love and war. While she had been criticized in Algeria for writing about love and female sensuality during the war because it was
deemed that they have nothing in common, *L’amour* exposes the traits that bind both the Islamic woman and the Algerian people through their common history of degradation. The Algerian couple is paralleled with the relationship between France and Algeria: both are unequal pairs with one party seeking to dominate the other, which is regarded as created for the former’s pleasure or exploitation. This comparison is achieved through the personification of the nation of Algeria as a female, and there are numerous occasions on which the author aims to make the metaphor clear. The French troops are frequently referred to as “amants” (16, 69) and the invasion itself as a “viol” (26, 69), which the soldiers “pénétraient quasiment sur le mode sexuel… comme en une défloration” (70) with “les bruits d’une copulation obscène” (29); and the words “guerre” and “amour” are occasionally paired, suggesting an affinity between them (“Traces semblables de la guerre, de l’amour” [69]). She also refers to the French tendency to regard the country as a female through the French captains’ letters that speak of “une Algérie-femme impossible à apprivoiser” (69). Many of these same expressions will be seen later in reference to lovemaking and efforts made by Arab men to repress women, reminding the reader of the earlier stories of war.

The interspersal of the stories of a newlywed Algerian woman with the asphyxiation of the Ouled Riah in the caves of Nacmaria and Badra, the “mariée nue de Mazouna” is done intentionally to show correspondences between the pain and subjugation of women and of the Algerian people. All are viewed as prey with no ability to determine how they want to live their lives (as the rules that govern their existence have been created and regulated by the owners of discourse) that the male or the European seeks to rape or conquer. Their own wants and needs are ignored for the sake
of the preservation of patriarchal or Western hegemony. More importantly, all three of these tales represent a protest in opposition to the usual state of affairs, equated with the submission of the other: through Djebar’s words, they refuse to become victims, taking the power away from the oppressor by becoming subjects in their own right. True, the elimination of the Ouled Riah by the *enfumades*⁴⁰ was done, the people killed, the horror accomplished. On the French scale, it was considered a successful operation, as Djebar recounts certain French soldiers’ self-congratulatory celebration of their achievement. Yet there have been several accounts, by a Spanish officer and an anonymous member of the troop, that describe the brutality in unsparing terms which allow their readers to see the dead as human beings (whereas the official record refers to it rather unemotionally as “le mal qui avait été fait” [85] and “des opérations” [88]). Even more remarkable is the record left by Pélissier, who was one of the superiors in charge of the Algerian campaign. Although Djebar tends to group him along with the other French officials concerning the true accuracy of the account, she somewhat reticently acknowledges the effort that he has made to mention individual Arab dead, in contrast to the group concept of which the Other is normally considered a part within Western discourse, which caused Lieutenant Colonel Canrobert to deem his description “beaucoup trop réaliste” (89). Writes Djebar:

> J’oserais presque le remercier d’avoir fait face aux cadavres, d’avoir cédé au désir de les immortaliser, dans les figures de leurs corps raidis, de leurs étreintes paralysées, de leur ultime contorsion. D’avoir regardé l’ennemi autrement qu’en multitude fanatisée, en armée d’ombres omniprésentes.

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³⁰ The Ouled Riah had managed never to have submitted to the French forces due to the many hiding places in the Dahra region. In 1845, during the Algerian resistance against French colonial occupation, the entire Ouled Riah tribe, including women and children, concealed themselves in the caves of Dahra. The French soldiers, ordered by Colonel Pélissier, built fires at the entrance of the caves, which resulted in the death of over 500 Algerians by asphyxiation.
Pélissier, ‘le barbare,’ lui, le chef guerrier tant décrié ensuite, me devient premier écrivain de la première guerre d’Algérie! […] Pélissier, bourreau-greffier, porte dans les mains le flambeau de mort et en éclaire ces martyrs (92).

His words function in the manner of a funeral, allowing those who care for the departed to recognize and to commemorate their existence, bring them “back to life” according to Djebar, so that they may finally be laid to rest. “Pélissier, grâce à son écriture ‘trop réaliste,’ ressuscite soudain sous mes yeux les morts de cette nuit du 19 au 20 juin 45, dans les grottes des Ouled Riah” (89). It is only through the remembering of the past that such an effort is possible. Once the focus has been shifted from the conqueror to the conquered through the power of the text, the object comes to take on subject status and can not as easily be subsumed by the self.

The story of Badra, the beautiful daughter of military leader Si Mohamed Ben Kadrouma, takes place at about the same time as that of the Ouled Riah and deals with a similar theme, the invasion of an Algerian town by the French army in the early stages of the colonial occupation. At the same time, Badra is due to marry but is kidnapped on the eve of her wedding by much lauded Arab prince Bou Maza. In the previous chapter, he was one of the good guys, “le nouveau héros des montagnes” (99); but as Badra’s captor, he takes on the role of the antagonist. The oppositions regulating black and white become unstable, showing that identity cannot be easily categorized in conventional binary terms. Let us examine the ways in which this tale functions as part of a cohesive unit with the other stories. Badra is presented as an allegory for the land of Algeria.

African cities are like women that have been subjugated, as can be seen in this passage referring to the future possession of both Badra and her town of Mazouna: “Mazouna vivait sa dernière nuit de cité libre et la vièrge, sous l’attente scrutaire des invitées parées,
laissa enfin couler ses larmes” (103). The fact that both “la ville” and “la femme” are feminine nouns that can be replaced with the subject pronoun “elle” further heightens the comparison throughout, causing the reader to be unsure as to whether the author is speaking of Badra, Mazouna, or both. She is fabulously decorated and covered in jewels in anticipation of her marriage, in the image of a pre-war Algeria. Bou Maza and his men enter the fantasia\(^{31}\) leading up to the wedding, slaughter many of the crowd with elated triumph over the defeat of the enemy, and take Badra and other women as ransom, much in the same manner that the French troops forced their way into Algeria and wrought destruction, seizing the most valuable treasures as they departed. “Celle-ci sera pour moi!” he proclaims (108), identifying her as an object whose destiny is controlled by others; “cette proie l’éblouissait” (108). However, the captives are not as easily subdued as they might have presumed, as the daughter of the agha declares that she will kill or be killed. “À peine si les yeux du jeune chef se rétrécirent, à peine s’il manifeste un étonnement muet face à ces femelles [Badra et la fille de l’agha] qui, en dépit ou à cause de l’éclat de sa victoire, ne pliaient pas” (109). Throughout the story, she is continually referenced by her relationships (or lack thereof) with men, as “la vierge” or “la pucelle,” her strength somehow degraded by reminding the reader of her semantic dependence on the male subject. At the same time, it is possible that her virginal status makes her more whole and uncorrupted, as she has never been violated by a force that seeks to objectify her through the act of marital lovemaking that the author equates with rape. Badra

continues to resist being degraded by her captors when, after she and the other women are
divested of their valuables, she strips completely to the great shock of all around her and
declares, “Louange à Dieu, je suis nue! Louange…” (115). Rather than being
embarrassed as they might have expected, she turns the tables on those who intended to
humiliate and victimize her by taking pride in her nudity, removing some of their power
against her. She is bare but not violated, the very personification of “une Algérie-femme
impossible à apprivoiser.”

Analogous to both of the historical tales that preceded it is the contemporary story
of an Algerian woman’s marriage and wedding night with her new husband, a man whose
attitudes about women’s abilities and place in society appear to be somewhat traditional.
He makes all the decisions, and her position is essentially to obey them with minimal
input of her own. It has been observed that the experiences of the young girl in the story
resemble those of Djebar herself, even though it is primarily narrated by an unnamed
“elle.” On a few instances, the author allows her presence to slip through the detached
use of the third person with a few first person subject and object pronouns and
possessives. Her decision to depersonalize this portion of the text both inhibits her from
experiencing the pain of her past in such an intimate manner that is implied with the use
of the first person, permitting her to be more of a narrator than a participant, and indicates
the universality of what happened to her to all Islamic women. They are in France when
the decision is made to wed and return to the mountains of Algeria for the ceremony,
which are likely the same ones that had been inhabited by the Ouled Riah (because rarely
does Djebar insert such details accidentally). Her impending marriage is not happy, nor
is the majority of those described in the novel: her mother cries often, as if she is
preparing for a funeral; and Djebar refers to “la deuil de la vie qui s’annonce” (122). The “vierge/pucelle” is objectified, stolen from her father and stripped naked in the same way as Badra, and then penetrated like the Algerian caves had been over a century earlier. Blood stains their bed, reminding the reader of the pools of blood beneath the dead of Nacmarea and thereby comparing the penis to a weapon. Indeed, she describes it as a “dard” and a “lame” (123) that rips her open. From this point forward, the result from the female would normally be silence, both immediately afterward and to the outside world, and a sort of death by ceasing to exist as an autonomous human being. Her remarks on this convention, particularly through the use of the word “gît” which one would ordinarily see on a tombstone, makes this clear: “L’épousée ordinaire ni ne crie, ni ne pleure: paupières ouvertes, elle gît en victime sur la couche, après le départ du mâle qui fuit l’odeur du sperme et les parfums de l’idole; et les cuisses refermées enserrent la clameur” (124). The same is the case with Algeria itself, as the reader has witnessed the utter devastation brought to those cultures that fail to submit to the colonizer. “L’Afrique est prise malgré le refus qu’elle ne peut étouffer” (70). In addition, the asphyxiation of the Ouled Riah later alludes to Djebar’s later descriptions of silenced women, who cloister themselves under their veils and in their homes, as being “asphyxiée.” Both new wife and nation are expected to lie back and take it without complaint, subjectifying themselves willingly to their new ruler in recognition of their relative inferior status. The bride in this story, however, refuses in the form of shrieks of pain, parallel to the screams heard from the dying and wounded Ouled Riah, which Djebar refers to as a “victoire” (123 and 124). The standard silence that is expected from the traditional victim is reversed, making them no longer victims. Both nation and woman seek equality and a
voice. The repetition of themes between these three stories also serves as a reminder that
the past is not dead, because events that took place over 100 years before continue to
resonate in the lives of people today.

WRITING ORAL HISTORIES

The third part of the text is principally dedicated to the stories of Algerian women
who were active in the resistance throughout the period of colonial occupation, from the
nineteenth century through to the fight for the nation’s independence. She effectively
adds their experiences to History, from which they had been lacking (“n’ayant pas droit
aux majuscules de l’histoire” [118]). Their tales are presented in the form of a speaking
circle, as most Arab Islamic women only feel able and more open to speak their minds
the context of the group, and only once they have reached old age. Such a method of
storytelling has been a part of her people’s traditions for generations. Djebar, who relates
her thoughts on her place in society and on the other women in addition to telling her
maternal grandmother’s story, is but one of the participants. Even though she would
normally be considered the center of the narrative and omniscient overseer of the textual
world as its author, she sits on an equal level with the other members of the speaking
circle; and what she has to say is not more important than what they have to say. “Dire à
mon tour. Transmettre ce qui a été dit, plus écrit. Propos d’il y a plus de un siècle,
comme ceux que nous échangeons aujourd’hui, nous, femmes de la même tribu” (187).
Also decentering the text is the presence of a number of different “je”s, represented by
the many women in the group. The exclusivity that is generally associated with the first
person is eliminated by a multiplicity of voices. Use of the first person singular is ordinarily considered taboo for Muslim women, because it implies a degree of self-awareness and egocentrism; yet her methods reduce this tendency by incorporating the singular voice into the collective. “Comment une femme pourrait parler haut, même en langue arabe, autrement que dans l’attente du grand âge? Comment dire « je », puisque ce serait dédaigner les formules-couvertures qui maintiennent le trajet individuel dans la résignation collective?” (177). What is essential in postcolonial feminine expression is not the “I,” but the “we.” Djebar does not fail to remind the reader of the oral quality of the circle, as she frequently appears to be speaking to the women by addressing them with the second person singular (for example to Chérifa), giving the sense that a conversation is taking place. The reader can almost see her sitting across from the women as they share their stories, interacting with them. The very structure of this part of the novel is characterized by the production and reception of sounds, as evidenced by the various chapter headings (sistre, mouvement, voix, clameur, murmures, chuchotements) as well as the occasional use of poetry, placing the focus on vocalizations and being heard by others as opposed to the silence (l’aphasie amoureuse, another chapter heading) that one would normally expect from these Islamic women.

Within the circle, some women tell their own stories while others share those of their departed relatives, which is custom. This process permits the conservation of their accounts, even after their passing, thus generating a localized history of Algeria. These women present a range of stories that speak more intimately on personal hardships and losses in addition to their tenacity and devotion to both family and country. These women are the heroes in their stories, some participating directly, others defending their
homes and families against the enemy. Although they were expected not to get involved, they chose to do so. They are strong and did not back down even in the most difficult of circumstances, showing themselves to be the equals of men. Chérifa dares the French soldier to kill her, declaring, “Tue-moi, car tu aimes tuer!” (151), refuses to recognize the French and doesn’t submit to their questioning, even when tortured and interrogated; and after she was sent to the dungeon for three days without food and water, she did not touch the food that they gave her for twenty days. “L’essentiel, pour moi, vis-à-vis des Français, était de leur montrer que je n’avais pas besoin d’eux” (158). Some resisted not only the French, but also patriarchal values by making their own decisions and speaking out against inequality. Through their strength, they deny the power of the Frenchman or the Islamic male to turn them into victims. Before being captured, Chérifa, who nursed the ill over a period of a year among the maquisards, refused the order of the men to stay in the same hospital and as well as one to marry, saying that she would rather be killed than wed a man whom she considered her brother. While she was not regarded favorably because of her choices, she is proud of her achievements and honored by Djebar for what she has done both for her country and for other Algerian women.

THE SILENCING OF ALGERIAN WOMEN

The nature of these women’s stories, as spread from person to person through spoken communication, provided Djebar with one of the primary rationales for writing L’amour, la fantasia: to preserve them in light of the disappearance of oral culture. She is weary of the one-sided picture of history that has been in the hands of the power structure
for centuries, effectively excluding all those who are not endowed with the sign and the
ability to write. “A nouveau, un homme parle, un autre écoute, puis écrit. Je bute, moi,
contre leurs mots qui circulent; je parle ensuite, je vous parle, à vous, les veuves de cet
autre village de montagne, si éloigné ou si proche d’El Aroub!” (236). At the same time,
the task of representing their words and experiences in French was the source of a
significant dilemma that she endeavors to resolve throughout her novel. I have already
discussed the strategies that postcolonial authors embraced to circumvent the presence of
the men who have repressed their people in their use of the former colonizer’s language;
therefore, I will not repeat myself here. My objective is to speak about the situation in
which the author finds herself, straddling Western and Arab cultures. Where the former
stresses individualism, the female members of the latter derive their value as members of
a group. This is perhaps best illustrated by the wearing of the veil. More a garment than
a headdress as in the Western concept of the veil, the female body becomes completely
obscured by layer upon layer of fabric with only the eyes left exposed. This feminine
“uniform” causes Muslim women to look practically identical, with few characteristics to
distinguish them from others. Those who speak out are looked down upon for their lack
of humility and sense of propriety. The unspoken objective is to be as unnoticed as
possible. Their bodies and voices muzzled, these women accept their lot as inferior and
find it second nature to them. Djebar, however, escaped this fate as a result of her
Western schooling, where she learned to read and write in French as well as developed an
ideological mind-set that would set her apart from her Islamic sisters. She delighted to be
able to take part in a world with more opportunities which, without her education, would
have remained unknown to her. Here, she imagines the future of a neighborhood girl
who was not permitted to continue in the French school, a future which she would have likely shared if not for the insistence of her father: “Qu’est devenue la fille du boulanger? Voilée certainement, soustraite du jour au lendemain aux chemins de l’école: son corps la trahissait. Ses seins naissants, ses jambes qui s’affinaient, bref l’apparition de sa personnalité de femme la transforma en corps incarcéré!” (207). Without the veil that functions as the most obvious outward sign of the self-effacing Arabic woman, she no longer suits the image as the opposite to the dominant male and avoids many aspects of Islamic victimization by removing herself from the traditional binary pairing. The skills of reading and writing have given her the ability to communicate with others outside of her immediate social circle and to express herself as an individual, the very intention of which appears contrary to Muslim female virtue. As she declares in a famous passage where she attempts to convince her father of the positive objectives behind some of her earliest teenage writings in French, “Tu vois, j’écris, et ce n’est pas « pour le mal », pour « l’indécent »! Seulement pour dire que j’existe et en palpiter! Écrire, n’est-ce pas ‘me’ dire?” (72). Because of her somewhat privileged status, she felt detached from the rest of the Islamic female community, an isolated participant in a Western language and culture that are widely considered to be incongruous with those of the Arab world. Uncomfortable with the concept of a French identity but separated from the women of her tribe through her occidentalization, her identity exists in an in-between place similar to that of Kane’s tragic character Samba Diallo, as an exile, a term that she often uses to refer to herself. She lacks the pure, untainted identity brandished by earlier African nationalists as one of the primary means for Africans to declare their independence from the colonizer. “Cette langue que m’a donnée le père me devient entremetteuse et mon
initiation, dès lors, se place sous un signe double, contradictoire…” (12). She misses the sense of belonging with other women and the feeling of fulfillment that they experience through their use of Arabic. “Le français m’est langue marâtre. Quelle est ma langue mère disparue, qui m’a abandonnée sur le trottoir et s’est enfuie?” (240). While French is the language that she chooses to employ in her writings, because it frequently fails to correspond with her emotions as well as represents a philosophy that is foreign to her own, it is not properly “her” language. The fact that it is the language of the former colonizer was as important a concern for Djebar as it was for those north African postcolonial authors that I mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter. Particularly distressing to her is the function that it serves in autobiographical texts. This genre would prove to be enough of a challenge in consideration of the many ideological constraints within Muslim society associated with exposing one’s innermost thoughts to a group of strangers; yet it becomes further compounded when it is performed using the words of the oppressor, the very words that had been the symbol of the civilization that subjected them to over a century of debasement. At the same time that she chooses to expose herself to the world, the language in which she does so turns itself into a weapon pointed against her, seeking to victimize her when she is at her most vulnerable. Within this context, her use of the third person singular to describe events taken from her own life makes more sense. “Parler de soi-même hors de la langue des aïeules, c’est se dévoiler certes… Le dévoilement, aussi contingent, devient comme le souligne mon arabe dialectal du quotidien, vraiment « se mettre à nu ». Or cette mise à nu, déployée dans la langue de l’ancien conquérant, lui qui, plus d’un siècle durant, a pu s’emparer de tout, sauf précisément des corps féminins, cette mise à nu renvoie étrangement à la mise à
sac du siècle précédent” (178). While writing in French, she also finds that she cannot fully reveal herself using a language that is not naturally coherent with her integral spirit. She is not revealing herself so much as cloaking herself with a disguise that does not represent who she truly is. “L’autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse se tisse comme fiction… Croyant « me parcourir », je ne fais que choisir un autre voile. Voulant, à chaque pas, parvenir à la transparence, je m’engloutis davantage dans l’anonymat des aïeules!” (243). This complication is curious when one considers that her participation in Western values has permitted her to unveil herself and speak freely, when she finds herself doing exactly the contrary in her autobiographical writing.

Still, she chooses to write in French rather than Arabic, as she attributes far more benefits to it than drawbacks. In the same manner as other postcolonial authors, she seizes the language as well as the genre that has the capacity to reach the greatest number of people. It is important that her words and those of other Algerian women be heard. Her unique position of hybridity is ideal for her to serve as a cultural intermediary, bringing those who would otherwise not have the ability to speak for themselves in the public arena into history and making their existence the subject of narrative. She can help to give them some of the freedom that they lack and endow them with representational power. Her identity midway between two self-exclusionary cultures, which has traditionally been regarded as constituted by absence of purity, does not negate her; it has a purpose and value in service to her silenced sisters. She is not empty like Samba Diallo, who discovered that French culture tore him from his roots; rather, she is fulfilled. “On me dit exilée. La différence est plus lourde: je suis expulsée de là-bas pour entendre et ramener à mes parents les traces de la liberté” (244). Her restructuring of the
French language that I described earlier allows her to negotiate a textual space in which she functions as the mouthpiece for Algerian women, not speaking in their place but giving them a voice to allow them to speak through her. The benevolent intention behind her words as well as her mixture of styles, voices, and genres compensates for the subjection that the French language has wrought upon her people. In her hands, it no longer carries the weight of the destructive acts of the colonial period but is a tool for liberation. Their message is carried through the writing style that she has chosen, not conquered by silencing power of the oppressor’s tongue. As she explains to the reader, “Comme si soudain la langue française avait des yeux, et qu’elle me les ait donnés pour voir dans la liberté… et qu’à ce prix, je puisse circuler, dégringoler toutes les rues, annexer le dehors pour mes compagnes cloîtres, pour mes aïeules mortes bien avant le tombeau. Comme si… Dérision, chaque langue, je le sais, entasse dans le noir ses cimetières, ses poubelles, ses caniveaux; or devant celle de l’ancien conquérant, me voici à éclairer ses chrysanthèmes!” (204). It is curious that the language of a people who have produced literature that has represented the African people through Eurocentric stereotypes and judgments, as the passive Other to the active Western Subject, has permitted the Africans themselves to express themselves as representational subjects of their own literary works on an international scale.
To conclude, I would like to return to a question that I raised in the introduction to this dissertation; and at this point, it is possible to examine this question in light of the preceding study. That question is, “What is the difference between representing a people as a member of that culture or as a non-member? Is one ‘better’ than the other, and on what grounds?” I would hope that I have examined the first part of this issue satisfactorily; but the second query, which has been the subject of much debate to this day, deserves further consideration. Those who choose to represent a social or national group to which they belong have an intimate knowledge of this group, as they are members of it. However, because they may inherently view their own cultural ideologies and practices as “natural” and “normal,” they may be unaware of the unconscious assumptions behind them that are generally only visible to outsiders. Thus, their capacity of truly knowing this culture is limited. There also remains the possibility that they will not be able to take an unbiased and critical look at a structure with belief systems that are similar to their own. On the other hand, those who represent a culture to which they do not belong are able to question and analyze it in a way that those who are a member of it could not. Outsiders are permitted more impartiality than the insider because they have less of a personal connection to a different culture’s basic myths, rituals, and values. Yet
there are possible risks involved in representing others during a situation of unequal power relations. There is an involuntary tendency to present them through binary oppositions, as like or unlike the identity of the self, and then to attach judgments to them. The description then provides less factual information about the other than an affirmation of the speaker’s cultural values. Who, then, creates the “better” cultural representation? First, let us examine both sides by returning to the novels that have been analyzed in the preceding chapters.

In *Le Roman d’un spahi*, two distinct cultures are examined. Pierre Loti’s protagonist Jean Peyral gives the reader a great deal of information about Africa, but it must not be forgotten that he also has much to say about France. As I suggested in the previous paragraph, it can be difficult for one who is a member of a culture to regard it without the interference of personal prejudice. The sentimental attachment that he holds to his homeland and all that it represents compromises his ability to be disinterested, causing him to look upon it with near-exclusive good favor, almost perfection. Les Cévennes incarnates his conception of how things should be. Anything else could not fail to seem lackluster in comparison, particularly a land that he visualizes as its exact opposite and where he is condemned to spend several years. Peyral’s unwavering predilection for French civilization also prevents him from looking upon others in an unbiased manner. Difference is viewed with immediate apprehension and an overriding sense of disgust. He cannot resist but to place his mark on all that surrounds him by attaching judgments to it that are rooted in his dedication to Western values. While the protagonist’s never-ending pessimism with regards to African civilization is a useful means for making his youth and inexperience clear to the reader, the fact that other
characters as well as the narrator agree with his attitudes make them appear to be more a reflection of fact than of his own biased opinion.

Eugène Fromentin was certainly more successful at producing a study of Africa that was not as influenced by his identity as a Frenchman in *Une année dans le Sahel*, and he makes it clear that this was one of his primary intentions in the composition of his novel. He acknowledges that one’s fascination with that which is new and unknown, such as the Orient, can awaken curiosity, a dangerous sentiment that he wishes to banish from his descriptions (184). It is likely that such an approach to one’s object of study can interfere with detached analysis. At the same time, it appears that he was unable to silence completely all traces of curiosity, or at the very least of to prevent his personal feelings from coloring his perspective. He establishes from the start that Africa is more than simply a place; it’s a concept that has meaning to him. In a similar manner that Jean Peyral regarded France as representing all that is good in the world, Fromentin suggests that Algeria and its people are a model of the ideal. The mere fact that something is Oriental tends to make it worthy of praise. Frequently, Algeria is defined in relation to France which, in comparison, becomes posited as the norm from which Algeria, as a rule, deviates. There seems to be a very clear demarcation between “them” (Africans) and “us” (Westerners). Unlike Peyral, however, who separated himself from the majority of the Africans, Fromentin interacts with them, placing himself on their level. Fromentin also writes out of a desire for knowledge, an approach that Peyral evidently did not share.

The level of personal interest that compromises the realization of a nonsubjective portrait in the two European novels is much less of an issue in *Une si longue lettre*. While Ramatoulaye is examining her own culture, her desire to call it into question
causes her to become detached from any investment that she may have in it. She does not want to preserve the values that are propagated by traditional society and therefore has no qualms about exposing its flaws. One may assert, however, that it is precisely her intention to challenge society that has the potential of rendering her too involved in it to discard her personal prejudices. Describing her situation within traditional mores in the most pessimistic manner possible and pointing out the positive results of promoting African women’s causes would only serve to make her argument stronger. I doubt that the resulting novel distorts the truth to promote her cause; yet I also sense that one should be aware of this possible conflict of interest in the reading of the novel. It is also worth noting that even though she may reject patriarchal society, she does not collectively reject African men in opposition to African women. Ramatoulaye does not feel the need to put down men in order to raise herself up, avoiding the “us” and “them” dyad that was present in the novels of Loti and Fromentin.

Assia Djebar, too, seeks to promote change in North African society and in the way that her people have been represented in the majority of European historical discourse in her novel L’amour, la fantasia. The majority of the text is characterized by the lack of any single reference point to serve as a foundation for normalcy through the inclusion of a variety of protagonists, making no one person the absolute arbiter of truth. Her historical accounts, while based on the evidence, are nevertheless not unprejudiced. The French soldiers and commanders, who had been lauded in their home country, become the villains in Djebar’s version of events, ambassadors of civilization recast as heartless murderers. The former enemy to the French, once represented as a faceless mass of people that should be controlled, now has a presence, their deaths pitied and their
resistance celebrated. The language that she uses to refer to the colonizer is very biased, to get the reader to see them in the opposite manner than they had been portrayed in European documents. Djebbar, however, makes no effort to deny her partiality. She denies the traditional role of the historian to be impartial, implying that there is always an intention behind historical discourse through her occasional use of the first person and of open-ended questions. Her objective is to right the imbalance that had been created through the almost exclusively Western interpretation of history. Her novel represents a dialogue with the West, talking back to it and exposing its own biases.

Several theorists have expounded their beliefs on the ability of a member of one culture to represent another, and their conclusions have generally been rather pessimistic. Several have also expressed doubt on the Other’s capacity of representing itself. Let us examine the positions of some of the more prominent theorists on the role that personal preconceptions play in the representation of other cultures. This will allow us to examine the validity of the attempt to represent the Other. Edward Said appears to be very set on his opinions regarding the Occident’s representation of the Orient/Other in narrative: the former will only, or at the very least tend to, approach the text as a terrain on which to declare its hegemonic dominance over the latter. As he writes in Orientalism: “[D]uring the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an assumption had been made that the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West” (40). He adds to this assertion in Culture and Imperialism: “All cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way control them. Yet not all cultures make representations of foreign cultures and in fact master them. This is the distinction, I believe, of modern Western cultures” (100). In the essay
“Latent and Manifest Orientalism,” he summarily dismisses all who choose to write about the Orient as practicing Orientalism: “[E]very writer on the Orient… saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption” (Macfie 112). He sees this as resulting from the imperialistic divide between Orient and Occident that remains in effect today despite the end of empire, controlling the perspectives of Westerners to such an extent that they are typically unable to discard an attitude of superiority vis-à-vis those people who have traditionally been regarded as depending upon the assistance of other civilizations to reach a level of mature development. This is an attitude for which Said has been often criticized, and I agree with the points of dissention. In his insistence upon the unchanging nature of the West and the homogenous intent of its inhabitants, he seems to ascribe to it the same kind of categorical immutability of which he accused Orientalists in depicting the Orient in its texts. Said has thus created “the Orientalist” in the same way that he sees the Orientalist as creating “the Oriental.” The ability of individual Westerners from the Classical Age to the present to know the unbiased truth about any cultures different than their own through any other stance than a binary one of Self vs. Other is considered an impossibility. Nor does he acknowledge, as Sadik Jalal Al-Azm’ points out, that Orientalist strategies of representation are not exclusive to the Occident (230): stating that only the Occident views other cultures as reductive to itself ignores that Eastern cultures can and do the same to other Eastern cultures (as can be seen in representations that declare the superiority of Syrians to other Arabs), which he refers to as “Ontological Orientalism in Reverse.” He adds that among texts promoting Islamic revivalism, there are also attacks of Western culture in favor of Arab ones, based on Islam as a subject, maintaining
differences between East and West. This can certainly be witnessed today in Muslim countries, where what are perceived as decadent Western (particularly American) philosophies and values are often rejected collectively in comparison to Islamic ones.

At the same time, I ask myself if perhaps Said’s references to “Orient” and “Occident” do not refer so much to the actual land masses and their populations as to the metaphysical constructs that take on meaning precisely in opposition to one another; for example, that the “Orient” gains meaning through speech acts that constitute it as the polar contrast to the global power structure known as “Occident,” and it remains tied to discourse as a function of it. I make this effort in an attempt to validate Said by avoiding the application of pseudo-scientific assertions to human behavior, because as I have stated in the introduction his theories are extremely useful once tempered and read in conjunction with other critics.

Agreeing with Said on the inability of the West to represent the Orient in a nonprejudicial manner is Arab critic A.L. Tibawi. He observes an antipathy towards Islam among those who practice Christianity or Judaism, for they view it as a rival religion that must either be destroyed or subjected to imperialist control. This posture negates any desire for sympathy on their part for Arabic nationalistic aspirations. Because Arab sentiment is so intimately connected to Islam, it is unlikely that a Westerner would be able to understand them; and the potential for offending a Muslim is high. In his opinion, Orientalists should not study Islam because a faith can only be


33 By “Orientalists,” Tibawi appears to be referring to all those who choose to represent the Orient, and not strictly those authors whose practices endeavor to “Other” the Oriental.
understood from the inside; and few Muslims share the same language with Westerners. Donald P. Little remarks that Tibawi, “while pleading for a more sympathetic, tolerant approach to Islam on the part of Orientalists, he has gone out of his way to denounce the work of those very Orientalists who have leaned over backwards to avoid offending Muslim sensibilities.” For Tibawi, “there is scant hope for neutrality” (126). Although much Western writing about Islam is condescending towards it, indicates Little, not all of it is (ibid. 136). Like Said, Tibawi seems to regard those who write about Islam as fairly evenly split between “them” and “us,” unable to recognize the many Muslims who are citizens of Western nations such as France and the United States and who might not see any contradiction between practicing Islam and considering themselves French or American.

One of Michael Richardson’s primary objections to Said’s theories raises some interesting questions on the capacity of the Other to represent itself. He describes Said’s goal in “true” representations of the Orient as completely dissolving the relation between subject and object, that of the dominant observer that has been endowed with the power to determine how the object, the silent party that cannot speak on its own accord, is to be represented in discourse. It is important to remember, however, the central role played by the reciprocity of subject and object in generating meaning. Explains Richardson in “Enough Said”:

It is difficult to see how anthropology can possibly take form unless it engages with the complex dialectical relation between distanciation and familiarity that the subject/object relation implies. If at its root this relation is unable to entertain the possibility of reciprocity, then anthropology must resign itself to producing images that bear no relation to the object of study. Worse, such images could only function ideologically and involve falsification in a power context (212).
The subject needs the object, and vice-versa: the subject needs something to represent, and the object needs the subject to capture it in representations. The object as an anthropological construct cannot represent itself; for within this framework, it is something to be observed and has no actual voice. Conversely, the subject has the ability to speak but cannot be represented. If either subject or object were to represent themselves, meaning would be determined solely on an arbitrary basis as nothing would exist to serve as a point of reference. The downside to the interplay between subject and object, however, is that the desire of the subject to identify the objects of his perception can create negative feelings when elements are misidentified, as in the case of the Other. In addition, total avoidance of any relativist strategies opens the debate to the possibility of pure universalism, which has a similar potential of creating subjective representations that are based more on opinion and personal leanings than fact.

Allow me to return to the question that I posed at the start of the chapter: “What is the difference between representing a people as member of that culture or as a non-member? Is one ‘better’ than the other, and on what grounds?” After the discussion that has been established in this conclusion, I find myself better situated to provide an effective response. I reiterate that both extremes (the representation of a people when one is a member of that culture or is not a member of it) have their drawbacks: personal interest can taint the analysis of the culture of which one is a member; but Othering in the form of racism, nationalism, or exoticism can cause the representation of a culture to which one does not belong to be based on a binary system in which the Other is represented as an element within the Subject’s signifying system. Both have the potential of lacking neutrality. Neutrality, however, can be regained through the processes
displayed by Montesquieu in his Persian novel: it is possible to know the Other in a nonbinaristic manner when shared values are employed as the basis against which the foreign culture is analyzed, rather than the observer’s own culture; and it is possible to know the Self without personal prejudice through knowledge of the Other as a point of comparison. “La connaissance de soi est possible, mais elle implique au préalable celle des autres; la méthode comparative est la seule voie qui conduise au but. […] [P]our connaître sa propre communauté, on doit d’abord connaître le monde entier. C’est l’universel qui devient l’instrument de connaissance du particulier, plutôt que celui-ci ne conduise, de lui-même, au général. A ignorer les autres, finalement on s’ignore” (Nous et les autres 471). It is through this process of gaining universal knowledge that one culture is not regarded as being more or less than another, as one particular set of values are no longer the absolute basis for judgment. It is through this, which Todorov refers to as “good” universalism, that people do not represent their own culture as “natural.”

With these arguments in mind and reinvoking the discussion on Montesquieu’s Les lettres persanes in chapter 1, let us return to the novels that have been examined within the earlier chapters of this dissertation with the goal of appraising their authors’ depictions of Africa. Le roman d’un Spahi provides a particularly strong example of the kind of Orientalism observed by Said in Western literature that results from protagonist Jean Peyral’s near-exclusive identification of his own values with those of the European outsider. The differences between Europe and Africa are made the focus of the novel from the beginning to the end through an accumulation of binaristic descriptors that set the two continents’ climate, inhabitants, flora and fauna, and belief systems in steadfast opposition with relatively few exceptions. Both protagonist and narrator are compelled
to attach value judgments to Africa’s culture and people that depart from European standards, which are thus established as a point of reference. Those elements that replicate Western culture are given the highest esteem. Even though Peyral spends several years in Africa, his experience has changed him relatively little; and by the end of the novel he continues to regard the African people as constituting a somewhat different species than his own.

As we recall from chapter 4, Eugène Fromentin’s *Une année dans le Sahel* does not replicate this extreme separation of Orient and Occident. He wrote of the debt that he owed Oriental culture for making him who he was; and his sense of affiliation with European ideology is not as strong as was observed in Loti’s novel. It seems clear that Fromentin made more of an effort to see his identity in the global fashion that is described by Todorov than a subjective one that is specifically aligned with one set of national or cultural values, as Fromentin endeavored to describe his experiences in Algeria in as unbiased a manner as possible. Yet at the same time, it is clear that his analyses are frequently made on the basis of European culture. He describes Africa as very different from his homeland, in terms of an escape from banality that requires the interpretation of a third party (himself) for the Frenchman to comprehend. He is as enthusiastic for African culture as Peyral finds it distasteful, and once again it seems that this level of personal interest that he has invested in the continent makes it rather difficult for him to be completely unprejudicial. His descriptions of the Algerian landscape, in contrast to those of Loti, are highly factual since the basis of their analysis is nature itself rather than French culture; and his multifaceted female character Haoûa represents one of the first successful attempts in Western literature to create a complex African heroine.
In *Une si longue lettre*, the subject of chapter 5, Mariama Bâ’s protagonist Ramatoulaye is undeniably invested in the issues of subsaharan African culture that she aims to examine. The stratification of men and women within traditional African society has subjected her to an existence in which she has been classified as secondary, a situation that she intends to question and thus to invite change. Could one say, in light of the considerations made earlier in this conclusion, that her intense involvement with these issues taints her ability to be open-minded? She describes two separate groups: African men and African women. She clearly identifies herself as one of the latter. Thus, she does not seek to describe the group to which she belongs, her “Self” as it were, through the medium of knowledge about the Other of patriarchy. Yet it does seem that she is able to make cogent observations about the unquestioned traditional values present in the African society to which she belongs through the knowledge that she has gained in exposure to Western models in the form of education, books, and movies. Reflected within them is a set of values that conflict profoundly with those of patriarchy, and these values have provided her with the means to speak back to patriarchy and challenge its position as the foundation for African mores. However, those women who had not been the recipients of French cultural ideology, such as Modou’s new wife Nabou, are not able to question it and become symbols of the victimization that traditional African values have imposed upon its women.

Among the novels that I have selected, perhaps the most unprejudiced attempt at analyzing the group to which the author considers herself to be a part is in *L’amour, la fantasia* by Assia Djebar, which I addressed in chapter 6. The author’s hybrid identity, which consists of a blending of the Islamic values that she gained from her family and the
Western values that she learned in her many years of education in French schools, causes her to be situated at the optimum vantage point to examine both cultures with a level of nonprejudiced reasoning that is the domain of the *exilé*. Neither culture is presented as being the better of the two or as possessing unquestionable truths that should naturally be respected by all human beings; both have their merits and drawbacks. Djebar correlates the repression of women by men under traditional Muslim custom and that of the Algerian people by the French under the conquest of the continent during the nineteenth century, making it clear that both disregard fundamental laws of respect for human decency. Her judgments are not strongly culturally based, as we observed with Fromentin and especially Loti, but are rather rooted in shared values that are not culture-specific. In much the same manner as Montesquieu over two centuries before, Djebar has disassociated herself from her own culture which, as Todorov stated, discourages the personal identification with any specific set of cultural values that, as we have seen, can impede an author’s capacity for impartiality. While she maintains her position on the side of her fellow Algerians, biasing herself in their favor as she negotiates a space for them within French-language representations, French culture is not her Other: having profited from its value system, it becomes a part of her Self.
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