

# Leïla Sebbar, Voice of Exile

By NANCY DU PLESSIS How to live the legacy of two worlds, divided at birth between the fatherland, Algeria, and the mother country, France? How to breathe in the fragrance of the former and communicate in the tongue of the latter? Then, at the age of maturity, how to leave the school that also was home, the village on the high plateaus of eastern Algeria, to take up residence in damp, gray Paris, never to return. How to live such a profound rupture, how to live it in art?

Leïla Sebbar, whose personal itinerary took this route, says, "Exile is my land of inspiration, lyricism, emotion, writing." Daughter of a Frenchwoman from France and an Algerian man who befriended the freedom fighters and revolutionary intellectuals—both teachers of French in a school for native boys in rural Algeria—Sebbar grew up there speaking French. Product of a mixed marriage during the struggle for independence, not speaking Arabic and not practicing any religion, she was in exile even before leaving the country to continue her university education in "mythological" France. She says, "If I had stayed in my father's country, my native land with which I have such an ambiguous history, I wouldn't have written, because to make that choice would have been to become one with a land, a language; becoming so joined, one's too close to have a clear view or an ear: you don't write, you're not in a position to write. . . . What I write is in homage to Algeria for my father."<sup>1</sup>

In five novels, in essays, stories, and articles, Sebbar has explored her existential condition, which she further articulates in *Lettres parisiens* (1986), a correspondence intended for publication with Canadian

author Nancy Huston, also living in Paris and writing in French: "I am a woman in exile, that is to say, always on the brink, living on the frontier, independent, standing apart, always on the edge, shifting from one side to the other, in permanent imbalance. . . . I write about silence, a blank memory, a history in pieces, a community dispersed, splintered, forever divided. I write of fragments, the void, a poor land, uncultivated, sterile—where you must dig deep and far to bring to light that which you would have forgotten forever."<sup>2</sup>

Her first full-length novel, *Fatima, ou les algériennes au square* (Fatima, or the Algerian Women in the Park; 1981), treats her most favored character type, the illiterate immigrant mother who is "very protective and very attentive and very curious about everything . . . very alert and very often the head of the family" (*LF*, 30). As in subsequent works, events in the story are far less important than the thoughts, memories, and conversations of the many characters who are linked in an almost seamless fashion—literally, without paragraph break or even punctuation. Recollections shared with female friends in the park portray the North African family in the housing project in the French suburbs, a family whose father is in a sanatorium and whose mother single-handedly raises her children, who no longer speak her language. Sipping tea or supervising the little ones in the playground, the women discuss a mother who batters her child, forced marriages, adolescent girls who prostitute themselves, marabouts, and saving for Muslim burials back home. In a frequently used device, Sebbar begins the story near its end: the teen-age Dalila has shut herself into a bedroom after her father has beaten her for coming home late. All

the flashbacks and interpolated stories within the novel occur over a period of eight days—prior to Dalila's own inevitable flight. Sebbar explains:

What is very important to me when I write is not to play psychologist in the style of the great novelists of the nineteenth century—that is, to stop at a given moment and say “The hero was thinking this” or “It is known that he wasn't in a good mood.” I don't know how to write with breaks for psychological developments; I don't succeed in writing them, and I don't want to. I think that my style of using the spoken language—the language of emotion—is to be inside the character in a way that's different from those who tell his psychology. I use the *indirect libre* style—going from the indirect (descriptive) to the interior, from the indirect to the interior—as a way to give emotion and paint the psychology. There are few intrigues as such in my stories. (*LP*, 150)

The work which has received the greatest attention in Algeria—the tour of a stage adaptation is projected, although the books are not readily available—is *Parle mon fils parle à ta mère* (Speak My Son Speak to Your Mother; 1984), an almost unbroken monologue by an immigrant mother addressing the runaway son who has suddenly returned home for a brief visit. To monosyllabic responses, she rambles on about the family, the ideal (Arab) wife for him, what she has heard on the radio, admonishments to remember his prayers. In her original presentation of the French spoken by an unschooled immigrant Arab, in a single eighty-four-page paragraph punctuated only by long dashes and ellipses, Sebbar has created a highly sympathetic and realistic character.

Sebbar's first full-length novel, *Shérazade* (1982),<sup>3</sup> relates the picaresque adventures of a seventeen-year-old daughter of Algerian immigrants who flees the suburban housing project for Paris, possessed only of lots of nerve, green eyes, brown frizzy hair, and a Walkman. Across a formica fast-food table, Julien Desrosiers, the son of former French teachers in Algeria who now studies Arabic and collects Orientalist paintings, spots her, then sees her again in the library. He pursues her, brings her to the Louvre to see the odalisques, to his apartment to savor Wagner and kiwi fruit; he writes a film with her as the main character. Still, Shérazade remains aloof, insolent, and enigmatic: is she really “Camille”? Or “Rosa”? She does not respond to her sister's messages on the free radio; the police never identify her as the runaway reported by her father. She squats an abandoned building with the militant Pierrot, the drug addict Driss, the revolutionary Basile from Guadeloupe, Djamilia, another runaway from Marseilles, and an appealing selection of marginal French adolescents.

Zippering around the capital with her street-chic girlfriends, alarming and amusing both conventional and trendy types, Shérazade describes a reality that is mostly unknown to readers who do not have access to the as-yet-untranslated literature of the “Beurs,” the second-generation North African immigrants. That

population often has been born and raised in France but legally may not be entitled to French citizenship and therefore suffers the difficulties common to all immigrants—except that the “Beurs” are “at home.” Like any second generation, they are not yet assimilated but do not share the language and the culture of their parents, surviving in a constant state of otherness unless—or until—they deny their own history.

From where I see them, from where I hear them (I don't live with them), I would like them to remain unassimilated, singular and violent, strong with their peculiarities and their ability to seize modernity. . . . They are my mythology. . . . I dare say and write it because I know how much I am like them, close and attentive in spite of my age, the privilege of being established, our differences. . . . If I speak of exile, it's because it's the only place where I can speak of the contradictions, the division. . . . It's so complex that I always resent myself for having simplified it. If I speak of exile, I also speak of cultural crossings; it's at the points of meeting or splintering that I live, that I write, so how can I state a simple identity? . . . The subjects of my books are not my identity; they are the sign, the signs of my crossbreed history, of the half-caste obsessed by his route and the roads that cut across it, obsessed by the surrealist encounter of the Other with the Same, by the interbreeding against nature, and the lyricism of the land and the city, of science and flesh, of tradition and modernity, of the East and the West.

Although Sebbar is capable of creating intriguing characters of all ages, nationalities, religious beliefs, and political orientations, her protagonists are mostly minors. Shérazade's spontaneous poetic verse makes her one of the most appealing girl characters in contemporary French literature. She has always contemplated going to Algeria, and one day, after scrawling “I love you” in red lipstick across Julien's bathroom mirror, she heads south with Pierrot, listening to Verdi. They crash their stolen BMW, which explodes with Pierrot and the arms he is smuggling in it. Shérazade walks away, only to turn up again in *Les carnets de Shérazade* (Shérazade's Notebooks; 1985)<sup>4</sup> as the uninvited passenger whom the trucker Gilles discovers asleep in his cab. Since nothing will wake her, he drives off with her, but when he finally sneaks a look in her red-and-black notebook, she jerks awake. He invites her to leave. She proposes telling stories to keep him amused or to prevent him from dozing off. “He looked at her and found her pretty, young, fearless. She looked at him and found him not so young, not so handsome.” For seven days they crisscross France and their memories: Shérazade's escapes, Gilles's girlfriends, Jessye Norman, Rimbaud, the history of Arabs in France, the repentant Italian terrorist in hiding, Chateaubriand. At Nantes, Shérazade rediscovers Basile, in Toulouse, Driss, and in a little hotel she comes upon the disconsolate Julien, who has been searching everywhere for her. Before taking off again, she leaves him a note promis-

ing to come to Paris soon, and when the week is up, she bids good-bye to Gilles at the edge of the capital and saunters into town.

Shérazade may yet make other appearances, admits Sebbar. It was she who enabled the author herself to return briefly to Algeria—but only to the capital—and it was with her in mind that Sebbar went to Israel and the occupied territories: “I don’t want to be finished with her . . . but I don’t like to travel. I don’t like to be the spectator of misery. I’m afraid of exoticism. . . . yet maybe Shérazade will bring me other places” (*LP*, 60).

Meanwhile, Sebbar has continued to deal with the exotic in France. Again and again in her books, the seemingly disparate meet. The protagonist of *Le chinois vert d’Afrique* (The Green Chinese from Africa; 1984) got his name from the physical mix of his Algerian grandfather with his Vietnamese grandmother. Twelve-year-old Momo also has run away from home and lives in a hut in the plot of community gardens, aided and abetted by his older sister. Throughout the book he is on the run from the police and the neighborhood vigilante committee, which searches for the little “savage” and confiscates and studies his strange amulets, knotted strings, and collection of war photos. He corresponds with—but never meets—the slightly older Myra, another crossbreed, plays her his flute in hiding, and leaves the pictures he has taken of her on the sly. He befriends the feminist booksellers, the couple that run the café, a collector of Wagner’s music. Laced through the story of Momo’s flight and the hunt for him is a lyric account of Minh, the Vietnamese bride whom Momo’s grandfather brought back with him to Algeria after fighting in Indochina: her sweet devotion to Momo, the charming details of her life in Vietnam, her adaptation to life in Algeria. A frequent theme in Sebbar’s other novels which figures importantly here too is the Algerian War and the divided attitudes of the French toward this conflict and the former colony.

In Sebbar’s latest novel, *J. H. cherche âme sœur* (Young Man Seeks Soul Sister; 1987),<sup>5</sup> young Jaffar gets out of prison and goes in search of his pen pal Yasmine. At the given address he finds only a smashed mailbox and a partly demolished building, which he learns was a home for unwed mothers. His second mission on achieving his freedom is one given him by his former cellmate, Roland: to look for the latter’s accomplice, the wild postal clerk Lise, who had urged him to commit armed robbery and then ratted on him. Along the way Jaffar gets picked up by Gilles, who mentions a girl named Shérazade, which is also the name of Jaffar’s seventeen-year-old cousin, who also is a runaway . . . . After finally meeting Lise at her family’s farm, Jaffar begins a life of crime with her. During another holdup Lise has proposed, she is killed, and later, back in the same cell with Roland,

Jaffar is eventually forced to reveal her fate. With the same careful attention given the urban and suburban disadvantaged youth in this book, Sebbar has expanded her scope to encompass the lower-class rural community.

In keeping with her concern for the “Beur” population, Sebbar’s most recent publication is the literary text for a photo album entitled *Génération métisse* (Crossbreed Generation; 1988), which deals with the current artistic contributions of this same group. Her numerous short stories deal principally with the second generation of North Africans in France, but she also presents the hideous nature of apartheid in the tale of a black servant’s indulgence toward the white child she cares for when he insists that they dawdle on the way home, only to have the child’s mother beat her precisely for being late (“La négresse à l’enfant,” 1986). She develops her stated love for the voices of women to a mythic degree in “La loi de retour” (1987), in which women harvesting olives begin to shout and continue shouting until they manage to draw everyone who hears their cry, even from very far away, back to them. The only man among them is the public scribe who records the poem they are shouting. Finally, the soldiers open fire, killing everyone but the scribe, who continues to write “what he understands of these words that came to him from the voices of women who shout no longer” (*LP*, 126).

In the autobiographical essay “Si je parle la langue da ma mère” (1978) Sebbar painstakingly dissects her emotional refusal and final acceptance of her pronounceable Arab name and her relation to the French language, her “mother tongue,” her mode of communication passed on by the severe schoolmistress, her mother: “I’m called Leïla and I teach the language of my mother to those who speak it because they speak the language of their mothers. And I write in the tongue of my mother. To come back to myself. I was a good colonized subject. Like my father.”<sup>6</sup> With understated passion and wry humor, Leïla Sebbar gives voice to those who do not have access to the general public. Hers is a woman’s voice; it speaks French, but it addresses concerns common throughout the world.

Paris

<sup>1</sup> Leïla Sebbar, *Lettres parisiens*, Paris, Stock, 1987, pp. 135, 21. Subsequent citations use the abbreviation *LP*. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy du Plessis, interview with Leïla Sebbar, Paris, 7 November 1988. Subsequent unattributed citations are from the transcript of this conversation.

<sup>3</sup> Leïla Sebbar, *Shérazade*, Paris, Stock, 1982. For a review, see *WLT* 57:4 (Autumn 1983), p. 676.

<sup>4</sup> Leïla Sebbar, *Les carnets de Shérazade*, Paris, Stock, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Leïla Sebbar, *J. H. cherche âme sœur*, Paris, Stock, 1987. For a review, see *WLT* 62:4 (Autumn 1988), p. 711.

<sup>6</sup> Sebbar, *Les carnets de Shérazade*, p. 7.