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## ***Aṣābi* ‘ *Lūlītā*: Postmodernizing the Postcolony: *Nedjma* and beyond**

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**Abstract.** This essay tackles the way the postcolony is refigured in Waciny Laredj’s *Aṣābi* ‘ *Lūlītā* (2012). It makes use of a number of theoretical insights to uncover the interplay between the representation of the colony during the colonial period through a brief examination of the fly metaphor in *Nedjma*, first published in 1956, and that of the postcolony. Relying on intertextuality, the essay attempts to highlight how the metaphor of the femme fatale, a key trope in *Nedjma*, is relocated in the interstices between national and transnational ways of constructing Arab identity that continues to be both here and there. The intertextual nature of *Aṣābi* ‘ complicates the postcolony as it rewrites it. This rewriting seems to highlight the tragic position of Arab characters that continue to vacillate between a traditional past and a postmodern present. Thus, Waciny Laredj subverts the femme fatale trope by making it literal and ends up shaking the very basis of the postcolonial state.

### **1. Introduction**

The Algerian novel written in Arabic knew its beginning with Abdelhamid Benhadouga and Tahar Wattar in the early 1960s, and had been seen as a reaction to the “French linguistic and cultural domination.” [1] (p. 122) This reaction had been grounded in the massive movement of Arabization which the revolutionary post-independence state adopted as a means of restoring to Algeria its Arab identity and ultimately undercutting the hegemony of the Algerian novel written in French. This led to a highly politicized interpretation of the Algerian novel written in Arabic. For Debbie Cox, for instance, “Wattar’s writing is overtly politicized,” and his novels are a marker of “state command” in virtue of “the discourse of the cultural revolution and state control over publishing.” [2] (p. 94) Similarly, Rita Salam interpreted the Algerian novel in Arabic as a minority literature, and argued that the post-independence state instrumentalized the novel to legitimize the Arabic language and “eliminate other languages and cultures” from what she called the “linguistic and cultural field” of Algeria. [3] (p. 97) In this essay I argue that the writings of Wāsīnī Al-A’radj (Waciny Laredj) attempt to go beyond this polarized view towards what can be called a thirdspace. In fact, both formally and thematically Laredj’s novels tend to draw a total picture of Algeria that extends from the colonial period to the postcolonial one reflecting a relative break away of the Algerian novel written in Arabic from the influence of the state ideology.

Many of Laredj’s novels are concerned with the issue of modernity and are set in the West. *Shurufāt Baḥr al-Shamāl*, (2002) [Balconies of the North Sea] is set in Amsterdam while *Ramād al-sharq: Kharīf Nyū Yūrḳ al-Akhīr* (2013) [Ashes of the East: New York’s Last Autumn] is set in New York. However, his characters remain completely dependent on their memories, and they usually gather back bits of their past lives in their home country. Like the two aforementioned novels, *Aṣābi* ‘ *Lūlītā* (2012) [Lolita’s Fingers] is set in Europe, and despite the western setting, or perhaps because of it, Laredj’s characters continue to be drawn to Algeria. Set in Western Europe (Paris and Frankfurt), *Aṣābi* ‘ attempts to represent the trajectory of Algeria’s recent history through a double prism that lends itself to a reading informed by both postcolonial theory and postmodern thinking. This essay draws on notions such as postcolony and thirdspace as well as on postmodernist techniques like intertextuality, irony, allegory and parody, and argues that while *Aṣābi* ‘ is set mostly in Paris, it remains strongly drawn to Algeria and re-imagines it in a way that adopts a both/and perspective by re-contextualizing the national narrative in a postmodern context, characterized by, among other things, the thin divide between fact and fiction, and the collapsing of times, spaces, and genres.

The postcolonial thrust of the novel resides in the author's attempt to emulate, reclaim (and eventually rewrite) a literary Algerian canon, *Nedjma*, while the postmodern one can be seen in the use of techniques such as literary collage and the fusion of history and reality. This writing strategy caters to both the colonial and the postcolonial conditions of Algeria, reflecting a constant interest in thirding as a strategy of opening up the Algerian (and the Arab) identity to postmodernity, creating thus a space of representation that blurs the boundaries between identities and nations, times and spaces, and national narratives through the recovery of key moments in Algeria's recent history and the celebration of exile as a form of existence. The move from the colonial (and the postcolonial) era is effected through the establishment of a sense of continuity between the experience of imprisonment in both the colonial and the postcolonial eras on the one hand, and the experience of exile in France on the other.

## 2. Methodology

Achille Mbembe defines the "postcolony" as "a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves." In its discursive actualization, the postcolony takes the form of "a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes" relying on various techniques. [4] (p. 102) In this respect, Mbembe points to the postcolony's nonlinearity as an "an age" that "encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another." This nonlinearity makes of the postcolony both a site for, and a space of, "entanglement" and "displacement" [4] (p. 14). The postcolony, like every other age, is a "combination of several temporalities." [4] (p. 15) Such a conception of the postcolony as "a time of existence and experience" challenges any linear understanding of time so much so that the postcolony becomes "an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones." According to Achille Mbembe, "the time of the postcolony ... is made up of disturbances, of a bundle of unforeseen events, of more or less regular fluctuations and oscillations, not necessarily resulting in chaos and anarchy." [4] (p. 16) The notion of entanglement is certainly very useful in approaching the postcolony as rendered by Laredj in *Aṣābi'*, not simply as a manifestation of temporalities following Mbembe's conception, but also as a spatial configuration of both the colony and the postcolony. Indeed, the notion of entanglement, though seen temporally, strongly recalls Edward Soja's idea of "spatial configuration" when he states that "putting phenomena in a temporal sequence ... somehow came to be seen as more significant and critically revealing than putting them beside or next to each other in a spatial configuration." [5] (p. 168) In this sense, Thirdspace, or what Soja calls the trialectics of historicity-sociality-spatiality, becomes a transdisciplinary perspective in the light of which human life can be reinterpreted and revalued. Yet, space should not be understood as a stage or a setting for action, completely divorced from "subjects." In fact, for Soja "There are no aspatial social processes" even when "pure abstraction, ideology, and representation" are involved. Thus, social reality is not a coincidental matter nor is it only time- or history-induced as there is no unspatialized reality. Soja reinterprets Lefebvre and argues that the reconsideration of space as a category implicates taking into consideration its "particular acuity in enabling social and political action to change the world." In other words, space is all-encompassing in the sense that "'everything' also occurs in space, not merely incidentally but as a vital part of lived experience, as part of the (social) production of (social) space, the construction of individual and societal spatialities." [5] (p. 46) This notion of thirdspace as an all-encompassing category is very clear in Soja's formulation that:

Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history." [5] (pp. 56-7)

Seen in this way, both Mbembe's postcolony and Soja's thirdspace seem to overlap and can be applied to the postcolonial novel in Arabic. This article draws on this conceptualization of the postcolony and attempts to analyse Laredj's novel by foregrounding the notions of entanglement and displacement while at the same time paying attention to postmodernity as a new site for the production and consumption of Algerian and Arab identity within the context of what Silverstein calls "transpolitics", identified as "The processes of collusion and contention, of appropriation and transformation, that link Algeria and France—Algerians and Franco-Algerians." [6] (p. 7) This notion of transpolitics is strongly tied to the issue of immigration, which in turn reveals a deep crisis in the nation-state. [7] (p. 1)

In *Aṣābi*, "transpolitics" is rendered through the use of intertextuality and parody highlighting a contradictory thirdspace that fuses incommensurable histories, texts, and spaces. It is in this sense a postmodern novel that, while opening itself up to "history", underscoring its "worldliness", foregrounds its "un-innocent historiographic" stand, and continues to celebrate its doubleness. This doubleness manifests itself in the conscious juxtaposition of "the presence of the past" of Algeria and the present past of France [8] (pp. 124;125). Laredj's novels in general, and *Aṣābi* in particular, undermine the colonial and postcolonial contexts and provide an alternate context of transidentity. I use the word "transidentity" rather than transsubjectivity because Laredj's characters seem to retain an "essential", though not immutable, relationship to their origin, irrespective of whether or not this origin is real or imagined.

This revisionist attitude towards European culture points to the pitfalls of modernity and coloniality. In this perspective, Lamia ben Youssef Zayzafoon argues that "In contrast with both Western and Arab scholars who read the Holocaust as a chapter in 20<sup>th</sup> (sic) European history, Laredj reconstructs it as a continuum of the Arab and Jewish experience in Spain." [9] (p. 71) Laredj's revisionist stand considers and values people as humans, rather than as essential constructs or products of an exclusivist conception of culture. In so doing, he attempts to go beyond unifying discourses of nationalism to adumbrate what Rachel Trousdale calls a transnational alternate world, which provides "a different kind of physicality for experimental fusions into which the individual may sink his roots." [10] (p. 7) In this sense, it can be argued, following Trousdale, that "alternate-historical settings provide the bases for forming new communal identities," based on new forms of affiliation that are attentive to "a general appreciation of humankind but in a simultaneous commitment to local particularities and to a global conception of humanity" [10] (pp. 2; 8) These liminal forms of affiliation point to the shortcomings of categorizing individuals along racialized, gendered, or cultured ways of seeing, paving the way for new ways of approaching them in a transnational context. Thus, as Trousdale argues, "transnationalism draws attention to what it negates—that is, the continued significance of the national" while at the same time critiquing it, and trying "to have it both ways: to cross borders and to acknowledge them, to fuse separate places and to recognize their separation." [10] (p. 12) In dramatizing the dynamics of exile and establishing it as a new form of imprisonment in the *metropole*, *Aṣābi* seems to accentuate inwardness while at the same time searching for other possibilities of resistance to authoritarianism and unifying nationalist discourse championed by both the postcolonial and the ex-colonial states as well as the modern European state. In this respect, Al-Musawi associates exile narratives with "inwardness, confession, and revelation that bring the reader closer to the human and the real" [11] (p. 2), while Trousdale interprets exile narratives within a perspective that allows for the exiles "imaginary worlds" to create "alternate-historical settings" that "examine the origins of power, community, and loyalty to reveal identity as a participatory process in which there is no passive audience," and ultimately "provide the bases for forming new communal identities." These communal identities "reshape the notion of national identity into an intellectual and emotional, rather than geographical, affiliation." [10] (pp. 3; 2) In *Aṣābi*, the attempt to create what Trousdale calls "alternate-historical settings" is effected through two techniques. The first relates to the challenging of national forms of affiliation by drawing contentious views about Frenchness and the second resides in the celebration of exile as a state of indeterminacy while valuing celebrated narratives whose subtext is exile.

### 3. Discussion

Marina recalls a Chilean friend of his with the name of Esmeralda commenting on a painting; she says: “in the depth of every one of us there is a covert desire to destroy the myth and reshape it anew with one’s own tools.” [12] (p. 186) This seems to be also Laredj’s desire in *Aṣābi*. The novel makes use of diverse strategies, ranging from an overt feminist engagement to intertextuality, as well as the collapsing of times and spaces in an attempt to relocate an early version of Algeria as woman in a postmodern era. In *Aṣābi*, as I shall try to demonstrate shortly, the inwardness alluded to above operates at the level of relocating the colonial era within a postcolonial one, while at the same time trying to create an “alternate-historical” setting grounded in a postmodern era allowing thus for a possibility of adumbrating a thirdspace. The relocation of the colonial era reuses *Nedjma* (1956) as an intertext. This relates to the “feminization” of the nation and the narrative exploitation of a whole imagery of insects deployed to relocate the postcolony in the metropolitan space. Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma* is replete with images that make use of insects and animals. Demonstrators are compared to ants. For example, when Rachid, one of Nedjma’s four lovers, is imprisoned after hitting a Frenchman, he is appalled by the sight of a spider whilst Nedjma and the Black Man are described as being “open to the first patrols of ants.” [13] (p. 132) However, the most telling scene is one where Algeria is compared to a fly:

I have hidden La Vie d’Abdelkader  
I have found Algeria irascible. Her breathing  
The breathing of Algeria was enough.  
Enough to keep off the flies.  
And then Algeria herself became...  
Became treacherously a fly. [13] (p. 49)

It is in the context of the early period of anti-colonial struggle that Kateb Yacine grounds and symbolically buries Algeria. The metaphorical association of Algeria with flies, subsumed in criticism within the far-arching metaphor of Algeria as woman, as Nedjma, symbolizing “an Algeria yet to be born in pain” [14] (p. III) is relocated in *Aṣābi* in the prison cell where Babana, a character representing Ahmed Benbella, is imprisoned after his deposition by the “colonel”, the name that the novel gives to Haouri Boumediane: Babana

resisted solitude in the company of a small fly that entered his cell by coincidence. Whenever food was put in front of him, she emerged out of her darkness and fear and came to share with him his food and his seclusion. [12] (p. 73)

In *Nedjma*, P’tit Joe, a prisoner who shares the same cell with Rachid, addresses the police officer who was trying to kill the spider on Rachid’s body using a whip by saying to him: “what if it [the spider] got angry?... It would be capable of biting you, this dirty spider which has always lived with the indigenous and the louts...” [13] (p. 36) The whip tellingly recalls Fanon’s assertion that “the colonial world” is “a world which is sure of itself, which crushes with its stones the backs flayed by whips” [15] (Fanon 1963, 52) The irony of beating the spider off Rachid’s body foreshadows the Sétif massacre in 1945 and strongly suggests the parallel between the colonizer and the colonized. P’tit Joe’s critique also contrasts the natives’ behavior with that of the colons when he asks the police officer: “What would your small children, who are always so clean that they throw away good God’s bread, say if a fly, a simple fly came to eat with them?” [13] (p. 36) Laredj appropriates this scene and relocates it within the the postcolony by replacing Rachid with Babana and drawing a stark image where the enmity between the fly and the spider is made more explicit and symbolic. Furthermore, the metaphor is given another twist by humanizing the fly and giving it a name. By naming her after his mother, Babana grants the fly a high value and she becomes the provider of meaning in a world characterized by violence and treason. When Babana is lonely he talks to her and tells her: “Hey, Lalla Mina, may God save and preserve you ... You are not just a fly, more than that. You are my mediator so that I won’t relinquish my right to life which they want to take away from me” [12] (p. 74). In addition, the enmity between the fly, symbolizing Algeria, and the spider, symbolizing the colonizer, is made more explicit in *Aṣābi*. Alone in his cell, Babana

misses Lalla Mina's company and looks for her only to be surprised that it "was hanging at a spider's web" and he resolves to "take his revenge from the spider." [12] (p. 75) Babana's symbolic act of killing the spider resuscitates the historical subtext of the Algerian war of liberation, in which Babana/Ahmed ben Bella together with the colonel (Haouri Boumediene) played an important part.

In a conversation with Eva, the translator of his novels, Yūnus Marina evokes Nawwa (Lūlītā) as a femme fatale, thus echoing *Nedjma*. [12] (p. 46) This invocation is part of what Geneviève Chevrolat calls allusive intertextuality. [16] (p. 449) A further consideration of the intertextual relationship between *Aṣābi* and *Nedjma* reveals that the two novels share more than one aspect. Thus, the conflicting fourpartite representation of *Nedjma* by her four lovers is retrieved and relocated in Yūnus Marina's multiple identities. In fact, he has four names, each of which represents part of his entangled identity. Nawwa-Lūlītā, the female protagonist, has also four names, aside from her postmodern one, Lūlītā, which Yūnus Marina gives to her. While the play on the number four in the two characters' names can be seen as a form of (playful) allusive intertextuality, it caters more to the fragmentation of identities in the postmodern era. Another motif that establishes a parallel between Nawwa-Lūlītā and *Nedjma* relates to their situation as victims. *Nedjma* is a victim of anonymity in the sense that she gets married to someone who might be her brother since her father is unknown, while Nawwa was raped by her father and later by her brother. Furthermore, *Nedjma* is associated (by Rachid, one of her four lovers) with Salammbô in Flaubert's historical novel, *Salammbô* (1862) [16] (pp. 455; 457), and Nawwa-Lūlītā is associated by Yūnus Marina with Lolita, the female protagonist in Nabokov's celebrated novel. However, while *Nedjma* symbolizes colonized Algeria, Nawwa-Lūlītā is the female figure that epitomizes the later period of post-independence Algeria as she was born roughly during the beginning of the Algerian Civil war. Thus, Laredj belatedly uses the technique of conflating woman and nation, which, as Beth Baron has shown, was adopted by artists after the 1919 revolution to represent Egypt as a woman. However, Nawwa-Lūlītā is not portrayed as a woman whose honor has to be defended, but rather as a victim of the discourse of political Islam. [17] (pp. 40-81; 107-34) This parallelism between Nawwa-Lūlītā and *Nedjma* is not the only striking feature in *Aṣābi*. The lifelines of Yūnus Marina and that of Babana are also conflated to serve as a technique of collapsing temporalities.

Another scene that recalls a similar one in *Nedjma* relates to Yūnus Marina's early relationship with a prostitute before he managed to escape to France. In *Nedjma*, when Rachid is being chased by a policeman, he tries to find refuge in a brothel. Inside the brothel, he finds a prostitute and asks her to give him her scarf in order to wear it as a disguise, but she refuses. [13] (p. 32) When the policeman asks her about him, she says: "here he's, take him in his own sheet like a son of a dog, and pay attention he's got the rabies." [13] (p. 33) While the relationship between Rachid and the prostitute is inimical and violent, the one between Yūnus Marina and the prostitute is one of care and protection. She has protected him from his enemies. At the beginning, the woman, reduced to her fingers, was the only thing that connected him to the outside reality. The fingers as a form of fetish later reconnect Nawwa-Lūlītā with the prostitute creating a sense of continuity between the colonial period and the postcolonial one. Laredj's portrayal of this prostitute, who calls herself Marie Madeleine, is also consonant with popular culture. Raving about her body, he recalls a popular song about women and drinks: "hey, madam, lady of the house / your navel is a crystal glass / I'll fill it with Whisky and Rijkard / and let the fire burn me..." [12] (p. 56) The incorporation of popular oral culture [12] (pp. 119-20; 253; 280) within the novel's fabric plays a "compensating role", and is used to undermine authoritarianism [11] (p. 8) at home and to open the Algerian woman to an allegedly gratifying postmodernity. In this respect, Marie Madeleine, who defines herself spatially as "a threshold between Heaven and Hell", and her place as a site of encounter of "the poor and the rich, the civil and the military, the ugly and the beautiful, the smart and the stupid, the intellectual and the illiterate," as ultimately "a no man's land," [12] (p. 59) seems to underscore the myriad forces that pull the postcolony apart. Furthermore, the strong association of this prostitute with Marie Madeleine collapses the religious discourse and the social reality of women implying that every human being is fallible. By portraying the prostitute positively and liminally, Laredj simultaneously reverses and enables the position of the female protagonist in

*Nedjma*. In addition, the prostitute in *Aṣābi* is well-read as she discusses with Yūnus Marina western novels, after which they fall for each other. Their desire for each other was ignited by one another's furtive touching of each other's fingers as the narrator was forbidden to go out of his hiding place.

The relationship between Marina and the prostitute is reminiscent of the colonial period. In her place, Marina discovers a copy of a painting, "aṣl al- 'ālam," "l'origine du monde" ("The Origin of the World") by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), [12] (p. 61), given to her by an unnamed man called "the son of the Frenchwoman." Details about the painting reveal its liminality, and reflect both the West and the East since the painting was made in response to a demand by Khalil Bey, a Muslim Turkish diplomat. [12] (p. 62) The prostitute reveals the subversive nature of the painting when she tells Marina that Gustave Courbet "opened the doors large on the theme of eroticism." "In 'L'origine du monde,'" she continues, "he made explicit what was implicit in Manet's Olympia, nettling thus the hypocrisy of the world." [12] (pp. 61-2) This uncovering of what is implicit in the two paintings seems to be applicable to the relationship between Nedjma and Nawwa-Lūlītā. This seems to operate at two levels. The first one relates to the construction of Nedjma as a symbol of the end of courtly love [16] (p. 462) while the second is linked to the narrative re-orchestration of the image of the femme fatale not as a mere metaphor anymore, but rather as a truth since she will kill herself eventually in the streets of Paris.

*Nedjma* is not the only text which *Aṣābi* appropriates. The opening sentence in *Aṣābi* reads as follows: "Impossible...the perfume has also got a memory..." [12] (p. 11) This recalls strongly Ahlam Mustaghanemi's celebrated novel, *Dhākirat al-Jasad* (1993) [18], translated as *Memory in the Flesh*. In addition, when Marina discovers Nawwa-Lūlītā's young body, he provocatively tells her: "This body barely has a memory" [12] (p. 182), parodying the title of Mustaghanemi's novel. Marina's statement is further complicated as it is contextualized in a remembrance of his about the "Origin of the World" painting discussed above. Another motif that points to Mustaghanemi's *Dhākirat* occurs when Marina and Nawwa-Lūlītā talk about a bridge in Paris, a recurrent theme in *Dhākirat*, and Marina in a somewhat theatrical way enumerates the literary figures who have been to the bridge and includes the Algerian novelist Malek Haddad, who wrote a novel entitled *Le quai des fleurs ne répond plus*. The invocation is further complicated by the fact that the central character in this pseudo-autobiographical novel, Khaled Ben Tobal, is also the name of the central character in *Dhākirat al-Jasad*. The link between *Aṣābi* and *Dhākirat* can be found in their appropriation and reinterpretation of the Algerian war of Liberation. However, while *Dhākirat* is seen as a form of resistance of the "Algerian writers writing in Arabic who confront unarmed the onslaughts of Francophony," [19](p.123) celebrating the Arabic language as a means of interrupting the hegemony of French, and reviving thus the old question of the choice of language in Algerian (and Maghrebian) literature and society, *Aṣābi* challenges this "purist" tendency and argues that French is part of Algerianness and that identity is hybrid and liminal invoking the work of memory as a constant reconstruction of the interplay between the present and the past.

Thus *Aṣābi* develops out of a constant shift between the past and the present, where borders and boundaries are constantly crossed. This ends in the protagonists being both here and there at the same time. This dialogue is perceived through two techniques: first, the importation of French words, sometimes long passages into the Arabic text, and second through the highlighting of translation. The first technique can be accounted for by the author's own views about the interplay between languages and identities. For Waciny Laredj, French is not the language of the colonizer only, since "the French language in which part of my imagination is now shaped, is not only a language with about two centuries of presence in Algeria, that is it has some legitimacy, but also because it is in us, it is part of our imaginary that is shared with other peoples. It propels us beyond the window of our small and safe house." [20](p. 66) Thus, while Laredj defends Arabic as an important component of Algerian identity, arguing that it is "not the hermetic language of the Qur'an, but it is a free space, a language of love and above all a language of modernity, which our epoch and superficial politics have travestied and reduced" [20](p. 63), he simultaneously underscores the importance of French as a liberating force for his bilingual characters and counters

views and opinions of other characters in Ahlam Mustghanemi's novels, for instance. So unlike Khalid, for whom French is a marker of sentimentalism and romanticism [18] (p. 90), Hayat thinks that French, which she sometimes speaks "out of habit" is "neutral." [18] (pp. 91;66) However, Arabic is *the* language of writing because it is the language of the heart [18] (p. 91). This dichotomizing of the choice of language in *Dhākirat* is never problematized in any of Laredj's novels, including *Aṣābi*. This is very clear with respect to Marina, who is not so much preoccupied by the question of the choice of language or the importation of French words into his speech and ultimately into his novels as he is concerned with the reception and the translation of his novels.

In a conference on memory organized in Barcelona, Yūnus Marina meets Babana. It is significant that it was Babana who asked to see Yūnus Marina, whom he recognized as being from his own city, Marina. For Yūnus Marina, the encounter is highly symbolic as he tells his Argentinian friend, Joachim: "...I was thinking ... how all this time passed as though history had been rushing and suddenly it stopped short to contemplate itself rigorously and toughly for a moment." [12] (p. 329) This rigor turns into a tragedy whose hero/victim is Babana himself. In an aside, Yūnus Marina remembers the meeting in the following terms: "I was face to face with a tragedy that [Babana] himself couldn't realize." [12] (p. 331). The tragedy does not concern only the deposition and later imprisonment of Babana, which marks the failure of the postcolonial state. It is a tragedy where Yūnus Marina and Nawwa-Lūlītā are the victims since after the coup Marina's father was killed and buried in a place that only Babana knew, and secondly because Nawwa-Lūlītā was raped during the later period of the postcolonial state. Thus, both Nawwa-Lūlītā and Marina seem to be variant products of the postcolonial state.

After his first meeting with Babana, Marina couldn't help remembering Nawwa-Lūlītā: "I had no force to confront him. And I don't know how at that moment I remembered Lūlītā, who overcame her fear, closed her eyes, and went to settle her account for good with her memory." [12] (p. 334) This tragedy is brought to bear on the post-independence state as a whole when Yūnus Marina tells Babana that "independence atrociously disfigured many people, killed others, and exiled the rest to get rid of their noisy remarks." [12] (p. 340) Later Yūnus Marina and Babana evoke together the fly scene. For Babana, the fly is equated with life, as he tells Yūnus Marina: "My story with the fly was a great one. It was [the story of] life." [12] (p. 337) Thus, the fly is maintained as a form of resistance in an invocation of the insect imagery in *Nedjma*. However, it is a futile resistance since it does not lead to any form of reconciliation with memory. In what seems to be a *mea culpa*, Babana tells Yūnus Marina that: "I have no convincing answer. I may disappoint you... When I got out of prison I visited the region and asked to be led to the carob tree... There was only a part of the wood left while the land was submerged by the water of the dam that was built on it." [12] (p. 341) Thus, although Babana is a fatherly figure who symbolically stands for Marina's lost father, Babana himself was unable to help him recover the body and ultimately the memory of his father. This sense of loss makes Marina deny any sense of belonging to the nation [12] (p. 333). Therefore, he sinks his roots in the "no man's land" that writing constitutes for him [12] (p. 59).

Another element that points to the novel's incipient interest in reviving the atmosphere of the early postcolonial period can be seen in the symbolic reappropriation of the title of Fanon's seminal book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. In *Aṣābi*, "the wretched of the earth" becomes the title name of the secret newspaper in which Yūnus Marina and his friends published articles that criticized the orchestrators of the 1965 coup in Algeria. Furthermore, Marina's own understanding of writing suggests that intertextuality played an important part in the articles he published; the narrator states:

He [Marina] remembered having read in a book, before writing the article that displaced him across many cities, that the country that initiates its reign with a coup, whets the appetite of the killers, the adventurers, and the mercenary politicians. At best, and in a seeable period, it builds a nest for voracity and killers. It doesn't initiate any space for happiness at all. As was often the case with him, he didn't care who said this. But he liked the sentence and he used it as an opening for his article. [12] (p. 68)

Thus, for Marina, both history and the (history of the) novel become intertwined and mixed together. When he remembers Nawwa-Lūlītā during a conversation with Eva, he cannot help evoking his past in Algeria when he tells her that Nawwa-Lūlītā has some “scary certainty” about her that reminds him of “something ambiguous and evasive that lay in his depth.” [12] (p. 48) In addition, Nawwa-Lūlītā is seen by Eva as a she-wolf. For both of them, Nawwa-Lūlītā is the “femme fatale” as I have stated earlier. This link between Nawwa-Lūlītā and Marina’s memory is further compounded when the latter remembers his first days in France (Paris) while on the train, listening to a song by Edith Piaf and finally says to himself, “Oh, Mum ...history has caught me (lit. us) up.” [12] (p. 60)

Therefore, through intertextuality Laredj’s discourse in *Aṣābi* ‘ retrieves both the aesthetic and the historical archive of Algeria to parody the past [8] (pp. 125; 127). Indeed, parody, as Linda Hutcheon has it, serves “both to enshrine the past and to question it.” [8] (p.126) While the enshrining is carried out in relation to memory, the questioning is grounded in the real experience of the two central characters in Paris.

Although Yūnus Marina and Mūsa Ait Mḥand Laḥmar were both strong opponents of the Colonel’s regime, and both were tracked by the “colonel’s wolves”, their life trajectories are different. While Marina, warned by Mūsa Ait Mḥand Laḥmar and sheltered by Haj Mrizeq, an ex-Mujahid in the Algerian Revolution, escaped to France, Mūsa Ait Mḥand Laḥmar was caught and imprisoned until his release “on December 28, 1978” after 13 years of imprisonment. [12] (p. 93) After his release following the death of the Colonel, Mūsa Ait Mḥand Laḥmar calls on Marina in Paris. Their short discussion reveals their different positions vis-à-vis the colonel’s legacy. Mūsa Ait Mḥand Laḥmar, old and sick, notwithstanding his qualification of the “colonel’s wolves” as “the killers”, who were “worse than Goebells, digging up death holes for all those who were against them,” [12] (p. 94) prefers to reconcile his memory with the past by pardoning and forgetting. For him, pardon is the only possibility since he does not want “to carry my rancor with me to my grave” [12] (p. 95) In addition, he pardons the colonel for two reasons: first, because Babana himself pardoned him and second because the colonel’s “belonging to the poor and his sense of nationalism were genuine.” [12] (p. 96)

Yūnus Marina, however, adopts a different stand. Like Yassine in *Shurufāt Baḥr al-Shamāl*, Marina can pardon the colonel and by extension the state only on the condition of state accountability reflecting Laredj’s own view [9] (p. 65). When Mūsa Ait Mḥand Laḥmar asks him to end his self-imposed exile and return to Algeria, he tells him:

Do you remember? You want to get rid of your memory, and perhaps you have buried it alive. I want to get rid of my memory, but I have a burning desire to question it; why all this loss and enormity? Why this mess? And for whom does it profit? ... I want an answer. I’m not satisfied with destinies nor with the post-independence problems. Unaccountability is what encourages the killers to be involved in killing. [12] (p. 97)

Thus, for Yūnus Marina exile is permanent. Unlike Khalid in *Dhākirat* for instance, who returns to his country, Yūnus Marina sees no possibility of return from exile. He cannot return to Algeria, not only because his mother is dead, but also and most importantly because he thinks he does not have a land anymore. In a telling sentence, he tells his friend that he has no land but his language. [12] (p. 98) This substitution of land with language and writing calls to mind Laredj’s own view, for whom:

The writer does not identify only with a land, but with something more: with an area with all its contradictions, with a century with the most ridiculous of its upheavals, with a limitless cultural space with no visible walls. With this entire arsenal, the writer gets settled in the impossible definition of places; that is, in a plural and indefinable territory which has no name other than a simple word: Writing.” [20] (p. 88)

Indeed, to his friend Mūsa, he says: “I have chosen another destiny to recover from the state itself, and that is writing.” [12] (p. 99) However, the discussion between the two friends ends on a positive note as each of them concedes that the other might be right.

### “The Fly”: a Postmodern Rendering of a Colonial Image

In *Aṣābi*, Marina invokes Babana’s imprisonment and the growing familiarity that got established between him and a fly that kept him company. The metaphor of the fly is invoked by Laredj in relation to his defense of the Arabic language when he asks: “Can we erase the effect of fourteen centuries that shaped and continue to shape today the gaze of Algerians with a fan strike as we do to keep a fly off?” [20] (pp. 63-4) As suggested above, relying on allusive intertextuality, Laredj establishes a kind of continuity between the early colonial period (allusive reference to *Nedjma*) and the early post-independence strife among the Army of Liberation (Babana and the colonel). This sense of continuity is carried over into the *metropole* through the creation of a strong parallel between the fly imagery and a valuable painting which Marina finds by chance in a the leather cover of a table he bought in a flea market in Paris. The move from the prison fly to the fly painting is arbitrary, for there is hardly any causal relationship between the two unless it be of course the narrator’s consciousness.

For Marina, the painting, called “The Fly”, is important “not because of its historical value, but because it depicts part of my life trajectory.” [12] (p. 343) This painting becomes the object of some art burglar interest and by the same token enters the circle of interest of the French police under whose protection Marina is. The painting itself reflects unoriginality as it was thought that another layer was added to it, underscoring the palimpsest-like nature of artistic creation in addition to the strong implications related to the unknown identity of its creator. Furthermore, the painting relocates Algerian history within the space of the *metropole*, giving thus another turn to the idea of continuity. This narrative relocation is brought to bear on the ongoing debate on identity in postcolonial France. In this context, Paul A. Silverstein argues that “immigration is a prime site on which debates over the future of the nation-state within a unifying Europe take place.” [6] (p. 14) This debate is undercut by Laredj’s discourse which focuses on the atrocities of Nazism and equates the victims’ suffering with that of colonized subjects.

Thus the 1965 coup that deposed Ben Bella is framed within two key moments in Europe’s history. The first is the deportation of the Jews during the Nazi regime, rendered through the appropriation of Anne Frank’s memoir in *Shurufāt Baḥr al-Shamāl*, and the second is the 1945 Sétif massacre. These two moments are interwoven in Marina’s memory, who quotes President Haouri Boumediene’s own remembrance of the massacre, saying: “That day I aged prematurely. The adolescent that I had been became a man. That day the world changed dramatically. Even the forefathers budged under earth. And the children understood that they had to combat arms in hands to become free men.” [12] (p.67) Boumediene’s invocation concerns May 8, 1945 in Algeria and points to the start of Algeria’s anticolonial armed struggle. The invocation also seems to be an incrimination of the colonial presence in Algeria, especially of the 1945 massacre, eclipsed in France for a long time by May 8 commemoration ritual [21] (pp. 7-8). The recovery of this event is meant to be understood as a continuation of Waciny Laredj’s interest in what some critics call the Algerian myth of the War of Liberation. In fact, this myth, which is “a founding act in the resurgence of the State of Algeria, is not inscribed in Algeria’s collective memory only, but it is at the heart of the dominant ideology, a federative core of all social categories, the epic sublimated by the popular imaginary.” [22] (p. 111)

### Collage: Parodying Authenticity and Nationalism

While in a Frankfurt book exhibition signing his latest novel, *Arsh al-shayṭān*, translated into German, Yūnus Marina’s olfactory sense is suddenly awakened by a strong perfume of a woman. Invoking Patrick Süskind’s central character in *The Perfume*, he becomes obsessed with locating the woman in question. This echoes a similar scene in Ahlam Mustghanemi’s novel, *Fawḍā al-Hawās*, where the “perfume has a memory.” [23] (p. 70). However, unlike in Mustghanemi’s novel, where memory is framed within a nationalist framework, in *Aṣābi* Marina associates this scent with the fictive character in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, [24] even before he knows that the woman in question is a Frenchwoman of Algerian origin. Thus, Nawwa takes on another, transnational identity while at the

same time continuing to stand for Algeria. The technique of grafting another identity on a previous one bears similarities with collage, defined as “lift[ing] a certain number of elements from works, objects, preexisting messages, and ... integrat[ing] them in a new creation in order to produce an original totality manifesting ruptures of diverse sorts.” [25] (p. 84) Thus, the fractured identity of Nawwa-Lūlītā becomes a transnationalized Algeria while at the same time continuing to allude to the 1950’s, the period when *Lolita* was written and published. Furthermore, passages from *Lolita* are incorporated in *Aṣābi*. Even Yūnus Marina wonders about the strangeness of this happening when he says: “Isn’t it strange to encounter a woman who steps out of a book that you read thirty years before...?” [12] (p. 46) The reference to *Lolita* (both the character and the novel), however, operates at two levels. The first relates to the relationship between exile and national sentiment and the second is connected with the sexual abuse of women. In its appropriation of *Lolita* as a symbol and myth, *Aṣābi* establishes a strong link between the self and the other in an intricate way, creating a transnational effect. Like *Lolita*, *Asābi* is “a novel of displacement”, “a story of an absence that might explain the continuous quest of the lost young girl.” [26] (p. 11) However, unlike *Lolita*, Nawwa-Lūlītā is herself lost between her multiple identities. For Marina, Nawwa-Lūlītā is a different woman. Though he questions her religious faith, Marina readily thinks that she doesn’t conform to the image of the postmodern fashion models who read mostly very “light”, “rosy” consumerist literature and fashion magazines. For Marina, she’s a “serious” reader of politics, a “magic woman”, with whom he feels a “strange familiarity.” [12] (p. 342) This strange familiarity underscores Marina’s position as both a reader and a writer. If in Nabokov’s novel, *Lolita* constitutes for Humbert Humbert a symbolic recovery of Annabel (recalling Edgar Allan Poe’s celebrated poem “Annabel Lee”) Nawwa-Lūlītā is for Yūnus Marina an ambivalent recovery of *Nedjma*, who constitutes the end of the myth of courtly love. The interplay between the subtexts of both novels underscores a strong irony since Nawwa-Lūlītā, who seems to be genuinely in love with Marina, is in fact there to assassinate him. In addition, she is a victim of her father who raped her. The rape is highly symbolic since the father uses her as a model to try out his Indonesia-manufactured saris, which seems to be a mild form of pointing to her Islamic identity as the material effect of a constructed discourse by Islamic-inspired movements that pullulated after the emergence of political Islam in 1928. Ultimately, Nawwa-Lūlītā, the Franco-Algerian fashion model born in Algeria during the early years of the Algerian Civil War, becomes a canvas on which disparate and incompatible identities are drawn and superimposed. This superimposition betrays a strategy of montage which ends up “disrupt[ing] the context in which it is inserted” as Benjamin has suggested [25] (p. 86). This disruption unsettles the hasty demarcations between identities in exile, going thus in line with what Said suggests in relation to the condition of exile: “The exile is offered a new set of affiliations and develops new loyalties”, which accrue from a keen “sense of loss” [27] (p. 183). Both Marina and Nawwa-Lūlītā experience this sense of loss, which they try to make up for in different, though not unrelated, ways. Marina makes up for this sense of loss by adopting a humanist view in his novels, where he critiques injustice and condemns the “killers” be they the Nazis or the proponents of national unity. Nawwa-Lūlītā finds refuge and consolation in both her sense of religious identity and her deterritorialization as she continually travels around the world while taking Paris as her base. In a sense, both characters are incessantly crossing boundaries and borders in an attempt to “assemble” a “nation out of exile” [27] (p. 184). This incessant crossing of boundaries and borders is a key trope in Waciny’s conception of identity. This seems also to be the case with the exiled Yūnus Marina, whose adopted family name is a celebration of his Algerian native town. Marina’s memory is almost always drawn to his native country, so much so that he seems to be both here and there. This “borderline” situation is clearly expressed by Waciny, who states: “I’m in two places without being able to see the frontiers separating them...I’m in an in-between space. An imperceptible and invisible abyss.” [20] (p. 67)

### Fact and Fiction: A Borderless World

In “Invention, Memory, and Place” Said argues that “memory and its representations touch upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority,” [28] (p. 242) underlining its

political use, its constructedness and its close relationship with narratives. [28] (p. 243). The invention and refashioning of memory attempt to create a “coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the world” [28] (p. 245) In *Aṣābi*’, memory straddles both fact and fiction to create a dialectic relationship between them, and points to the possibility of subverting the ideological discourse of the Algerian, and by extension, the ideological foundations of Arab post-independence state. Yūnus Marina, who has lived in Paris for more than a half century, suddenly becomes in the shot line of fanatics, whom Nawwa-Lūlītā calls the neo-killers [12] (p. 27), and with whom she is ironically aligned. Marina’s fictional novel, *‘Arsh al-shayṭān* (The Devil’s Throne), is proof of his indictment. If we judge by the play on words, i.e. *‘Arsh al-shayṭān/ Āyāt shayṭāniyyah* (The Arabic translation of *The Satanic Verses*), it would be easy to remark that Yūnus Marina is a fictional translation of Salman Rushdie. Furthermore, because Marina is under the protection of the French police, he becomes interested in official personalities like Bernard Squarcini, Claude Moniquet, both occupying positions in French Intelligence. He becomes attentive to their declarations in the media and attempts to analyse for himself the (wrong) motivations of terrorists, citing their real names. Furthermore, the real names of singers and artists who were targets of the “neo-killers” are invoked alongside the names of famous writers like Salman Rushdie. [12] (pp. 29;106;371) However, while the invocation of the Salman Rushdie controversy points to the postcolonial blindness of equating between fiction and truth, Marina’s invocation of the traditional case of Ibn Al-Muqaffa’ in the Arab-Muslim history suggests that this blindness is deeply embedded in culture.

The second point relates to the recontextualisation of the fictional *‘Arsh al-shayṭān* in a prior epoch in Western history. For Eva, it is hardly understandable why “a German readership par excellence” would be interested in a novel, which emerged out of “a crematorium and the sacred Inquisition,” an issue that the Germans are seemingly done with. By recontextualizing the novel in the Middle Ages, Eva suggests the parallel between the time of the Arab “modernity” and the dark past of Europe. Marina, in turn, wanted “to know the secret behind the Italians’ and the Germans’ love of a folly that emerged in the East of gunpowder, wars and battling religions.” [12] (p. 16) In addition, Marina adheres to the idea that “history ends up catching us, whether we will it or not.” [12] (p. 48) Thus, Marina and Eva’s points of view converge in collapsing times, echoing Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return of the same. Through the juxtaposition of these two different times, *Aṣābi*’ points to the ambivalence of the neo-killers vis-à-vis modernity. This goes in line with Marina’s essential aesthetics which questions the validity of the claims of both the West and the East.

Lūlītā seizes the opportunity to point to Marina’s ambiguous position on religious matters, telling him that she has read somewhere about a conference on his works organized in his home city, and that the participants “concluded that you were a Jew because many of those who had known you in childhood stated that you had been intimate with the rabbi’s daughter, and that you later converted to Christianity, and that your conversion to Islam was just a means of guarding yourself against the people’s anger.” [12] (p. 150). While the exchange between Lūlītā and Marina makes room for the latter to express his relativist point of view on all faiths, it also contextualizes Marina’s novel, *‘Arsh al-shayṭān*, in a context where the zealots make a whole issue of printed materials that they deem blasphemous. Indeed, *‘Arsh al-shayṭān* revives a whole history of the relationship between literary creation and diverse religious or quasi-religious establishments in the Arab and Muslim countries. The narrative exploitation of *‘Arsh al-shayṭān* points to the interplay between two main forces in the Arab-Muslim countries. According to Sabry Hafez, these two forces can be broadly brought back to two parties: the traditional elite, represented by Al-Azhar establishment, and the much diffuse new cultural elite that emerged as a consequence of Muhammad Ali’s reforms, carried on later by his grandson Khedive Isma’il [29] (p. 119).

What is of interest in this context is that *Aṣābi*’, especially through the character-novelist Yūnus Marina, restages this fight between the zealots and the secularists in the postcolonial state cutting across the idea of nation. Another significant point can be seen in the shifting of the encounter paradigm in the West. In this context, Rasheed El-Enany has identified two dimensions that govern this representation in the postcolonial novel: proud encounters and humbled encounters,

each of which relies on the rise and fall of national sentiment. However, in its insistence on the encounter between (transformed) Algerians in a European setting, *Aṣābi* complicates and challenges prior narrative treatments of the issue while keeping the same theme. Thus, it is a change in perspective, not in content. This challenge and complication mark a significant shift in the Arabic novel as the encounter is not between an Arab and a foreigner, one which is grounded in the sexual metaphor. Indeed, Marina and Lūlītā are in a sense the products of both the colonial and the postcolonial state respectively. Much of what befalls them in exile seems to have a bearing on their dual (and ambivalent) relationship both to Algeria and France. In other words, the two characters constantly cross the boundaries as they acknowledge them, highlighting the centrality of memory in a transnationalized context.

#### ***Aṣābi* 'Lūlītā's Alternate Worlds: Sinking one's Roots in the Margins of the West**

Trousdale has argued that in their texts exiled writers continuously seek to set up alternate spaces where identities cross the borders and positively graze with each other. In *Aṣābi*, this alternate thirdspace is highly sensitive to the margins of the West. Both Marina and Lūlītā engage in relationships with fallen characters. Caroline, one of Marina's acquaintances, is portrayed as a victim of the modern discourse on the female body in the fashion business and is staying in a clinic to treat her anorexia. Likewise, Clara Maxime, an ex-model who enjoyed celebrity and fame in the 1970s, ends up alone in her apartment and, like Lūlītā, kills herself to end her torture. Furthermore, the Barcelona conference on memory works as a space for bringing together characters who have suffered from authoritarian regimes.

At the level of French characters, *Aṣābi* reconstructs them along what seems to be a binary division. Most of them hold opposed views about third-world French citizens. In this context, the discussion of the motives behind the possible terror attacks on personalities living in France between David Etienne and Mary, two officers in the French intelligence, is very significant. Mary tells David Etienne: "I don't understand why all the other minorities are comfortable and have accepted to interact positively with our culture, except for them. Why do the big calamities come only from the Blacks, or the Arabs, or the Muslims?" [12] (p. 108) According to Mary, these minorities are responsible for "bringing in terror to our safe land." [12] (p. 109) However, David Etienne, whose grandfather was a victim of Auschwitz, sublates her claim by making allusion to Nazism [12] (p. 109), which is for him a form of terror. These two positions highlight the denial and acceptance of cultural difference in modern France, an ongoing ambivalent process that lies between universalist citizenry and "structural nostalgia." [6] (p.10)

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

Thus, *Asabi*, like many of Laredj's novels, seems to celebrate an identity that is neither completely Algerian nor purely French; his protagonists are in a perpetual errance, which, in a way, recalls and celebrates Kateb Yacine as a "*Maghrébin errant*" [31] (p. 210), whose texts continue to stand out as a battleground for different groups of the Algerian society. The repeated allusion to celebrated novels both Algerian and non-Algerian underscores a writing that constructs itself as it imagines other narratives, creating a series of juxtapositions that underline the complexity of encoding Algerianness. This usually leads to the author's effacement [31] (p. 102), a stance where the space of writing amounts to creating "a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears." [31] (p. 101)

Via literary collage and bricolage, Nawwa-Lūlītā becomes the postmodern figuration of *Nedjma*, and epitomizes the reality of the *femme fatale* who ends killing herself on a Paris street. This brings to the fore the contemporary upheavals in the painful negotiation of Algerian (and Maghrebian) postcolonial identity in the margin of France. The preoccupation with loss, death, exile, memory and state accountability seem to reflect an Algeria torn between its painful past and the prospects of an ambiguous future. The tragic death of Nawwa-Lūlītā and the capturing of Marina by "the colonel's wolves" in the end of the novel constitute a step forward in a tentative

total critique of the Algerian postcolonial state. In addition, Marina's appropriation of the Western discourse on art seems to highlight the Arab intellectuals' tendency to emulate the West and a position from which he tries to speak simultaneously to the ex-colonized and the ex-colonizer, an attempt that apparently ends up in a cul-de-sac.

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