



Rachid Boujedra, Auto-Fiction, and the Interplay of the Aesthetic and Personal¹

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Abstract

Analyzing the female character in Rachid Boujedra's select narratives and with insights from both the sociology of gender theories and the narrative texts, this paper reflects on how literary portrayals of female characters might be subject to personal standards of evaluation while being responsive to social norms and expectations questioning whether writers can keep loyal to their artistic objectivity while writing women. With a particular emphasis on the Boujedra's obsession with the Motherly figure in his narratives, this paper considers in what ways personal experiences intervene to shape the writer's image of women in his society. Taking the Algerian society as a frame of reflection, the present paper articulates the interplay of the aesthetic and personal dimensions of Boujedra's auto-fictional narratives pointing out that literary representations of female characters in male narratives do often oscillate between social expectations of women roles and the writer's personal experiences.

Keywords: auto-fiction, female identity, loyalties, Rachid Boujedra, writer intuitions

Literature both reflects and helps to create reality. It is through their preservation in works of art that we know what the stereotypes and archetypes have been and are; in turn, knowing the way images influence our view of reality and even our behavior.

(Mary Ferguson, p.5)

Introduction

In literature, the debate over how woman character and identity can be portrayed while considering sociocultural norms and ethics of standardization is a multitudinous one. No matter what is the sociocultural context, the same dynamic of self and other shaped the way female characters were/are projected in literary works with reference to the same social expectations that define woman's place and role in society. Being loyal to woman feelings and character in

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the world of the text created an air of opposition between some writers who married their intuitions about women personality and aspirations with the social image prescribed for centuries and others who resorted to their lives for more enlightening examples to depict in what ways a woman might fit in to the social world she is raised in. The issues of gender roles, women passive voice in history and sociology and woman/female representations in literature have always formed a part amidst a wider and more evolving cycle of social and literary theorizations. Both gender social theories and literary approaches to woman character do intersect to possibly argue about the proper way of defining a woman identity or role in society.

Over the ages, writing women accounted for different social priorities and considerations. While the woman figure in Greek mythology was held in a position that elevates her to be gods' and warriors' pleasure satisfying agents whereas socially performing the role of a second class citizen, the Mary and Eve distinction in Medieval times inspired most literary approaches to women confining their roles to certain spiritual behaviors the refusal of which leads to social exclusion and deprivation. More standards were attributed to the way women were portrayed in the coming periods leaning more towards shaping clear cuts between a male and a female character as for Victorian women who were glorified as staying at home daughters, wives and mothers supportive and obedient to their male counterparts. This kind of domestic incarceration of women, according to the general perception of the time, allows more room for woman purity and innocence while developing her character in more straight ways.

More rebelling and uplifting attempts at portraying women started to be given shape towards the 20th century albeit remaining within the confines of a norms prescribing society. Whereby female characters became enjoying the position of protagonists and heroines in novels and poems, they were projected tragically as ending up in circumstances that force them to reevaluate the danger inherent in their attempts at achieving independence, equity or defying the general norm of the house angel. Thereafter, and upon gaining more weight, establishing a distinct voice in literature and taking advantage of the pen to sound their thoughts and desires became pertinent with many feminist initiatives and movements. Woman portrayal of her woman fellows sprang from her personal and social experiences yielding in fine autobiographical narratives aiming at schooling the way societies tend to structure vile gender distinctions along biological and class lines.

Be that as it may, while the general scheme of things supposes that a piece of literature can exert a kind of effect on the way a society might view women and their roles and where the textual abodes different writers fashion try to project female identity and character with certain aspired to extricating potentials, some male-authored narratives are still ambivalent in their representation of women as Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope state in *Who am I This Time?: Female Portraits in British and American Literature*:

"Patriarchal society views women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life. Men change the world, and women help them. This assumption has led to an inaccurate literary terminology and criticism." (p. 10)

This what the epigraph seems to relate to; the fact that literary works help us make sense of the prejudices and stereotypes as advocated by certain societies and the way they are transmuted in the world of the text. Making use of literature to endorse a personal cause or reflect upon personal experiences defined many male-authored narratives which gave a different dimension to the way women can be possibly approached and portrayed. Accordingly, the writer's envisaging of the social world gives way to what he sees plausible to project his female characters. This determines the behaviors of women in the world of the text and in the eyes of the demanding society they are obligated to adhere to.

With reference to Rachid Boudjedra's fiction, that is known to delve deep into the Algerian society's socio-cultural fabric, this paper attempts to examine the extent to which literary portrayals of female characters in male-authored narratives might be subject to personal standards of evaluation and how writers can keep loyal to their artistic objectivity while writing women. With a particular emphasis on the writer's obsession with the Motherly figure in his narratives, this paper examines the way personal experiences intervene to shape the writer's image of women in his society and how a writer's loyalties might fluctuate between response to the social image of women and his personal experiences and intuitions.

Rachid Boujedra's Schizoid Aspirations in Literature

Rachid Boudjedra, a writer known to be wearing many hats and a mind tearing open a rebel oscillating spirit, is a prominent figure amid modern Algerian novelists who tried to grapple with various issues appertaining to a postcolonial and contemporary Algerian society. With a francophone expression and with both the Algerian society and the human condition as his extrapolating spaces, his narratives broach questions as regards socio-cultural transition in modern Algeria, postcolonial dialectics, universal existential ethics as they are regarded an outline for woman freedom and emancipation. Through a language adorned with fine poetic and philosophical pronouncements and with a captivating equivocity of subject treatment, Boudjedra's writings constitute a cry of anguish in the face of a father who, according to Boudjedra's view of him and in reference to so oft-made statements, is a reflection and symbol of a pietistic and hypocrite Algerian patriarchal society; a society that opened up his horizons for a literary vision that moves from the narrow context of the Algerian family to act upon a wider social scale. Adding on several micro limbs of the daily dynamics of the Algerian family, with his being a focal point, Boudjedra's novels furnish examples of social investigation targeting the major tenets of a postcolonial society like Algeria.

As we earlier argued that over and above the fact that a piece of literature emanates from certain social and historical contexts where a certain cause pertinent to a society might be espoused or defied, the world of a narrative text acts as a retaliatory terrain giving the writer the possibility to unveil some personal truths and experiences for the sake of satisfying an instinct or criticizing a disagreeable mode of social behavior. Writing becomes borne out of a personal necessity to uphold or oppose a certain cause with the writer himself playing the role of an active character. This trend of drawing on the affective and transformative potential of literature to speak out a tortured soul is characteristic of Boudjedrian literary output. While responding to women plight in his society with the desire of propagating hidden histories and stripping bare what other literary productions regard as beyond retribution, the personal dimension of Boudjedra's writing is so manifest through his body of works as he patently declares:

"Je crois que j'ai écrit -particulièrement au début- parce que j'ai été rebelle à mon milieu, à mon pays, à ma religion. Tout cela revient à dire que j'ai été rebelle au père, je me suis rebellé contre lui, dans tous les sens du terme, c'est-à-dire sociologiquement et psychanalytiquement. Cela a donné la nécessité et l'urgence d'écrire". (KOM, p.78)³

³. Rachid Boujedra's statements and the extracts taken from his novels *La Repudiation* and *La Pluie* are quoted in French due to their access only in French; and personal translation is avoided in respect to the writer's exactness of message and structure.

"Dans la mesure où j'ai eu personnellement des problèmes avec mon père quand il a répudié ma mère. J'en ai énormément souffert, mon père a épousé trois femmes, j'ai une vingtaine de frères et sœurs". (*Ibid.*)

"Ma blessure symbolique, c'est le rapport au père extrêmement violent, ce salaud de potentat minable de 1,60 m." (Boudjedra, 1969, p. 221)

For that being the case, gender dynamics in Boudjedra's fiction, mostly prompted at the beginning by a desire to rebel against an irresponsible father and a restricting milieu, are torn between the need to eke out a path for women emancipation and the necessity to redeem and get over a troublesome past. In a Freudian parricide like fashion, Boudjedra's novels constitute spaces of resentment over a repudiating father and a strong desire to engage in literary avenging trials. The writer inveighs against a father-centered horde for the sake of deconstructing such a fatherly order to erect a more tolerant and less restricting family abode for himself and his repudiated mother:

"Entre nous, le père disposait une barrière d'hostilité qu'il s'ingéniait à consolider. Effarés, nous allions nous abîmer dans cette lutte difficile où les couleurs ne sont jamais annoncées: la recherche de la paternité perdue." (*La Repudiation*, p. 49)

"J'érigais l'érection en système verrouillé d'automutilation, à tel point que, dans ma rage de confondre les choses, j'associais à la douleur physique [...] la coupure définitive avec le père." (*Ibid.*)

In this light, most of Boudjedra's narrative texts assume an autobiographic nature in both content and structure. Autobiographic narratives attribute validity and assertion to narration for they give meaning and context to experience and "a life journey confused by frequent misdirection and even crises of identity but reaching at last a sense of perspective and integration, a satisfying wholeness" (Buckley, 39-40). Self-writing, even though in a fictionalized rhythm, allows for introspection, soul-searching and allures the reader's capacity for reflection and analysis, with all being bound on how much discussion a writer intends to generate upon laying open specificities of his life.

Literarily Avenging a Repudiated Mother: a Fatherly Horde Deconstructed

Most of Boudjedra's narrative texts expose female psychology and aspirations through the eyes of a repudiated mother. The Mother figure, as it develops through his major fiction, gains weight and freedom reflecting an enslaving obsession of the writer with his mother and his interest in avenging her from a repudiating father. Howbeit the issues being investigated in his texts; the status of women in the Algerian society, religion, sexual inclinations, psychological redemption, politics in a postcolonial state, the theme of 'repudiation' forms the crux of them all. His first novel, *La Repudiation* (*Repudiation*), won him the "enfant terrible" award which became synonymous with Boudjedra's troubled childhood. A novel which is regarded as a family drama digs deep into the writer's psychology revealing the complications one might experience while living within the confines of a detached family headed by a repudiated mother. With Boudjedra stressing the fact that it is a "drame familial dont j'ai été le produit, littérairement parlant," (Boudjedra, *Le Matin*) and that it is "une oeuvre qui a longuement muri en moi et qui est ensuite venu comme ça " (Achour, p. 136), this part of the paper attempts to examine how the writer engages in an avenging initiative against a repudiating careless father while trying to elevate his mother's submissive status, with his novel *La Répudiation* being the space of reference, to expose her as reaching both psychological and social balance in later texts mainly *La Pluie*.

Boudjedra adopts the word 'repudiation' instead of 'divorce' to emphasize how much a repudiated woman is more heavily tortured compared to the divorced and released. In a repudiated status, the woman is still restricted to the husband's control but excluded, abandoned and abjured physically, emotionally and psychologically. In the novel, aged thirty years when her husband repudiated her, the narrator's mother experiences victimization at many levels. Burdened by the obligation to preserve the entire family's honor, she accepts repudiation sharing that duty of honor preservation with the uncles. The protagonist's brother Zahir's drowning in alcoholism and homosexuality; and his sister Yasmina's returning home after a broken marriage to die of intestinal fever at twenty-one inflict further pain on the family's tragedy. Amidst this frustrating context, Rachid, the protagonist, is ten years but old enough to witness the tormenting impact of a family shattered by repudiation. The father's indifference to the mother's and the family's declining status and his marriage with a second 15- years aged girl further fueled the narrator's, Rachid's, avenging sentiments. While he himself feels repudiated and for the sake of achieving the revenge he sought and to show his denunciative revolting attitudes, Rachid, sleeps with his young stepmother, and commits incest with his half-sister Leila and a cousin. This kind of misbalance that afflicts the family forms the dynamic of the novel being tragically intensified the more the narrative develops. The psychic status of a repudiated woman as experienced by the protagonist's mother is intensely and tragically portrayed:

"Lamentable, ma mère qui ne s'était doutée de rien ! [...] La peur lui barre la tête et rien n'arrive à s'exprimer en dehors d'un vague brouhaha. Elle est au courant. Une angoisse bête. Elle se déleste des mots comme elle peut et cherche une fuite dans le vertige ; mais rien n'arrive. [...] Elle ne sait pas cerner le réel. [...] Lâcheté surtout.

Elle est debout et lutte contre l'envie de s'évanouir. L'indifférence rutile dans la pièce fraîche. Le père continue à manger, très lentement comme à son habitude. Pour lui, tout continue à couler dans l'ordre prévisible des choses. [...] Ma hésite. Une gêne... La banalité des mots qu'elle va prononcer. Elle ne sait pas se décider. Et les fantasmes ! Surtout pas d'insolence pour ne pas rebuter les ancêtres. Se taire... [...] (Dans la ville, les hommes déambulent. Ils crachent dans le vagin des putains, pour les rafraîchir. Chaleur... Les hommes ont tous les droits, entre autres celui de répudier leurs femmes. [...] Ma mère ne sait ni lire ni écrire. [...] Elle reste seule face à la conspiration du mâle allié aux mouches et à Dieu." (*La Répudiation*, p. 34)

Bringing to focus an alienated paternity through revolting against a careless father and through looking for a solace in the mother figure, being an epitome of sacrifice and dedication, inspired the thematic of Boujedra's first and most accomplishing novel, *La Répudiation*. The Father Figure and the question of a good or alienated paternity shape the dynamic of many world narratives. Some works like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which projects a father utterly prepared to sacrifice everything to save his son amidst the hopeless and grimy context of the novel or Jane Austin's Mr. Bennett who reflects the image of a father having ecstasy in the affectionate relationship that connects him to his daughters and who is projected as having solace in the intimacy he shares with his daughter Elizabeth whom he confesses to be his greatest source of pride, draw the image of the father character as caring, responsible and dedicated to his role as the head of family. A parenthood portrayed in the way it plays a role in the child's self-development and as a positive drive towards having a balanced sense of self. Other narratives tend to assume a critical tone through spotlighting the complexities emanating

from certain types of fathers who inflict misery on their children through escapism, irresponsibility, inadequacy, ambivalence and self-interest as it is the case of the father portrayed in Boujedra's narrative, *La Repudiation*. From the psychoanalytic perspective to literary portrayals of the father figure, the strong presence of the father in a child's life is regarded as a moving motif towards maintaining both defensive and integrative capacities while passivity, on the part of the father, yields in the child developing revengeful sentiments further motivated every time a child loses a chance to relate actively and passionately to the father. It is viewed as a modal to be emulated being lost and substituted with internally fashioned images having no alternative manifestations in the real world. In the context of Boujedra's narratives, fatherhood, or paternity, is conceived as an obstacle to self-improvement and family unity and the writer's search for a lost parenthood is one of his main concerns in this narrative.

This feeble, compliant and serene character of the mother, as vehemently criticized by the narrator, heaps more submission on her status for being reluctant to face repudiation with more assertion and prowess, "Ma⁴ ne s'y trompe pas, elle sait qu'il faut rester digne et se faire à l'idée de l'abandon" (*La Répudiation*, p. 35). "Ma, quoique fraîchement répudiée, reste soucieuse du bien – être de Si Zoubir" (p. 35). With the writer being the protagonist of this novel, the way the maternal love captures all his aspirations and actions is well expressed when he pronounces:

"Comme ma mère était condamnée à ne plus quitter la maison jusqu'à sa mort, nous étions très inquiets à l'idée de l'agonie qui allait nous envahir et de l'amour maternel qui allait nous dévorer. Il n'y avait plus d'issue!" (p. 88)

The writer's approach to the mother's status springs from the way he views the entire confining and limiting social context of the society he intends to project. Viewed from the perspective of the sociology of gender theories, social expectations of women cut across cultural boundaries and range from personality traits, domestic behaviors, occupations to physical appearances. Although there are slight differences across cultures, woman character is shaped by the kind of expectations a society builds around the woman figure. Passivity, submission, and fragility are traits very often associated with woman character while toughness and domination are most commonly male traits. Women are described as incompetent and emotionally-laden in the face of men's ability for action and alacrity for calculation. Self-perceptions are often shaped in relation to these environing factors that render the person's image of himself an acquired rather than a self-conscious dynamic. These self-perceptions are altered by the kind of effect the social other might have on that self, actuating either its edifying or degrading potentials. The way personal traits are then internalized portend even more the extent to which external variables could exert their judging or evaluating effects on one's image generating a new model of self-viewing that exceeds the individual level to absorb more externally inventive variables.

The sociologist Charles H. Cooley developed the theory of the "looking-glass self" (1902) in which he argued that the image an individual gives to himself is a response to the way society wants him/her to be. In that sense, personal traits are acquired in line with the roles assigned to them and expected of them on the part of that society. Accordingly, gender develops into a learned behavior and a socially produced identity that subjects self-viewing standards into a self/other inter-relational activity. Social referencing of one's capacities and potentials is further supported every time one relates to others in his social realm since "the tendency of the self, like every aspect of personality, is expressive of far-reaching hereditary and social factors, and is not to be understood or predicted except in connection with the general life"(Horton, 1902, p. 185). This social other can be an active variable in constructing and inventing the way

⁴. "Ma" refers to 'mother' or 'mum' in local Algerian dialect.

a person comes to perceive himself. This motivated self-feeling can come about while interacting with a family member, a friend or any other person who can have hold on that self.

In Boujedra's later novels mainly *La Pluie*, complementary to the thematic of the previous novel and assuming cathartic overtones, this image of the submissive, indifferent, and afraid mother started to find momentum. This novel assumes a liberating tone with the mother figure reaching a readjusting stance with self and society. The image of the mother in this later text resumes all the facets of the mother figure as portrayed in the previous texts, *La Répudiation* and *L'Insolation*, while consummating the writer's trial at elevating his mother's status the way he started it in *La Répudiation*. The female figure is getting more resonant and willingly responsive to its self-assertive claims. While previously portrayed as deprived of the capacity to speak for herself and to espouse her motherly cause, the mother figure of this later novel is projected as educated, working, true to her womanhood and distinction, cherishing a positive attitude towards crisis, enjoying her individual world with much vivacity:

"Ma mère s'efforce de recevoir mes invités avec beaucoup de gentillesse et de délicatesse. Certes c'était un peu surfait et cela manquait de spontanéité et de naturel. Mais je lui en su gré. Elle ne me déçut jamais. Quand mon vieil ami et son épouse s'en allèrent ma mère me dit-il ressemble à ton père comme une fève ressemble à une fève." (*La Pluie*, p. 101)

And with the elevated motherly figure speaking out her renewed self and as having an impetus in writing and introspection:

"Je griffonne. J'écris. La plume glisse sur le papier lisse et blanc. Elle le blesse profondément. L'encre paraît comme une sorte de sang bleu par la chaleur de la lampe. J'ai envie de planter mes doigts dans cette matière aveugle et brute". (p. 20)

"Elles me ramènent à cette zone limite de l'écriture intime. Celle des émois solitaires. J'ai envie de conserver mon journal. Etre sincère, jusqu'au bout. Ne pas m'autocensurer. Puis très vite après ce grabuge infernal je retrouvais mon calme. La paix s'installa de nouveau en moi. Je pus alors me récupérer entièrement. Bout par bout. Je pus aussi rassembler mes propres éléments qui s'étaient éparpillés en moi-même. N'importe comment. Dans un désordre inouï. Le dedans se rendurcit de nouveau. J'eus envie que la pluie cesse pour pouvoir me concentrer." (pp. 116-117.)

While being critical of his mother's malleable status in his *La Repudiation*, the writer, in later texts, insisted on drawing a more positive image of this female figure to show that despite all that impedes and obstructs a woman's road to self-assertion, she can resume resonance to her character against the inordinate impact of patriarchy, repudiation and male domination.

Conclusion

The present paper veers towards emphasizing the fact that a writer's loyalties to his art and aesthetic preoccupations might be fluctuating between the need to design literary texts for women emancipation in his society and the desire to lay open some personal truths and experiences to reach some sort of catharsis with self and society. Still, one might ask, upon reading Boudjedra's fiction and mainly his *Repudiation*, would his narratives be that avenging and contemplative in tone if he, the writer and narrator, has not personally and intimately experienced the feelings of detachment and deprivation? What would our view of the sexual

relation with a stepmother, incest with a half-sister be when considered out of the retaliatory context of the novel? To what extent can this novel be regarded extricating to women predicament in the Algerian society while it tries to upbraid some female figures like the stepmother and the half-sister while extolling others like the mother? As a prevailing trend in most narratives that assume an autobiographic character, an answer to such questions is dependent on how much we know that a literary work can be so blinded to truth while being immersed in self-apprehension and introspection and to what extent we come to perceive the role of a literary piece in constructing and deconstructing reality to serve an implicitly designed purpose.

Adding to what has been advanced so far; Boudjedra's intellectual sagacity reflects an adamant spirit so insisting on according to literature its unraveling dimensions. Boudjedra's narratives question reality as seen through psychologically and emotionally tormented characters. With women being a considered priority, reaching catharsis, then suggests opening closed sores, retrieving old memories and investing the present with a reconciliatory self-affirming energy with writing being the most manifest medium to do so.

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