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Writing Queer Desire in the Language of the “Other”: Abdellah Taïa and Rachid O.

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Abstract

Since the attainment of independence by Maghrebian nations (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), there has been animated discussion of the use of either Arabic or French as the language of expression. A liminal linguistic spectacle has emerged between the two languages in such a way that there is a dialogic intertwining and resonance occurring between them. This paper focuses on how in spite of the “cultural recognition of a wide array of sexual practices and roles spelled out meticulously in the linguistic variants attributed to them” (Al-Samman 272), the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality” (in the Western sense of the words) do not exist in dialectal Arabic. This paper thus explores the stakes surrounding the use of French in explicitly broaching “marginal” sexuality in the novels of two openly gay Moroccan writers, Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa. It is herein posited that the “transliteration” of experiences encountered in Arab-Muslim milieu through the use of the French language allows for an opening up of a discursive domain that had hitherto remained shrouded in silence and regarded as taboo and unutterable.

[Keywords: French language, Rachid O., Abdellah Taïa, homosexuality, subversion, queer desire]

Introduction

An intricate and complex relationship exists between sexuality and language. In the introduction of their book *Language and Sexuality*, Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick pertinently observe that “our ideas about sex are bound up with the language we use to define and talk about it” (ix). Language is a central concern in the novels of two Moroccan writers, Abdellah Taïa and Rachid O., whose texts grapple with the question of queer sexuality in Arab-Muslim North Africa.

In this paper, I draw on the theoretical postulations formulated by Lise Gauvin who reflects on the situation of certain francophone writers who are compelled to perpetually think about language. She posits that such writers have a linguistic over-consciousness which affects the manner in which they use and relate to language (7). According to Gauvin, these writers are displaced into the world of the relative where each act of writing represents a conquest, a renegotiation of a foreign language. The foreign language or the language of the “other” ceases to be simply a distinct language in itself but rather coalesces with the other languages known and used by the writer. Ultimately, the language of expression and writing that is chosen by the writer becomes a reinvented personal language, a point of encounter where the binary relationship of the symptomatic dominant/dominated matrix dissolves into a new bond which triggers off a multiplicity of

interpretative paradigms. Such a theoretical underpinning is valid given that Abdellah Taïa and Rachid O. instead of using Arabic opt to use the French language to describe the queer¹ identity and experiences of their protagonists. Such a use of French is particularly relevant given that dialectal Arabic does not possess any terms to describe in a positive manner queer sexuality. Terms that do exist in Arabic denigrate non-normative sexuality and paint it in pejorative terms². In using French to broach queer sexuality and identity, Taïa and O. subvert the logic of silence that surrounds this phenomenon in Arab-Muslim societies of Morocco. By referring to these brief theoretical remarks, this paper will show that the novels of Taïa and O. are exceptional illustrations of the role of language in the construction of a queer sexual identity. I contend herein that the novels of the two writers frame themselves within a linguistic fault-line created between French and dialectal Arabic. Although French is the language of writing and expression, Arabic logic and thought processes continue to inform their intimate writing. Within this linguistic “third space”, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s terminology, these Moroccan writers are involved in a perpetual dialogic exchange between Arabic and French. Their literary works reveal a fascinating linguistic and cultural intermingling which is important in the construction of the queer identity of the protagonist-narrators. The question of the choice of language is decisive because the most profound elements of individual and collective character are expressed and constructed through language. In the literary space of the novels of the two Moroccan writers, a subtle tension between Arabic and French is highlighted by the manner in which these languages intertwine, refer to each other and give way to the emergence of an innovative literary expression.

¹ Such a use of French is particularly relevant given that dialectal Arabic does not possess the terms “homosexuality” and “homosexual”, in the western sense of the words. The two writers in using French to depict queer sexuality and experiences are subversive of the logic of silence that surrounds this phenomenon in Arab-Muslim societies of Morocco. By referring to these brief theoretical remarks, this paper will show that the novels of Taïa and O. are exceptional illustrations of the role of language in the construction of a queer sexual identity. It is herein hypothesised that the novels of the two writers frame themselves within a linguistic fault-line created between French and dialectal Arabic. Although their language of writing and expression is French, it is the Arabic thinking that informs their intimate writing. Within this linguistic “third space”, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s terminology, these Moroccan writers are involved in a perpetual dialogic exchange between the two languages. The novels of the two writers reveal a fascinating linguistic and cultural intermingling which is important in the construction of the queer identity of their protagonist-narrators. The question of the choice of language is decisive because it is through language that the most profound elements of individual and collective character are expressed and constructed. A subtle interaction between French and dialectal Arabic exists in the novels of the two authors. French emerges as the language of writing expression. The narratives of the two writers highlight a tension between the two languages in such a manner that they intertwine, refer to each other and give way to the emergence of an innovative literary expression.

² Stephen O. Murray offers an interesting analysis of the terminology that is used to describe homosexuality and homosexuals in Arab-Muslim countries of Southwest Asia and North Africa. He explains, for instance that the term “*luti*” which generally refers to homosexuals continues to carry connotations of deviance. The terms “*liwat*” and “*ubna*” which mean “insertor” and “insertee” respectively, reduce homosexuality to nothing but the sexual act. He concludes that even though there are no terms to describe positively homosexuality as an identity and lifestyle, “absence of terms does not prove the absence of a phenomenon” (627).

Islam and sexuality

Although Islam is considered more accommodating to human sexuality, provided that it is heterosexual and within the confines of marriage, it does not differ from other monotheist religions in its consideration of queer sexuality. Kligerman attests in this respect that given that “the purpose of sex is procreation according to the religious text, homosexuality is seen as an aberration of Allah’s will which threatens Muslims with extinction. As a result, there is officially no room for homosexuality or homosexuals within Islam” (54). However, this does not mean that queer sexuality does not fester in Arab-Muslim communities of North Africa, or elsewhere in the Arab world. On the contrary, queer practices are widespread even if they are not openly acknowledged. Serhane aptly points out in this regard that:

Toutes les déviances sexuelles: prostitution, homosexualité, zoophilie existent dans la société marocaine. Tout le monde le sait et le reconnaît. Mais en parler reste intolérable. Le poids du tabou sexuel est incontestablement le plus insurmontable même au niveau du discours. Ne pas en parler est la preuve que la société ne souffre d’aucune déviance. Le silence est au service de l’hypocrisie sociale (25).³

[All sexual deviances: prostitution, homosexuality, bestiality exist in Moroccan society. Everyone knows it and recognises it. However, talking about it remains intolerable. The weight of sexual taboo is undoubtedly the most insurmountable even at the discursive level. Not speaking about it gives the semblance that the society does not suffer from any deviation. Silence is at the service of social hypocrisy].

A pact of silence is kept so as to give the illusion that these societies are stable and are not havens of any forms of deviation: behavioural, sexual and otherwise. In a different perspective, Kligerman asserts that Arab-Muslims have a complex relationship to queer sexuality. According to her, an Arab-Muslim man can “practice” homosexuality as long as he is not the one who is penetrated (54). In a display of virility and machismo, the active man can boast of his “homosexual” exploits whilst shame and scorn are heaped on the man who is penetrated as he is considered to be less than a man. She goes on to explain that a man can also engage in homosexual acts provided he marries and gives the semblance of being a respectable and exemplary father and husband. She contends that what is important in these societies is the question of the family. A man who fulfils all his familial obligations can do what he sees fit with his sexuality.

It is against such a background that the autofictional novels of Abdellah Taïa and Rachid O. frame themselves. O. is the first contemporary francophone North African writers to openly depict queer sexuality in his novels. He was born in 1970 in Rabat and was educated in Marrakech. He then obtained a scholarship to study at the Villa Medici in Rome in 2000. To date, he has published five novels that detail the difficulty of assuming a homosexual identity in a conservative and deeply pious Muslim society. Taïa was born in 1973 and studied in Rabat before settling in Geneva where he studied for a

³ This and other translations in this paper are my own.

semester in the 1990s. He thereafter moved to the Sorbonne in Paris to work on a doctoral thesis on the work of the painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard. A widely publicised interview in the magazine *TelQuel* marked his official coming out in 2007. To date, five of his novels deal with various facets of queer sexuality and experiences of the protagonist, both in his Moroccan homeland as well as in different European cities.

French or Arabic: the stakes

For Taïa and O. who grow up in Morocco, there is an inevitable tension between their native language (dialectal Arabic) and the language of the “other” (French). As previously pointed out, the process of arriving at the choice of language of expression is contentious because had they chosen to write in Arabic, it would have been insuperably difficult given the lack of vocabulary and terminology to describe queer sexuality and experiences. Kharraz affirms that “*la langue française constitue pour certains écrivains de la nouvelle génération francophone maghrébine un moyen de dire ce qui est indicible dans la langue sacrée : l’arabe littéraire. [...] En conséquence, aborder le thème de l’homosexualité dans une langue étrangère semble la seule solution pour l’écrivain maghrébin*” (68) [the French language constitutes for some writers of the new generation in Francophone Maghreb a way to express what is unspeakable in the sacred language: literary Arabic.[...] Therefore, broaching the topic of homosexuality in a foreign language seems the only solution for the North African writer]. Yacine further develops that “*emprunter la langue de l’autre, c’est forcément s’introduire dans son environnement social, mental, culturel mais aussi intime*” (195) [borrowing the language of the other is necessarily introducing one into their social, mental, cultural as well as intimate environment]. By appropriating the French language, the two writers (as well as their protagonists) create a symbolic link with a culture and civilisation that has hitherto remained foreign and “other” to them.

French offers the protagonist-narrators of Taïa and O. freedom to express and assume their difference. Abdellah in the novel *L’Armée du Salut* affirms that: “*il me semblait que le français était la langue qui permettait d’exprimer clairement et de façon précise ses idées, nuancer ses propos, polémiquer, se défendre*” (88) [it seemed to me that French was the language that allowed for a clear and accurate expression of ideas, for a qualification of ones remarks, argumentation, defence of oneself]. Moreover, by using French to describe the homosexuality of their protagonist, the two writers break the silence surrounding non-normative sexuality. As noted by Tlatli, “*leur relation à la langue française s’accompagne en effet d’une critique virulente contre la tradition arabo-islamique*” (301-302) [their relationship to the French language is in fact accompanied by a scathing criticism of the Arab-Islamic tradition]. This criticism should not be viewed as an antagonistic endeavour but rather as an indispensable element towards the creation of new forms of cultural and social meanings.

Abdellah’s first contact with French is characterised by muddled emotions: admiration, fear, contempt. He initially considers it to be a language for the affluent and laments that he suffered from an abominable inferiority complex in relation to this language. Given the supposed superiority of French, he decides to stay away from it.

However, when he enters formal school, he realises that his fear of French and initial conclusion were based on false premises. In fact, he finds that this language not only opens his mind but that he begins to realise the complexity of reality and that there is no one fixed way to perceive it. The most important point however, is that the language allows Abdellah to access the world of literature:

Apprendre à mieux connaître le français et la littérature française, c'était aussi connaître l'histoire de ces deux écrivains [Jean Genet et Roland Barthes] et ce qui les a amenés jusqu'au Maroc, jusqu'à Rabat. La littérature et la vie réelle sont à jamais unies pour moi, l'une ne peut exister sans l'autre. La vie sans les mots des livres me semble impossible à vivre (Le Rouge du Tarbouche 51).

[A better understanding of French and French literature meant also knowing the history of these two writers [Jean Genet and Roland Barthes] and what led them to Morocco, to Rabat. For me, literature and real life are forever fused; one cannot exist without the other. Life without words from books seems to me impossible to live].

Learning of French writers such as Jean Genet is important in that he is able to encounter literary characters that freely assume their queer sexuality. Abdellah hears of Genet for the first time during a visit to maternal relatives who live in Larache. There, a cousin called Ali tells Abdellah of Genet. During a trip to the tomb of this writer, Abdellah recognises that his cousin Ali has an excellent command of French:

Ali et moi dans les rues vides de Larache [...]. Ali et moi seuls. [...] Ali qui me surveille, qui fait attention à moi, qui met son bras sur mon épaule. Ali pour moi. Ali et son français qui faisait accroître mon admiration pour lui. Ali était réellement magnifique. [...] Ali parla dans cette langue qui me fascinait déjà beaucoup mais que je ne comprenais pas bien encore: le français. Ali le parlait aisément, j'étais fier de lui, content d'être en sa compagnie en pareil moment (Le Rouge du Tarbouche 47).

[Ali and I in the empty streets of Larache [...]. Ali and I alone. [...] Ali watches over me, pays attention to me, puts his arm on my shoulder. Ali all for me. Ali and his French which increased my admiration for him. Ali was really gorgeous. [...] Ali spoke in the language that had fascinated me a lot but which I did not understand very well: French. Ali spoke it easily, I was proud of him, happy to be with him at such a time].

During this trip to the tomb of Genet, French language and literature intersect. It is interesting how the growing fascination for the French language and Genet is inextricably linked to the blossoming homoerotic attraction to his cousin. While remaining a model for Abdellah, in terms of the mastery of French, Ali is transformed into an enigmatic figure who provokes in the protagonist strong but chaste homoerotic desires and Ralph Heyndels aptly emphasises that: "*la langue française s'associe intimement au désir, au délice d'une situation amoureuse, et à la fois séduction*" (474) [the French language is closely associated with desire, with delight in the romantic situation, and simultaneously with seduction]. Heyndels further contends that:

Nous assistons à un moment à la fois ténu et essentiel qui superpose la découverte phonématique d'un nom (« Genet »), et la découverte dénotative d'une définition associée à ce nom (« écrivain français ») et la découverte connotative d'un prestige lié à ce nom (« très important, célèbre dans le monde entier »). Cette triple perlaboration se réalise dans un locus amoureux irradié par Ali(474).

[We witness a moment that is both tenuous and essential which superimposes the phonemic discovery of a name (“Genet”), and the denotative discovery of a definition associated with that name (“French writer”) and the connotative discovery of the prestige linked to the name (“very important, famous around the world”). This triple working-through is realised through the locus of love irradiated by Ali].

This discovery of Genet is important, at a meta-symbolic level, in that it also marks his initial awareness to his desire for men. Abdellah is however convinced that his cousin has not told him the entire story of this enigmatic figure that is Genet and that for him to know it, he had to improve his French and then read the complete story of Jean Genet. The encountering of Genet and the French language becomes an allegory of the process of re/creation of Abdellah’s queer identity and he notes in this regard that:

[J]’ai fini par connaître toute l’histoire de Jenih. Je sais à présent bien écrire et bien prononcer son nom, même si au fond je reste fidèle à Malika [la mère d’Ali] et à sa manière d’arabiser et de s’approprier cet écrivain en l’intégrant à sa réalité quotidienne. [...] J’ai choisi, comme Ali, la littérature française pour mes études et pour mes rêves (Le Rouge du Tarbouche51).

[I finally got to know Jenih’s story. I can now write and pronounce very well his name, although deep down I remain faithful to Malika [Ali’s mother] and her way of arabising and appropriating this writer by integrating him to her daily reality. [...] Like Ali, I chose French literature for my studies and for my dreams].

This encounter with French language and literature opens Abdellah’s mind to the manner in which his society is closed. He admires and compares himself to one of his sisters, Fatima, who also realises the rigidity of their Arab-Muslim society in Morocco:

Fatima est la plus moderne de mes sœurs, la plus assoiffée de liberté. Très tôt, elle se distingua des autres, elle n’avait pas les mêmes rêves. Des rêves européens, je crois. Des rêves qui la secouaient en permanence. Rester tranquille et sage à la maison comme toutes les filles bien élevées, ce n’était pas pour elle. Sortir, voir autre chose, voilà ce qu’elle désirait (Mon Maroc34)

[Fatima is the most modern of my sisters, the more thirsty for freedom. Very early, she stood out from the others; she did not have the same dreams. European dreams, I believe. Dreams that shuddered her constantly. Staying calm and well-behaved at home as all well-bred girls, that was not for her. Going out, seeing other things, that’s what she desired].

Like his sister, contact with French shows Abdellah that it is possible to be different even in a society that imposes homogeneity. Moreover, French literature proposes a territory of imagination through which he confronts and negotiates his so-called deviant queer desire and sexuality. As appropriately explained by René de Ceccatty in the preface to the novel *Mon Maroc*, in Abdellah Taïa’s literary world “*le livre devient corps, le corps devient livre. Il n’y a pas en lui de conflit entre le corps et le livre. Il a une façon naturelle d’évoquer toutes les sensations de son existence où la sexualité a une part importante*” (10) [the book becomes a body, the body becomes a book. There is no conflict between body and book. It has a natural way of evoking all the sensations of his life where sexuality is an important part]. A symbiotic relationship exists between the written word and the body and this in turn plays a pivotal role in the creation and fortification of his queer identity. This appropriation of French becomes synonymous with and mediates Abdellah’s mediation and acceptance of his difference.

There is a slight difference in the manner in which Rachid O.’s protagonist relates to the French language and its influence on the construction of his queer sexuality. Rachid the protagonist has his first contact with French through Lalla, an old maid who rears him. She had previously worked for a French expatriate family and had over the years perfected the use of their language. Lalla becomes the mediator of French language and culture. This information transmitted by Lalla significantly transforms the way in which the young Rachid relates to his own body. He remarks that: “*j’aimais cette langue et je sais que c’est Lalla qui a suscité mon attirance pour le français. J’aimais et j’étais fier de pouvoir parler comme elle, elle qui n’a jamais fait d’études mais qui comprend cette langue et la parle bien*” (*Chocolat Chaud*¹³) [I loved this language and I know that it is Lalla who triggered off my attraction to French. I loved and was proud to talk like her, she had never been to school but she understood and spoke this language very well].

Unlike Abdellah whose attention is caught by French literature, for Rachid it is a French boy who ignites his desire to master the French language. Having seen a photograph of a boy called Noé, the young Rachid immediately falls in love with him and the idea of France:

La France, ce mot et cette langue sonnaient bien dans mon oreille. Je transposais ma fixation par rapport à tout ça sur la photo de Noé. Il commençait à me manquer au point que ça devenait physique... J’aimais le regarder, lui sourire, son visage aux yeux bleus et étroits qui ne voyaient que moi me souriait aussi (*Chocolat Chaud*³⁴⁻³⁵)

[France, the word and the language sounded good in my ears. I transposed my fixation of all of this to the photo of Noé. I begin to miss him to the point that it became physical... I loved looking at him, his face and his small blue eyes which looked only at me and also smiled back at me].

Visual fixation on Noé’s photo transforms into an erotic obsession as Rachid begins to spend long hours contemplating, talking to the photo as well as expressing his love. This initial homoerotic seed having been sown, Rachid understands that if he is ever to meet Noé, then it is imperative that he masters French. However, with time, he recognises that a physical relationship with Noé might not be possible given that they are in different

countries and continents. As a result, to nurture his nascent homoerotic inclinations, he befriends a boy called Youssr. The imaginary homoerotic relationship that he has with Noé allows him to confront his own obsessions and to face his sexuality and finally come out of the closet. He acknowledges that even though his relation with Youssr is short-lived, it is important in that it is one of his first queer experiences with a Moroccan. Through this relationship, he awakens to the erotic potential of his own body.

Even after these relationships with Youssr and Noé, the development of Rachid's queer identity is obscurely attached to his desire to perfect French. When he falls in love with Antoine, a Frenchman older than him, Rachid notes that he began to compose sentences entirely in French in order to impress his lover. He finds that had it not been for his improved fluency in French, he would not have stayed as long as he did with Antoine:

Si je n'avais pas changé, si je ne m'étais pas métamorphosé, en parlant bien le français [...] je n'aurais pas pu rester avec lui. C'est une stupeur sans arrêt pour Antoine: maintenant je parle tellement bien français que quand je fais une faute, on me reproche (Chocolat Chaud102)

[If I had not changed, if I had not transformed myself by fluently speaking French [...] I would not have remained with him. It is perpetual amazement for Antoine: I speak French very well now such that when I make a mistake, I am reproached for it].

Mastering French seems to be a *sine qua non* for his sexual emancipation. The more he perfects it, the more he is comfortable with his queer sexuality. He openly claims in this respect that he is a “*un garçon qui parlait très bien français, qui assumait son homosexualité, un garçon ouvert*” (*L'Enfant Ébloui*109) [a boy who spoke French very well, who assumed his homosexuality, an open-minded boy]. The apogee of his mastery of French is reflected in his adoption of writing to strengthen and impose his queer sexual identity. He explains at the end of the novel *Ce Qui Reste* that:

J'ai raconté des années de sexualité avec des pédophiles de langue française dépeint par un garçon qui n'était pas une victime. [...] Quand je dis que je ne connaissais pas les couleurs avec lesquelles j'ai dépeint le premier livre et encore le deuxième, c'est que j'étais loin d'imaginer ce que ça allait me faire, les mots (112).

[I spoke of years of sexuality with French paedophiles described by a boy who was not a victim. [...] When I say I do not know the colours in which I portrayed the first book and even the second one, it is that I had no idea what words would do for me].

The ability to speak and write in French marks a pivotal point in the construction of Rachid's queer identity because this allows him to fully live and impose it. Although he downplays literature, its role however small it maybe cannot be overlooked in the fortification of the protagonist's queer identity and desire. The single reference to French literature is a reference made of Jean Genet. What is important is not Genet, but the circumstances surrounding the visit to his tomb. Rachid embarks on a journey to Larache

in the company of a French boyfriend, Luc. There, they meet Abdallah who proposes to be their guide to Genet’s tomb. This young tourist guide speaks French exceptionally well and this immediately strikes Rachid’s attention. The protagonist’s knowledge of Genet develops in tandem with his homoerotic feelings for the tourist guide. In his analysis of the significance of Genet’s tomb in the novels of Abdellah Taïa and Rachid O., Heyndels attests that:

‘Genet’ est à la fois la figure de l’écrivain et l’effet figuratif d’une légende, dont la tombe du cimetière de Larache devient en quelque sorte un lieu de sémantisation symbolique pris dans la démarche scripturale. Car c’est bien la tombe écrite, son inscription descriptive et sa contextualisation consubstantielle avec la scène originelle de l’écriture et le montage autofictionnel à l’œuvre chez chaque écrivain (2009, 478).

[Genet is both the figure of the writer and figurative effect of a legend whose tomb in a cemetery in Larache somehow becomes a place of symbolic semantisation taken in the writing process. This is because the written tomb, its descriptive entry and consubstantial contextualisation with the original scene of autofictional writing and editing in work in each of these writers].

Genet’s tomb in a Muslim cemetery is a strong metaphor of the manner in which French culture and language infiltrate Morocco. It is also interesting that this tomb is inextricably linked to the sexual emancipation of the two protagonist-narrators.

Conclusion

It is worth noting in the guise of conclusion that the protagonists of Abdellah Taïa and Rachid O. circumvent the linguistic paucity of dialectal Arabic by using French to describe their non-normative sexuality. French language and culture are important mediating agents in the quest by the protagonists to assume and impose their “unutterable” sexuality. The use of French thus becomes a signifier of freedom in the evasion of the conservatism of Arab-Muslim societies of Morocco. The novels of Taïa and O. broach queer sexuality not as inferior to the hegemonic and dominant heterosexuality. They demand a reconceptualised contemplation of queer sexuality, identity and experiences as phenomena that are entirely complete in themselves and not ineludibly subsumed to the culturally idealised heterosexuality which continues to assert itself as having a transcendental supremacy, in North Africa as elsewhere in the contemporary world. Queer sexuality, it can be argued, destabilises the sacrosanct position that has been occupied by heterosexuality and heteronormativity. As such, it challenges not only the salience of gender in social stratification but more importantly the policing of desire and sexuality.

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