La guerre de mémoires in Contemporary French Theatre: Remembering the Algerian War of Independence

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Abstract

The term "guerre des mémoires" ("memory battles") has been used by historians in an attempt to describe the debate that arose in French society concerning the "legacy" of colonialism. This debate expressed the efforts of different groups to articulate alternative discourses that challenged the authorized, official narrative of history. Theatre has often hosted these competing narratives. The performance of fragmented personal memories and the presentation of alternative viewpoints of historical events has often been the focus of both playwrights and theatre artists. The Algerian War of Independence, being among the most traumatic chapters in recent French history and involving many different social and ethnic groups that claimed their own version of its narrative, has undoubtedly dominated these "memory battles." As such, it has attracted the interest of many French and francophone playwrights. Experimenting with different dramatic devices and techniques, playwrights such as Richard Demarcy, Eugène Durif, Jean Magnan, Mohamed Kacimi, Mehdi Charef, Aziz Chouaki, among others, present the permutations of memory as these shed light to the "hidden" details of historical events.

Keywords: French theatre, memory battles, colonialism

The landscape of my childhood was double. From one side, there was Northern Africa, a strongly sensual body, whose bread, fruits, scents, and spices I shared with my brother. On the other side there was my mother’s landscape covered with snow. And above these countries, there was always present, History.

Hélène Cixous recalls growing up in an interspace between the narrated landscape of Europe, her mother’s homeland, and the pluralistic city of Oran, where she spent her childhood. The experience of the in-between (‘double’) space that Cixous evokes may contribute to an understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the formation of national and cultural identities in postcolonial francophone societies. It may also shed light on the way these identities have been inextricably linked with the function of memory and its relation to History; in particular, the history of the Algerian War.

The different ethnic, cultural and social groups, which participated in the eight-year-war that ended with the declaration of Algeria’s Independence in 1962, were later engaged in producing their own memory narratives in order to counterbalance the absence of an official version that included them all. These narratives form part of what has been described by cultural historians as la guerre de mémoires in contemporary France.

The present study explores the contribution of theatre in this guerre de mémoires. By examining selected plays that deal with the Algerian War, the aim is to trace how these

1 When there is no translator mentioned, the translation from French is mine.
dramatic works open up alternative perspectives in the mapping of the French postcolonial landscape. The plays to be discussed are Jean Magnan’s Algérie 54–62, Mehdi Charef’s 1962, Le dernier voyage, and Aziz Chouaki’s Les oranges, in which the playwrights return to the past not by representing events, but by interweaving on stage fragmentary images, texts and feelings; the very material of memory.

**La guerre de mémoires and the Algerian War**

The term “guerre de mémoires” (battle of memories) was introduced in order to describe the conflicting relation between history and memory which, to a large extent, was the result of the growing involvement of media in the construction and communication of memory and historical material (Blanchard 27-34). The case of the Algerian War has been one of the most strongly debated chapters in the guerre des mémoires. It is considered the key event that marked the end of France as a colonial Empire, and had a deep impact on the postcolonial societies of both France and Algeria.

In France, the events of the war “disappear” from official political discourse after 1962; it appears as though a sort of censorship had been enforced and the traumatic memories repressed. And yet, many different groups were forced to leave Algeria and move to France: the pied-noir community, the harkis, and the Algerian immigrants (Stora, *La guerre des mémoires* 13-18). These groups produced a collection of memories on the war which, however, “have not coalesced into a ‘national memory’” (Davidson 67). According to Benjamin Stora, the silence concerning the events of the war may either be explained as the legitimate silence that traumatic memories often impose, or as a willful forgetting that betrays the denial to accept political responsibilities (“La guerre d’Algérie” 132). In Algeria on the other hand, the war dominated the post-independence national narrative, which articulated a one-sided version of the events, without allowing any space for the articulation of the minority “histories” to be heard.

In France, the repressed trauma of the war “returned” almost thirty years later, when a debate that aimed to shed light on the dark side of the events was initiated (Hargreaves 2-4). Almost at the same time, the civil war that broke out in Algeria also created a space for the reconsideration of the national narrative about the war of Independence. In this light, more voices were “heard” and the contribution of the different groups that participated in the formation of the nation was acknowledged (Stora, “Algérie: Les retours” 463-65).

In order to understand how these different memory narratives map the territory of national history – especially in postcolonial France – one needs to resort to the notion of multidirectional memory, as developed by Michael Rothberg. In an attempt to describe the complex networks that memory narratives create and the way these transcend the realm of the nation state, Rothberg introduces the term nœuds de mémoire (memory knots), as an alternative to Nora’s lieux de mémoire; a notion, which according to him, is associated with a more traditional concept of the nation. Nœuds de mémoire refers to a more open process that does not necessarily bind remembering to a particular territory or identity. It suggests that

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2 For a detailed description of the term, see Lindenberg (77-95). For the Algerian War, see Lindenberg (91-95).
3 The name harki in Arabic means traitor and was used for the Arabs that served the French army.
4 See Benjamin Stora, “Algérie: Les retours de la mémoire de la guerre d’indépendance” (461-73) and Raphaëlle Branche, “The martyr’s torch: memory and power in Algeria” (431-43).
performances of memory may well have territorializing or identity-forming effects, but those effects will always be contingent and open to resignification" (Rothberg, “Between Memory” 7). In order to explain the creation of nœuds de mémoire, Rothberg defines the function of multidirectionality, which refers to the mode in which personal or collective memories are articulated:

Against the framework that understands collective as competitive memory [...] I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative (Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory 3). The plays discussed in this article have been selected from quite a large repertory of texts because they represent the viewpoints of most of the groups affected by the events of the war. They can therefore be regarded as texts representing memory narratives which bring forth the function of multidirectionality.

Jean Magnan’s Algérie 54-62 (1983): The memoriescape of a pied-noir

Jean Magnan completed the play in 1983, and his initial plans were to write a trilogy with Algérie 54-62 as the first part (Engelbach 8). The play was produced by Robert Gironès in 1991. Both Magnan and Gironès had a personal involvement in the events: the former was pied-noir that was born in Algeria, and the latter had a firsthand experience of the war as an appelé soldier.

The dominant role of memory is emphasized by Magnan, who explains that he aims at exposing “a particular state of affairs in the realm of memory” (Magnan, “Vingt ans après” 12). The playwright also specifies that his final intention is to draw a map of his personal memoriescape: “our intention is not to narrate History, but [...] the history we sensitively recall” (qtd. in Engelbach 8). In his attempt to find the appropriate form for a play that deals with “History,” the playwright constructs a fictional universe that consists of scattered images and textual fragments, supported by a densely-weaved intertextual network. The play’s dramatic world can be seen as a memory space where personal and collective memories intersect, a space comprising many nœuds de mémoire that operate as a trigger to the various narratives about the war.

Although Algérie 54-62 covers the first period of the Algerian war – from 1954 to 1958 – the intertextual citations link this period to the past in order to present the war as an inextricable part of the entire colonial venture. Magnan emphasizes the military aspect that defined the French presence in Algeria despite the fact that there are no violent scenes enacted on stage, there is a prevailing mood against the irrational violence of the war. It is a feeling reflecting to a large extent the emotions of les appelés, the recruited soldiers that participated in the military conflicts throughout the war. Among the references the playwright cites is a book by Luc Frédefon who narrates his experiences as an appelé soldier (Magnan, Algérie 25).

For a comprehensive presentation of the relevant repertory see David Bradby; Janice Gross; Chantal Regairaz; Mustapha Larbi.

The play unfolds through the succession of fragmentary scenes, each constructed in a different dramatic style, all together forming a collage representing the history of colonial Algeria. The “raw” material of this collage consists of quotations from literary texts, history books, films, references to particular geographical landmarks and historical figures, as well as traces of the playwright’s personal memories. The principle of mixing elements of different origins also defines the play’s verbal texture; realistic dialogues are intermingled with poetic descriptions, quotations from literary texts, history books and radio broadcasts.

A similar logic governs the depiction of characters and the presentation of the dramatic space and time. Paul, the protagonist, crosses the landscape of his childhood introducing the other characters to its major landmarks. He meets lieutenant Sutter, the assistant Chief Marcel and his girlfriend Lucette, Sirius – whose name is reminiscent of the nickname used by Hubert Beuve-Méry the founder of the newspaper Le Monde –, Alkaseltzer – whose name is a word pun for the known pain reliever –, and “Corto Maltese,” the adventurer sailor from the world of Hugo Pratt’s comics. In the military landscape, the playwright introduces some fictional or anonymous figures who intrude the realistic world of Algiers in the 1950s. Tartarin and Vialar from Alfonse Daudet’s novel Tartarin of Tarascon; the Woman with a Chrysanthemum (La Femme avec un chrysanthème) and the Political Man (L’ Homme Politique); emir Abd-El-Kader, the legendary hero who fought against the French in the 19th century, speaks a rather incomprehensible language, and repeats the verses from Molière’s Le bourgeois gentilhomme (Magnan, Algerie 43); three Moorish girls, Djamila, Zohra, and Samia, who act as the play’s chorus and remind us of the violent episodes that accompany the French presence in their land.

Similarly, Magnan constructs the play’s dramatic space as a palimpsest consisting of different traces/layers of History. It is like a map that depicts Algeria’s colonial history by interweaving three different levels: the real, the imaginary and the metaphorical. On the realistic level, the dominant space refers to the military barracks, located in the middle of a barren landscape that is hostile, unknown and dangerous for the French. The second spatial level – superimposed on the “realistic” setting – refers to the imaginary space of the intertextual references, all related to the colonial presence of the French in Algeria. The landscape described is fragmentary, like a map with many blank spaces, and consists mostly of known landmarks related to particular events in the colonial history.

The interconnection between these two spatial levels creates a third metaphorical space: that of History. Magnan enters the world of history in order to perform his own recollection of events; doing the work of an “archeologist” he rewrites the itinerary of his fellow pieds noirs by remembering history books, cultural landmarks, films, literary texts, journal reports, and radio broadcasts.

By interweaving these fragments of texts, images, impressions and feelings, the playwright – entrapped like Paul in a history that is not his own – realizes that colonial Algeria was ultimately the home of soldiers and battles, a land for the adventurers of the

7 His personal involvement is particularly evident in his notes in “Algérie 54-62. Une première esquisse,” 25-27.
8 In fact Magnan uses a reference to Molière’s play twice (Algerie 41,43) in Cleonte’s speech in Act 4, Scene 4 of the play. This can be interpreted as Magnan’s attempt to express the oriental viewpoint dominating the French perception of the Other.
West. The images he can recall from his peaceful, childhood landscapes are very few, captured in the dark room of memory.

**Mehdi Charef’s 1962, Le dernier voyage (2007): Childhood memories from the summer of 1962**

While Magnan maintains a rather detached position and revisits French Algeria by creating a collage of images, Mehdi Charef returns to his childhood years in Algeria and explores the colonial past through the eyes of the pieds noirs. Charef is a popular writer and film director, and 1962, Le dernier voyage is his first play. The playwright has a firsthand experience of that period; for him, the war marked a radical rupture between the past (French Algeria) and the future (Independent Algeria and postcolonial France), a rupture that also exerted a deep influence on his personal life since, after the Independence, he moved to France with his family (Charef, “Parler de l’Algérie” 66). Charef points out that his aim was to explore and understand the complex relations between the French (pieds noirs) and the Algerians, then and now; to acknowledge and openly talk about their shared history (66).

In 1962, le dernier voyage, Charef mainly resorts to his memories in order to draw the characters’ profiles and to recreate the atmosphere of that crucial moment of rupture. He presents a number of stereotypical pied-noir figures, and succeeds in providing his audience with a detailed map of the different social groups forming the community of the European settlers. The play’s structure mostly follows a conventional dramatic form; the dramatic space is the train station of the city of Marnia in the North-West of Algeria, a setting that remains the same in all three acts. The dramatic time is also specified: 16th June 1962 (Charef, 1962: 19).

However, this realistic background acquires a symbolic significance. As a borderline location connecting two different places, the train station can be seen as the last refuge for the pieds-noirs surrounded by the Arabs, who, though physically absent are still felt and heard throughout the play. In this light, the train station can be considered the last “territory” of French Algeria, a few hours before its definite “erasure” from the map. In a similar manner, the dramatic time refers to the few hours before the end of French Algeria: what the characters, the pieds-noirs, conceive of as their reality (French Algeria) already belongs to the past, while their future (the ex-metropolis) remains an imaginary and hostile land.

Madame Léonie Canava belongs to the group of land owners who lived in rural Algeria and represents the good-willed side of the European settlers. She has always considered Algeria her homeland, a “home” her ancestors created with hard work and creative ideas. However, a few hours before she abandons her “homeland,” Madame Léonie’s illusions are exposed and her true bonds with Algeria revealed. Like many European settlers, she has endorsed many principles and attitudes of the colonial ideology, ignoring its violent side. The Arabs were part of her environment and she was willing to accept them, but always in a patronizing way and from a distance. On the contrary, Jules, her late husband, established a

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9He has also used the same subject in his novel À bras-le-coeur (2006) and in his film Cartouches gauloises (2007).
10The play was first produced in 2005, directed by Kader Boukhanef and Azize Kabouche at the Théâtre Montparnasse.
11It is the home town of Charef, Maghnia, which was formerly called Marnia.
deeper bond with the Arab culture: he learned the language and converted to Islam (Charef, 1962 36). As Tahar reveals, Jules chose the land of Algeria as his homeland and committed suicide in order not to be forced to die in a foreign country (Charef, 1962 22).

Like Jules, the hairdresser Dacquin learned Arabic and participated along with many pieds noirs in the movement for an Algerian Algeria. Dacquin condemns the colonial ideology that formed the background of French Algeria and wishes for Europeans and Arabs to live together as equal partners, in one country belonging to both: Algerian Algeria.

Dacquin’s most ruthless opponent is Perret: he feels betrayed by pieds noirs and adopts a racist ideology, insisting that each social, racial and religious community should stay separate (Charef, 1962 43). Having internalized the most common colonial stereotypes about Arabs, he believes they are incapable of maintaining the system and the “goods” the Europeans have created.12

Similarly frustrated is Barnabé, the station master, in charge of the last train itinerary. He feels he has to protect it from the “fellagas” that are watching from a distance. Barnabé justifies his hostile feelings by saying that those like him who belong to the lower middle class of pieds noirs and live in the cities have a more realistic perception of the indigenous people than the romantic view held by the landowners, les gros colons (31). He also feels violently uprooted when he is transferred to a village in France, that foreign country he cannot even find on the map (30).

On the other hand, Marie, who returned from France a few years ago to find out what happened to her fiancé – a missing soldier – experiences a different sort of exile for a second time. Though she decides to stay in Algeria and pay tribute to her lost friend, she does not see this journey as a trip back home, but as journey to a “foreign” land.

Charef does not provide many portraits from the side of the Arabs. Tahar, former servant of the Canava family and current leader of the F.L.N. army is escorting the pieds noirs to the station; for him, French Algeria is already a thing of the past, and he is focused on the future, ready to celebrate the establishment of a new independent country. The only “enemy” who does not have a place in this new country is El Dib, a harki soldier who came to the station in an ultimate effort to escape from the Arabs. In the end, he is shot dead.

In presenting the different narratives about French Algeria, Mehdi Charef appears to fulfill an imaginary promise to all those pied noirs he met as a child. As one of them exclaims, “Do not ever forget us! Because it is only you, that you have met us, you are our memory” (Charef, 1962 55). Moreover, Charef points out that despite the network of power relations that colonialism imposed, the different groups shared more than they thought. Seen from a postcolonial perspective, they did not only share a particular geographical location, but also the history of this “imaginary” country with which they were all related. Only if history is perceived as a common field that consists of nœuds de mémoire generating different and often contested memory narratives, can one trace what the two communities share in the present.

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12In the end, Perret is going to miss the train, killed most probably by one of the Arab soldiers who were around the station (Charef, 1962 58).

While Charef presents the pied-noir versions of French Algeria, Aziz Chouaki introduces the memory of the land itself. In *Les oranges*, it is as if Algeria remembers its history and projects on stage images from the different groups that left their traces on its landscape throughout its history.¹³

Chouaki, a writer, journalist and musician, is considered one of the most important Algerian francophone writers. He describes himself as a second generation pied noir in an attempt to highlight his hybrid cultural identity, constructed by various elements deriving from the mosaic of cultures that characterized the francarabe atmosphere in Algiers, where he grew up.¹⁴ Chouaki identifies the multilingual environment in which he was exposed as the core of his hybrid identity. He considers the “neurotic” relation with language that he and the other Algerians of his generation have as a result of the different languages to which they were exposed: the official French, the Kabylian dialect, the everyday spoken Arabic, and the classic Arabic (Chouaki, “L’Humour” 49-50). The issue of language as a live material is of crucial importance for Chouaki. He believes in the palpable power of words and the writer’s culinary relation with language, in the sense that using words becomes a “physical” experience (Caubet 159). The game of discovering the traces of different cultures that the words “conceal,” and their “material” presence – especially as registered in their rhythm and musicality – form part of Chouaki’s poetics. Taking this into consideration, the emphasis the writer puts on orality may be discerned as well as its association with the Arab tradition of storytelling (Caubet 160-61).

In his play, Chouaki associates orality with an inventive use of the monologue, structured like a tale narrated by a storyteller or like an epic rhapsody. Chouaki suggests that *Les oranges* may indeed be considered a rhapsody; a narrative expressing a poetic reality using multiple registers: epic, popular, and philosophical (Caubet 162). The playwright constructs an original monologue intermingling narrative, dialogic and poetic passages. His protagonist, who undertakes the task of narrating the history of Algeria, explains that the story begins with an orange – Algeria’s national fruit – and the bullet this orange received by the first French soldier who disembarked on this land. The narrator promises that he will bury the orange only when peace is restored in Algeria, and when its people live in peace with each other, like oranges on the orange tree (Chouaki, *Les Oranges* 31). Chouaki adopts the hybrid perspective of the second-generation pied noir, in an attempt to demystify all these falsified versions of history written by those in power (Caubet 164), and to support, like Charef, the idea of a shared memory (Gross 217, 233).

In order to make “visible” on stage the contrapuntal logic of watching history as this is “projected” on the contemporary landscape, Chouaki makes creative use of the dramatic space and time. He places the protagonist on his balcony, a location that allows him to have a privileged view of the bay and the city of Algiers. From this spot, he can observe snapshots of contemporary everyday life, and also contemplate on the events taking place in the realm of history. Adhering to this logic, the playwright divides the play into six parts.

¹³ The play was first produced in 1997, directed by the playwright himself.
¹⁴ For more information see Aziz Chouaki (45), Dominique Caubet (155-66).
In the three scenes entitled “Balcon,” which refer to the present, the protagonist records the noises, the voices, the smells and the colors in the popular neighborhood where he lives, providing a vivid image of contemporary Algerians. The protagonist explains that the landscape of the contemporary city is a place already hybridized. There are many landmarks that have changed their names but remained the same (Chouaki, Les Oranges 27). Moreover, if one perceives the map according to an old popular saying of the pied noirs, that “the Mediterranean sea crosses France like the river Seine crosses Paris,” one can still see this analogy; contemporary Algerian identity is located somewhere in-between Marseilles and Algiers, between couscous and béchamelle (Chouaki, Les Oranges 28).

The other three parts refer to the protagonist’s “visits” to the major landscapes of Algerian history; in the first part, the protagonist travels back to the days of colonialism, starting in the 1830s when the French arrived on the Algerian shores. He comes across renowned historical figures like General Bugeaud and de Saint Arnaud who contributed to the violent imposition of the French domination, Emir Abdelkader who fought against the French Army, de Tocqueville and Victor Hugo discussing about the utility of the colonies. He also meets well-known figures and anonymous inhabitants: the mysterious Isabelle Eberhardt, the woman who travelled in Algeria disguised as a man, the famous fortuneteller M’Barka, the Italian blachisseuse Rosina, the professor of sociology M. Bourdier (Pierre Bourdieu?) and Albert Camus, who is not remembered for his writings but his unique technique in slicing watermelons (Chouaki, Les Oranges 33-35).

In his second journey, the protagonist revisits the Independent state and watches how the colorful power of revolution has been gradually transformed into a black and white totalitarian regime, into the “Arabic version of Stalinism” (Chouaki, Les Oranges 45). After leaving this bleak atmosphere, the protagonist reaches the recent historical period which refers to the civil war that broke out in the early 1990s. The authoritarian regime returns, with the only difference that Marxism is replaced by Islam (Chouaki, Les Oranges 60). The protagonist reads aloud names from the list of exiled or executed “enemies” of the regime: politicians, poets, playwrights, and journalists (Chouaki, Les Oranges 62-63).

Entrapped in this circle of violence, the protagonist acknowledges that the one “lesson” he was taught during his travel to history is that the real wealth of this country resides in its multiethnic texture. As he admits, the Algerian soil consists of all sorts of different blood: “Phenician, Berber, Carthagian, Roman, Vandal, Arab, Turc, French, Maltese, Spanish, Jewish, Italian, Yugoslavian, Cuban, Corsican, Vietnamese, Angolan, Russian, pied noir, harki, beur” (Chouaki, Les Oranges 49). Chouaki reminds us that violence will come to an end in Algeria only when diversity is accepted; when historical discourse opens up to accommodate the different – multidirectional – memory narratives.

**Conclusion**

The plays of Magnan, Charef, and Chouaki make an important contribution to the guerre de mémoires placing emphasis on the fact that, in order for French Algeria to lose its phantomatic presence – a burden identified with the evils of colonialism –, it should be seen as a contested imaginary territory belonging to the historical past of both countries. As all three plays suggest, the different groups involved (pied noirs, Algerian immigrants in France, Algerians, Arabs and Berbers, harkis) discover the “space of a shared memory, where the
documentary experience of a traumatic history is replayed through human exchanges that attempt to confront and reexamine the experience of the past’’ (Gross 219).

**Works Cited**


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