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## Writing the Feminine Desire in Maissa Bey's *Nulle autre Voix* (2018)

كتابة الرغبة الأنثوية في *Nulle autre Voix* لميضاء بي (2018)

### L'écriture du désir féminin dans *Nulle autre Voix* de Maissa Bey (2018)

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“And when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive”. (Audre Lorde, A litany for survival).

### Introduction

The following analysis rests on the premise that women writers all around the world, in the past and present, struggle with internal and external forces to claim their feminine identity as well as a literary authority. The Algerian women writers face similar exclusions from discourses, the problematic relationship to place and belonging, relations with their male writers, and the way in which women's subjectivity has been constructed through a variety of stereotypical images and distortions. Therefore, their literary output reflects on their feminine responses to the various previous misrepresentations.

The focus in this paper is on the representation of the Algerian woman with reference to the ways Maissa Bey has “taken writing” in her last novel, *Nulle autre voix* (2018) to represent and denounce the historical muting of women under the system of patriarchy, a form of social organization in which males assume power and create for females an inferior status. The narrative explores how an unnamed woman's transgressive actions emerge as her desire to express self-determining subjectivity beyond social constraints. The questions to be addressed and to which we shall provide answers are: what determines the heroine's actions and feminine desires? How does she claim the right for a space as woman in a male-dominated society? What she ought to do to get back her authority.

What is noteworthy to point out is also how to perceive the phases of woman's past to be the predisposing causes of her unusual behavior and action. To establish the connections between her deeds and the causes that propelled them, three main threads run through our reading of this novel: first, claiming a place, the violence of representation, and the writers' consciousness of her paradoxical subject-position within the society as an excluded other. Before examining the

issue of feminine desire, however, we begin the analysis with a consideration of gender construction following the theoretical analysis provided in Judith Butler's critical approach.

## 1. Theoretical Considerations

The theoretical framework deployed throughout this analysis of Bey's last novel is based on ideas provided in Judith Butler's thoughts on the issue of feminine desire, which she develops mainly in her book entitled, *Antigone's Claim. Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000) and her *Undoing Gender* (2004) where she stresses the way social violence urges the tasks of social transformation. Her critique of gender norms is clearly situated within the framework of human persistence and survival. And to « do » one's gender in certain ways sometimes implies « undoing » dominant notions of personhood (Butler, 2004: 168).

What is interesting in Butler's study of Sophocles' heroine, Antigone and which seems to be relevant to the feminine desire in Maïssa Bey's novel is the way the American theorist links Antigone's act of "saying: No" to the oppressive authority of the state represented by Créon, to the issue of kinship. For her, there is a close link between the two. Through her transgressive act Antigone, in contrast, emerges as the first individual to express self-determining subjectivity beyond her social role. (Butler, 2000: 11-12).

Butler as many philosophers and theorists returns to this figure in an attempt to grapple with the struggles and crises of the modern times. It is important to mention that the figure of Antigone did not fascinate Judith Butler only ; her actions were inspiring to many authors, contexts and periods. Although the details and context differ in relation to Maïssa Bey's last novel, nonetheless, certain elements of the story converge in many ways. Features like the isolated woman excluded 'other', the struggle against male power and rigid social norms are recurrent in Bey's last novel. Moreover, woman's actions nevertheless allow her to overcome the fateful repetition of oppression inherent in her society. She, thus, suggests new beginnings by "undoing gender" that are both personal and collective.

Following Butler thinking, who represents a feminist position that necessarily challenges or may be completes Hegel and Lacan's analysis, Butler follows Simone de Beauvoir in arguing that the idea of desire is never determined by biological sexual differentiation, it must always be thought of as attached to an embodied "situation". Butler speaks of kinship not as a form of *being*, but rather as a form of *doing* (Söderbäck, 2007: 8). For Butler, "it becomes impossible to separate out

“gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (Butler, 1999: 6).

By using Butler’s reflections, we aim to show that through her fourteen letters, the anonymous woman sheds light on the links between writing and gender. Nevertheless, the best evidence Bey’s concern about gendered control appears over the performativity of language and the narrative discourse.

## **2. The Synopsis of the Novel**

Maissa Bey’s last novel, *Nulle Autre Voix* tells an unusual experience of an unnamed woman, who after stabbing her husband, informs the police about her action. She is found guilty of murder and spends fifteen years in prison. The narrative is built around the fourteen letters, which she has written to a woman writer. Through flashbacks and a fragmented style, the narrator informs the reader about the causes which propel her to commit a murder. She voices all the physical, psychological trauma, and violence she went through all along her childhood and during her marital life with an oppressive husband that exerted a heavy toll on her conscience and mental health.

By mixing different genres, the author focuses on the feminine desire for liberation from the grip of an abusive and sadistic husband, an oppressive mother, and from the weight of rigid social norms. The fourteen letters written inaugurate a return to life and contribute to awaken her consciousness. By this complex novel, Bey provides an image of the daily life of woman who suffers in silence. It is also an account of the traumatic experiences of her companions of misfortune in prison, which deciphers clearly women’s lives burdened by dehumanizing mistreatments, which they endure in a total neglect and indifference.

The descriptive and introspective ways the author appeals to in order to present the main character in her psychological distress and the silence following the murder of her abusive partner are intended to denounce the excessive violence against women who suffer from confinement, loneliness and marginalization. It also attests to Bey’s determination not to be silenced about those concerns within her writing as we shall attempt to show in this analysis, which centers woman’s feminine desire.

## **3. Representations of a Disturbed Memory**

The narrator portrays a rather tormented life of the unnamed woman caused by her mother’s incomprehensible behavior, which she interiorized deeply in her psyche. The narrative uncovers fears and anxieties caused by her oppressive mother, which is followed by a repetitive violence by an abusive husband. Her

“Social death”, in Orlando Patterson’s words, as a living being, which is radically deprived of all rights that are supposed to be accorded to all human beings led her to an anti-social behavior. To exteriorize the terror she went through, she begins writing in a notebook about her troubled memories. After her release from jail, she felt an irrepressible desire to write the story of her life. She found herself coming to writing project in which she takes refuge in order to describe her tormented life, starting with her ambiguous relationship with her mother. Through her words, she externalizes repressed ailments she has been enduring since her childhood. That’s why writing becomes a liberating element for her.

The continued efforts at silencing this unnamed woman was perpetuated and reinforced by her conflictive relationship with her mother, which forced her to an arranged marriage and an unhappy life. Through backward and forward moves, between reason and madness, the narrator creates a world in which the prodigious power of writing will help her to remember her past, describe violence, overcome her fears and hope for a better future.

The novel ends with an unexpected fall ; the writer does not exist. The nonexistence of the writer suggests a mental disorder in the character after suffering from so much mental violence. Physical, sexual and psychological cruelty led her to commit murder to free herself from her oppressor. The murder of her husband becomes a kind of therapy for her. Describing her crime as liberating, the woman feels relieved as she frees herself from the grips of a monster. The murder also seems to strengthen her desire to end with her silence and weakness. It was her way of getting the mother’s attention, showing her that she was strong, she is not passive, and that she could react in the most awful way to violence. However, the mother did not try to understand her ; she even forces her family members to never pronounce her name after her scandal (p, 71).

It is important to point out that the oscillation between reason and madness marks the entire narrative. The reader does not know whether the character suffers psychological disorders or not. It is until the end of the novel that one understands that the violence suffered and practiced by her mother and husband destroyed the rationality of the young woman. Her brain has created a parallel world, in which she no longer speaks to those around her.

The young woman remembers her mother’s words and gestures and describes them in detail. The reader understands easily that she has an excessive love for her sons and a contemptuous indifference to her daughter. This was noticeable even through the impact of her voice which criticizes gender difference:

Sa voix se faisait douce pour son premier-né. À la fois protectrice et suppliante, parfois agacée quand elle s'adressa à son petit dernier qui savait la pousser dans ses derniers retranchements. Froide, sèche, coupante, vibrante de colère et d'exaspération dès qu'elle croyait comprendre que je voulais lui tenir tête. Aujourd'hui encore, pendant que je vous écris, elle vibre à mes oreilles. (p, 61).

We may call the mother-daughter relationship schizophrenic because it is a source of love, protection for her sons while she inflicts psychological violence on her daughter. She might have done it unconsciously, but the fears of maternal violence marked the girl's childhood since. This passage expresses clearly the damage caused on her personality:

Je n'ai jamais pu supporter la dureté soudaine de ce regard qui se détournait dès qu'il m'effleurait. Ou qui, au contraire, s'attardait sur moi avec une intensité telle que mon corps se rétractait, que la surface de ma peau se hérissait de milliers de petite pointes douloureuses pendant que mon sang arrêtait sa course dans mes veines (p,62).

The mother terrifies her young daughter and causes an uncontrollable reaction of fear. Therefore, involuntarily she pisses herself. The mother's oppression leads to another psychological trauma by her injurious words by repeating the nickname of « pisseuse », which pursued her for several years. Criticism, humiliation and scorn are the mother's only exchanges with her daughter, which continues even through her marital life.

After her marriage, she went through more and more degrading remarks which caused her greatest anxiety. Her « monstrous » confidence obsessed the narrator's thoughts. The anonymous woman's negative attitudes derive in part from her unhappy relationship with her mother. She complains that her life is troubled by her mother and her culture: « Ma mère qui aurait voulu effacer toute trace de mon existence » (p,40). Bey's last novel calls attention to the problems of writing, narrative discourse, and the use of metaphor by women when the mother figure epitomizes symbolically the weight of culture, which continues to shackle her freedom and desires: « Je ne sais pas ce que vient faire ma mère dans cette histoire. Dans mon histoire. Mais, elle est là. Partout. Partout » (p. 23).

The author's position as a woman can be linked to the struggle of the female character over control of language and story. Her consistently ironic voice sets up a kind of double text that both tells a story and comments on that story at the same time. Like Antigone, the unnamed woman's speech underscores her own sovereignty: "Although she uses language to claim her deed, to assert a defiant

autonomy, she can perform that act only through embodying the norms of the power she opposes" (Butler, 2004: 167).

However, the narrative reflects a sense of helplessness and the woman desire for change. The psychological pressure exerted on her by the abusive and violent husband to keep the truth under wraps unhinges her mental self-control in very subtle and imperceptible ways. The disconcerted woman grows progressively paranoid. Her sexual relationship with her husband is marked by a growing monotony, indifference, and lack of love. Driven to murder by a sense of suffocation resulting from her dilemma, the anonymous woman might become mentally deranged. The reaction to domestic violence was fatal for the husband. The woman's suffering or cry of distress did not stop until she took action. One and only solution: kill the man who has abused her for several years in order to free herself from his oppression. The oxymoron: confinement/freedom is recurrent throughout the novel; it shows that the relief of spirit was acquired only in prison, once the man has been killed.

## **4. Silence and writing of women's desire**

### **4.1. Writing and Claiming a Space for Woman's Desire**

The feminine desire in Bey's last novel resides no less within the sphere of kinship. As mentioned earlier, it derives from the woman's turmoil caused by the tyranny of her mother, from which she remains unable to detach herself. The contempt of the mother keeps her fettered to a position of social submission. This can be added to her "Social death" embedded in the violence of a repressive, male-dominated society, which shows that woman has no chance to be considered autonomous moral subject.

To undo the oppression of her mother and perversions committed by her husband, the anonymous woman transgresses the norms. However, we cannot reduce her female desire to some dark desire for death of her husband. The narrative sheds light on the ways in which the story of woman can function, on the one hand, as a springboard for alternative life in her desire of freedom. Her experience allows her to regard sexuality beyond its determination by gender hierarchies. As Judith Butler points out, woman's life allows "associating it with a freedom that takes us well beyond the categories of social domination" (Butler.2004: 185). Interestingly, the arguments made or perhaps implied by Butler can be connected to feminine desire of the unnamed woman, who is motivated to seek for the desire for recognition, and recognition is itself a cultivated form of desire according to Butler.



In the work of Bey the novel is considered to exemplify a tragic violence inherent in the feminine condition and illustrates the story of a woman forced to confinement and a life of silence under the weight of her family and society, which compels her to commit murder as an act of liberation. To uncover previously unnoticed connection between the anonymous woman's anti-social action and her desires by concentrating on the insanely violent act is a key point of focus and trace her provocative progress through the narrative. As such, she does not appear to feel guilt, though she does assert her right, even as she acknowledges that what justifies her act is regarded only as a sign of criminality.

Bey challenges and transgresses the traditional codes framing women's life in the patriarchal culture. She comes close to Butler in questioning the category 'woman' and continues in this vein with examinations of 'the masculine' and 'the feminine' gender hierarchies. Best known however, but also most often misinterpreted, is Butler's concept of gender as a reiterated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality. Maissa Bey regards the example of the anonymous woman as symptomatic of the enigmas surrounding human existence and identity as such. The representation of feminine desire is not reducible to structural, social, and sexual terms; it rather calls for a deep understanding of an "otherness" that cannot be reduced to the social sphere only. For Butler, such conflict emerges, first and foremost, from the family and kinship. And this is precisely what the Antigone complex is concerned with the pressure of an unfathomable otherness.

Although excluded from the sphere of power, the unnamed woman attempts to pierce her shell in order to change her life. She knows exactly what she wants and how to pursue it. She makes her own plans and sets her own norms as she says: "Je l'ai tué. Normal" (p,20). She then engages in an impulsive, socially unacceptable behavior, for which she feels no remorse. And insofar as she inhabits the place of the no longer silence and submissive, she contributes to create an imaginary universe: a world where she can live: "Merveilleusement. Définitivement seule" (p,25).

The woman's new life without constraints becomes possible by giving birth to imaginary universe and a different space from the one she went through. It is a space where she is not condemned to exclusion, alienation, and a loss of subjectivity. Though she has been stigmatized as a "criminal", she nevertheless, maintains her human contours, her hopes, her dignity, and let her own voice to be heard through her writing project. She voices her optimistic vision as follows: *« J'ai compris, en revenant à mes carnets chaque soir, que l'écriture libère bien plus*

*la parole* » (p,192). Her statement implies that she can bypass her problematical place in society.

## **4.2. The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action**

The novel features, a woman so incensed with hatred for her husband that she stabs him to death. As her action is not allowed to go unpunished ; she is sent to prison for fifteen years. After her release, the reader discovers her past through the confessions she makes to a writer who comes to listen to her several times a week. Though the cause of violence is inscribed in a larger context of the patriarchal symbolic established order, it is also originated in a fundamental lack of joy, a flagrant lack of love and livable life with her violent husband: “A pas de loup. Il m’a donné un coup de pied sur les mollets. De toutes ses forces” (p, 113).

It also comes from the anxiety felt in the face of an oppressive mother, who rejects her. As a Child, she did not have the opportunity to become attached to her. As an adult, she fails to learn how to develop significant emotional ties to others. She remains silent and incorporates the passive virtue of a good woman. She presents herself to the reader as unvoiced and submissive. Bad things keep happening to her because of her passivity and her incapacity to protect herself: “Le silence le vide prennent le relais. Ou autre chose. Je suis déjà de l’autre côté de ma vie” (p,11). This cry from woman’s prevalent suffering and extreme anxiety become her lifestyle. She falls so many times that it becomes obvious that her suffering is compensated by her enjoyment she takes in killing her husband: “Il n’y a ni douleur, ni chagrin. Pas non plus de regret. Rien d’autre qu’un sentiment de paix, une plénitude qui m’envahit chaque matin quand j’ouvre les yeux” (p,17). This moral jubilation expresses a more trouble manifestation of the drive than that of an aggressive avenger. The woman manifests a kind of enjoyment that her husband ceases to control and terrify her, which gives her pleasure, independence, and autonomy. Her words overturn a discourse in which feminine desire is depicted as the negation of moral freedom. Although her situation represents the impasse of female dependency, she ceases to be forced into submission and inaction.

As we pointed out in the introduction, Bey does not explain the silence and oppression of women through social conditions only ; she chooses to depict them within the family and marital life. While the woman is the victim of unjust laws and social conditions, she contributes in a certain way to her inferiority through an exaggerated acceptance of self-denial: “Je me suis fixé moi-même les contraintes” (p,58). As the narrative progresses, her marriage becomes a powerful

metaphorical code of the prison walls, which serve as an image for her female servitude. She discovers that her marriage to a heartless, brutish and selfish man has failed to give her the satisfaction she expected ; instead it has ruined her for life. Unlike the safety it is supposed to provide, marriage is lived as a form of punishment that inflicts pain in addition to depriving woman of her freedom. The fact that she is imprisoned by the institution of marriage, which made her feel rather being a property and a victim of her husband's violence. The unnamed woman feels doubly enslaved: first by marriage and by her cruel mother. However, the unnamed woman escapes from the prison of an unbearable marriage, but remains a prisoner of her past trauma. She is clearly terrified by the instituted violence against woman by tradition. But rather than freeing herself after the crime, she remains a victim of her past. This passage introduces her dilemma not in order to define the function of feminine desire, but rather to illuminate the difficulty of being a woman

Une enfance solitaire, sans amour, une mère autoritaire, abusive parfois, des frères qui portaient leurs attributs de mâles avec une assurance tranquille, Un père absent, déconnecté de la réalité, une difficulté presque congénitale à trouver sa place dans la famille puis dans la société Et enfin un mari qui correspond presque exactement au portrait-robot des hommes classés dans la catégorie prédateurs violents (p,151).

She unleashed intense violence that had been repressed in her for years. She was totally unable to leave him or engage a divorce, but the choice to kill him comes as a necessity. It was the only way for her to free herself from the recurrent violence. The first proof of woman's autonomy is to get rid of her initial "assujettissement" to her husband's paradoxical situation of incomprehensible silence and the sense of his total indifference to her presence.

By the end of the narrative, the young woman rebels by refusing not only her status as a submissive woman, but also she confronts her fears and decides to let people know about her story. By moving on to the « criminal » act, she becomes released despite having lived for several years in the walls of a prison.

Peut-être qu'en tuant cet homme, je suis arrivée à ce que je souhaitais secrètement: obliger ma mère à tenir compte de mon existence. L'atteindre dans ce qu'elle a de plus précieux: son honorabilité et celle de la famille tout entière. Mais aussi faire qu'elle souffre par moi, à cause de moi, comme j'ai souffert à cause d'elle (p. 70).

Through this unnamed character, Maissa Bey suggests a reflection on the status of woman, which stands for so many others who live under the yoke of domestic

violence and family rejection and exclusion. Violence becomes deliverance and a therapy that heals one's unbearable daily life. More importantly, Maïssa Bey expresses an overt criticism of social conditions and gender hierarchy that deny any feminine desire and destroy woman's possibility for emancipation. However, an exploration of woman's determination challenges to constructing a female narrative that escapes oppression and silencing. Bey's authorial voice appears within the interstices of the ruptured surface story to critique the masculine impetus to subordinate all women within her narrative. The most significant aspects of gender emerge from what is not said, from her silence: "Une vie de femme ne peut trouver de sens que dans le souci des autres et le sacrifice de soi" (p, 105).

In this sense the author reinforces her female protagonist's experience as a way of writing "*Nulle Autre Voix*". Bey strengthens her position as a professional novelist. For if language is not to be trusted, an author's only chance to tell the story rests on her ability to structure a narrative around meaningful silences so that a different story can come out. The narrative comments on itself through the contradictory and fragmented style, which allows for a silent authorial critique from within the gaps and invites the reader to participate in the construction of an alternative story that criticizes masculine narratives about women.

## **6. Reclaiming authority and the female identity**

### **6.1. The Quest for Re-Appropriation of the feminine Identity**

Maïssa Bey tackles the problems of desire and subjectivity in all her novels, but her *Nulle autre voix*, displays a treatment rich in complexity and implications of such an issue. The story of the unnamed feminine character, addresses pertinent questions concerning contemporary desire and subjectivity from new and thought-provoking angles while from a social or cultural viewpoint, it appears inadequate to speak or even to think about femininity and feminine desire. The author refutes isolating desire as an aspect of symbolic castration ; she rather links it to the impact of family and the social dysfunctional norms.

The solution for the unnamed woman is to accept the contradictions that defined her, to develop a sense of self as a woman that exists on her terms, and to acknowledge her difference. Her agreement was willing to risk the social exclusion that authorship entailed for her as a woman. She develops a friendship with a confident and professional ties woman writer. It seems that Bey's assessment of her culture's loss of interest in a "feminine desire" style of writing was both insightful and sharp. If patriarchy has encouraged women to become silent, weak

and submissive, Bey contributes to the creation of free and rational woman. Although the conditions of patriarchy may still apply, the author refers to the social conditions that led to the crime, but she does not simply explain the action through these conditions. The immorality of woman's act of killing her husband is the result of a double oppression, which had a demoralizing effect on her. It is only a consequence of her distress: « Je sais que la violence, la violence première est d'abord celle que l'on se fait à soi-même » (p. 33). Forced obedience under a patriarchal system produces her extreme fall into humiliation, suffering, and self-denial. Bey depicts extremes of suffering so pervasive that they turn into enjoyment and mental relief. Thus it is clear that the anonymous woman acts according to the machinations of her own desire, which becomes a paradoxical sign of moral autonomy. At the same time, she takes up a defensive position in relation to her mother, who caused her silence and self-hatred. Her mother's rejection led her to compensate the lack maternal affection with another woman, the writer. Her continuing brilliant analysis of the social order and culture suggests her ultimate inability to reject, entirely, the feminine figure that had shaped her world and early identity.

Furthermore, Bey explores in detail the difficult relationship with her mother who came to represent for her much that was wrong with Algerian women defined by their total adherence to tradition within a patriarchal social system. The young woman describes her mother as a tyrant figure whose focus on appearances and superficial values provided a bad model for her. The very kind of womanhood she critiques in many of her other novels. Bey rails against her mother's efforts to ensure that her daughter must do only what she considered proper. Noting the contempt that she feels for her had a tragic impact on her future life, her own words suggest the extent to which she both resisted and conformed to her culture's expectations of a woman's role. She complains that her mother determined she must make her debut into society.

From the beginning, however, it seems that her marriage and her role as wife were not without difficulties. She recounts what was to her an utterly humiliating experience when she confronted her mother about exactly what would happen. Yet, the apparently naïve, fearful, and terribly inexperienced young woman would take a complicated way. Although she appeared willing enough as a young woman to conform to the social expectations of her gender, she ultimately found herself in a loveless marriage. Her silence about her daily events hints at the pain it caused for a woman unencumbered by oppressive husband. Ironically, this enterprise rests on novel depicting the failures of female protagonist to find her voice and to

tell her story. She is silenced by circumstances and by her own unwillingness to tell the story that would save her:

Chaque fois qu'il levait la main sur moi, chaque fois qu'il m'insultait, m'humiliait me trainait dans la boue de ses fantasmes, les plus violents, les plus répugnants, si avilissants, que je n'oserais jamais les évoquer devant vous, je me persuadais que la seule issue était la mort. Qu'est-ce qui me rattachait encore à la vie ? (Bey, 2018: 46).

The passage illustrates consistently how the unnamed woman is denied the opportunity to speak, to explain, to tell about the terror of her husband.

It is important to point out that this relation between Bey the author and the silenced protagonist of her novel indicate the various challenges of authorship faced by a woman in a patriarchal culture. At the same time, it illustrates the complex narrative strategies the author employs to overcome these discursive limitations. As her character, Bey struggles with the destabilizing of identity and conceptions of gender hierarchy that rejected claims of a fixed and transcendent woman's voice.

Woman in *Nulle Autre Voix* heightens cultural tensions over women's roles in general. It can be placed along a trajectory of increasingly complex ways of telling the story and a growing confidence within Bey about taking on the role of writer. The novel form can be understood an ongoing debate about the possibility and potential for a woman to become the authors of her own experience. Although her protagonist largely fails to control their own story, the very importance of Bey's novel, in our view, derives from the fact that it suggests a possibility that women can tell the story. The multilayered narrative accords the author's voice, authority, and power. Bey transforms a story about the disastrous consequences for a woman who commits a crime into a carefully crafted tale about women's alienating effects of masculine domestic violence. Through the unnamed woman, she shows how individual masculine narratives about the identity and moral worth of the female protagonist can be destabilized within larger cultural narratives regarding women. The success of the anonymous woman to get her autonomy offers a powerful critique of the silencing of women while it reveals the possibility of acquiring a voice that accords her social independence.

Moreover, Bey's literary "re-vision" of social codes calls for a new way of looking at literary tradition. She points to her own struggles between her female identity as woman and her role as a writer working within a masculine literary tradition. She argues that women must find new perspectives on a literary history that largely ignores female writing. By reference to the historical and cultural

forces that shape her as what Julia Kristeva calls a “Speaking Subject”, which invites the reader to understand her last novel in relation the author’s efforts to gain literary authority.

## 6.2. The Force of Woman in Regaining Authority

Maissa Bey’s last novel does not only denote woman’s obstacles to taking on the authority of telling the story but also shows clearly how she triumphs over the various obstructions facing her in everyday life. In the beginning of the narrative, the woman lacks power, and therefore both freedom and autonomy. She is the object of her violent husband’s striving for control of her body and spirit:

Je ne parlais pas. Je ne criais pas. Un cri de surprise parfois. Lui non plus ne criait pas. Personne ne devait nous entendre. Personne ne devait savoir. Un couple très discret. Sans histoires. Les gifles étaient fortes. Mais pas assez fortes pour laisser des traces sur mon visage. (Bey, 2108: 165).

As this excerpt illustrates, the cultural and social codes, impose silence on woman by masculine domination, which traps her within logic of subjection. However, the unnamed protagonist struggles against her absence of power over the story and, her fighting back, reveals the author’s clear and continuing critique of the social impetus to take over the narrative. The novel’s structure reveals increasingly complex strategies that allow the author to tell multiple and even contradictory stories.

Through her anonymous woman character, for instance, the author suggests a reflection on woman’s awareness of her silencing. Hence, shapes her as a subject, who succeeds in a construction of the fictional space in which she can live her life, and her creation of story lines that poignantly calls into question the lack of female power over the story. She challenges a system where women had few constitutional rights and individual possibilities. Bey’s narrative may be read as a woman’s cry for emancipation and moral autonomy. It appeals for the need and desire to end woman’s submission and dependence upon others.

Such a reading of *Nulle Autre Voix* reveals the real complexity of this novel and suggests that Bey’s view of her society and the men and women who inhabit it is much more critical than one expects. Her critique resides in the narrative juxtaposition of unnamed woman’s story, her fears about responding to her mother’s sense of being deceived:

« Le plus léger haussement de ton me terrifait et entraînait une réaction incontrôlable: un écoulement involontaire d’urine. Autrement dit: “je me pissais dessus” (p. 60).

In addition to the psychological terrifying mother, she is trapped by the man who exerts physical and moral control over her, her unwilling decision to kill him comes out after the horror she has been enduring for long time. Her husband and the social constraints condemn her to a silence that she does not dare break. As she writes her letters, she constructs a story about her life ; she puts an end the imposed silences by writing what is not said, at the spaces within the story. The ruptures within Bey's text, thus, reveal the dilemma of a female writer working within a culture that codes authorship as male and the subject of narrative as female. Yet these ruptures also suggest a solution to the "problem" of women writers such as Bey who must face down both social disapproval and inner uncertainty in order to write.

By the end of the narrative, the anonymous character succeeds to reconstruct her ruined life and emerges as a metaphor for Bey's optimistic vision. Ironically, she voices its author implied invitation to the reader to piece together the broken bits of her narrative to generate a story. The unnamed character's story emerges out of her silence, hesitation, and fragmented speech. In a similar way, the narrative structuring of fragments in *Nulle Autre Voix* enables Bey to create a doubling of meaning so that the novel both validates and critiques what Camille Froidvaux-Metterie calls the binary oppositions:

"enracinée dans une conception essentialiste qui oppose l'homme, agressif, dominant et prédateur, à la femme opprimée, exploitée et victimisée"(Froidvaux-Metterie.1998: 124).

Silences within the story become the author's means to critique the very silencing of her protagonist. She demonstrates by this imposed silence about the harsh realities of how masculine narratives silence women's voices and how the latter fail to define their own stories of identity and express their feminine desire. As a silenced subject, she remains unable to control the story told about her and unable or unwilling to construct her own narrative.

After several appointments with the writer, the unnamed woman starts to speak and explain: « J'allais le supprimer. Je me répétais cette phrase et tout devenait simple, lumineux comme une évidence » (p, 47). The woman's statement expresses her desire to end with the chaotic effects of violence by man and the silencing of her female voice. It encourages the reader to consider the novel the context of Bey's continuing concern about the challenges to female authorship. She struggles to define herself and articulate her desire against all the obstacles. Bey's text reveals narrative strategies that address the divided position of the female character and enables her to take on the authority of writing by killing symbolically the masculine dominating figure: « Au moment où j'ai frappé, je



voulais mettre un point final à trente ans d'échine courbée et de reniements » (p. 76). Symbolically, she succeeds to assume her role as an artist and literary professional, to develop a popular readership and an enviable literary reputation. She negotiates the cultural tensions inherent in becoming a serious female writer in a male-dominated literary scene.

The woman's confessions through the letters reflects on the way Maïssa moves beyond the conventional narrative of a good woman ruined by her own weaknesses and the moral corruption of the society that shaped her. Cultural and familial notions about the role of women reduced to silence are deconstructed through the unnamed woman's words, which consistently criticize the norms that silenced her: "Combien de fois avez-vous dû prendre sur vous pour dissimuler votre dégoût, votre pitié, mais aussi votre peur ?" (p.37). This questioning explicitly represents all damaging effects of masculine and social oppression undergone by woman. Bey uses her character to foreground the constructs of the silencing process of the female protagonist. Such disjunctions create a space for an alternative narrative that enables the text to examine the problem of literary language and the construction of stories that operate as a silent and ironic commentary on the way the anonymous woman is subjected to the representation by others.

While in the beginning of the narrative, the woman without a name finds it very difficult to extricate herself from a patriarchal society, but her belief, her feminine desire, and her ability to go beyond the harsh living conditions offer insights into the condition of a social speaking subject equipped with a possible transformation for the better. If these insights must be measured in terms of the specific cultural milieu from which Bey emerges, they too perhaps at least point to some of the conditions and challenges that women writers face in general. Her narrative reveals her deep desire as she argues that it was her destiny as a writer that enabled her to overcome family dysfunction, a marital unhappy life and isolation: « *L'écriture m'a sauvée* » says the narrator (p.90). This focal point helps show some of the ways in which feminine desire has been depicted in some distinctive passages of the novel.

Bey constructs her discourse as a provocation and a challenge because it cannot be adequately represented within a social and cultural order in which norms and values have been erected. While the patriarchal society regards feminine desire simply indecent, the author foregrounds it through the conflicts between the woman and her milieu. In this perspective, Bey points out to inconsistencies and contradictions, which prevent woman to live freely. She locates the "gap" or deficiency in the moral edifice that serves to illustrate either moral weakness or the failure of the woman to identify with laws and norms. Unlike male desire, the

feminine does not strive for social recognition or power. She rather seeks a place to live in an acceptable way and a free life.

## Conclusion

What comes from the preceding analysis of Maïssa Bey's last novel, *Nulle Autre Voix* is a reflection on the anonymous woman, who endeavors to achieve her feminine desire in many ways. First, she thinks of taking responsibility for changing her own fate. She moves from a state of ineffective victimization into "a final relief from guilt" (Butler, 2004: 170), which she gained during the time she had spent with other women victims, whom she meets in prison. The various stories of the detainees dismantle institutional structures and modes of thought that exclude women by muting their voices. Bey through the use of her "shadow discourse" as a strategy, she describes female protagonists and makes continual references to various contradictory discourses including that of the detainees to track how female characters live oddly far from the social normative ideals and become progressively imprisoned by male stories. The strategy suggests also Maïssa Bey's awareness of the ways women are rendered powerless by their exclusion from the discursive realm.

Second, the shaping of the woman character allows the author to subvert the different comments, which depict women as weak, faulty, and full of self-deceit. She reverses all those feminine shortcomings that men used to accuse women of by showing that woman can be an autonomous agent, and therefore capable of exerting moral and intellectual responsibility. As a social being, the unnamed woman may well have been denied such responsibility and therefore behave as weak and irrational in the beginning of the narrative. By the end of the novel, this subjection is then transformed into self-determination and a decision to define herself, to situate her problems by herself, and speak with her own voice, instead of being defined and spoken for by others.

In so doing, she goes beyond the limits, the weakness of femininity, and her subjugation to her mother and husband authorities. This is an important discovery because women are not just victims of circumstances ; they are moral agents. Maïssa Bey appeals to various expressions, many of them violent and demeaning, to prove that women are subjugated to interiorized as well as exterior domination. The weakness of the anonymous woman, for instance, is caused by a severe anxiety and fear, an outcome of a troubled childhood by her mother's contempt and hatred, which is added to her husband's excessive violence. Hence her moral deficiency is not a natural one, and therefore it is subject to rectification and change.

A careful reading of the novel also reveals Maïssa Bey's appeal to complex textual strategies not only to tell a story but also to carry out an investigation into the ways by which women both control and are controlled by narrative. It suggests the author's engagement in an activity perceived by herself and her culture as something that men did. Thematic concerns and narrative features within the novel highlight the desire for authority for telling of stories. If an outsider cannot narrate her story directly, woman provides alternative narrative structure that gives her voice power to challenge patriarchy. There is, of course, a rich tradition of women's stories about women who manage to tell their stories using irony, deceptiveness, and even silence. Therefore, she dismantles "The myths of femininity which, from an evolutionary viewpoint, were derived from traditional stereotypes such as the myth that all women are 'caring' from birth in a biologically determined way" (Wodak, 1997: 02)

As pointed out in the introduction, women writers' efforts to define themselves as authors and to tell the story they need to tell may require a kind of symbolic "murder", an undermining or subverting of the conventional narrative so that more than one story can be told. The last novel of Maïssa Bey can be read within the pressures aligned against women writers, shaped by and working within a culture that says men write great literature and women get written about. Bey's use of irony and deceit implies her critique of the various imposed silences on woman. The narrative does not contain the whole story, that reflects textural disjunctions and ruptures, that employs conflict and irony, that allows for a silent authorial critique from the gaps within the narrative can be a way of telling a story albeit indirectly. But these alternative stories also point to her increasingly sophisticated analysis of the nature and potential for women's stories.

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## Abstract

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The present paper is intended to investigate the issue of "Feminine Desire" in Algerian Women Literature by revisiting Maïssa Bey's last novel, *Nulle Autre voix* (2018). The main objective is to foreground the multifaceted issue of feminine desire, which has greatly fascinated philosophers and literary theorists. Throughout a textual analysis of the novel, it will be argued that the notion of "Feminine Desire" is basically related to the constitution of a feminine subject in relation to kinship and social norms. Central to this analysis of the novel is the representation of a link between the feminine subject and the social norms within a particular a specific Algerian historical and cultural environment, which produced them. The analysis is based on the theoretical underpinnings provided in Judith Butler's recent reflections developed in *her Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). The task is to examine how Maïssa Bey uses her last novel as a medium with a liberating force to champion the cause of women in the Algerian society. The author calls for a self-definition and a reconstruction of the Algerian woman, new perspectives in articulating difference, an inventive way of using language, a strong sociopolitical commitment within a feminist perspective. These are some of the salient features that her *Nulle Autre Voix* particularly and powerfully suggests.

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## Keywords

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Writing- Silence-Patriarchy-Self-definition- Feminine Desire.

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### مستخلص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة مسألة «الرغبة الأنثوية» في الأدب النسائي الجزائري من خلال إعادة النظر في رواية ميساء بك الأخيرة، (Nulle Autre voix (2018). الهدف الرئيسي هو تسليط

الضوء على السؤال متعدد الأوجه لرغبة الإنثى ، والتي فتنت الفلاسفة والمنظرين الأدبيين إلى حد كبير. من خلال التحليل النصي للرواية ، سيجادل بأن مفهوم «الرغبة الأنثوية» يرتبط ارتباطاً أساسياً بتكوين موضوع أنثوي فيما يتعلق بالقرابة والأعراف الاجتماعية. ومن الأمور المحورية في هذا التحليل للرواية تمثيل العلاقة بين الموضوع الأنثوي والأعراف الاجتماعية في بيئة تاريخية وثقافية جزائرية معينة، والتي أنتجتها. يعتمد التحليل على الأسس النظرية التي قدمتها تأملات جوديث بتلر الأخيرة التي تم تطويرها في كتابها مشكلة النوع الاجتماعي (1990) والتراجع عن النوع الاجتماعي (2004). الهدف هو دراسة كيفية استخدام ميساء بك لروايتها الأخيرة كوسيلة تحرير للدفاع عن قضية المرأة في المجتمع الجزائري. تدعو الكاتبة إلى تعريف الذات وإعادة بناء المرأة الجزائرية ، ووجهات نظر جديدة في التعبير عن الاختلاف ، وطريقة مبتكرة لاستخدام اللغة ، والتزام اجتماعي سياسي قوي من منظور نسوي. هذه بعض السمات البارزة التي يقترحها كتابه «لا مكان آخر» بشكل خاص وقوي.

### كلمات مفتاحية

الكتابة - الصمت - النظام الأبوي - تعريف الذات - الرغبة الأنثوية

### Résumé

Le présent article vise à étudier la question du « désir féminin » dans la littérature féminine algérienne en revisitant le dernier roman de Maïssa Bey, *Nulle Autre voix* (2018). L'objectif principal est de mettre en avant la question multiforme du désir féminin, qui a beaucoup fasciné les philosophes et les théoriciens de la littérature. À travers une analyse textuelle du roman, il sera soutenu que la notion de « désir féminin » est fondamentalement liée à la constitution d'un sujet féminin en relation avec la parenté et les normes sociales. Au centre de cette analyse du roman se trouve la représentation d'un lien entre le sujet féminin et les normes sociales dans un environnement historique et culturel algérien particulier, qui les a produites. L'analyse s'appuie sur les fondements théoriques fournis par les récentes réflexions de Judith Butler développées dans ses ouvrages *Gender Trouble* (1990) et *Undoing Gender* (2004). L'objectif est d'examiner comment Maïssa Bey utilise son dernier roman comme un moyen ayant une force libératrice pour défendre la cause des femmes dans la société algérienne. L'auteur appelle à une auto-définition et à une reconstruction de la femme algérienne, à de nouvelles perspectives dans l'articulation de la différence, à une manière inventive d'utiliser le langage, à un engagement sociopolitique fort dans une perspective féministe. Ce sont là quelques-uns des traits saillants que sa *Nulle Autre Voix* suggère particulièrement et puissamment.

### Mots-clés

Écriture, silence, patriarcat, définition de soi, désir féminin