Creativitas: Critical Explorations in Literary Studies
ISSN: 3048-8575 (Online)
Volume – 2, Issue – 1 (2025), pp. 154-175
https://creativitasjournal.in

The Politics of Memory in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Recognition and Denial in French and Algerian Narratives of Colonialism

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Abstract: This article investigates the intersection of memory, politics, and literature in the context of French colonialism in Algeria, with a particular focus on recognition and repentance. By examining works from both French and Algerian writers, it explores how literary texts serve as critical sites for negotiating the legacies of colonialism and their political implications.

French authors such as Henri Alleg (*La Question*, 1958) and Leïla Sebbar (*La Seine était rouge*, 1999) confront France's fraught colonial past, highlighting themes of moral accountability and historical erasure. These works reveal the complexities of recognition in a national context where collective amnesia often undermines efforts at genuine repentance. Conversely, Algerian writers like Assia Djebar (*L'Amour, la fantasia*, 1985) and Kateb Yacine (*Nedjma*, 1956) articulate resistance through counter-memory, foregrounding the embodied trauma and enduring struggles for justice that colonialism has left in its wake.

Drawing on political theories of memory, such as Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), and Frantz Fanon's seminal *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), this study positions literary texts as material-affective assemblages that mediate between personal recollection and collective history. The article also interrogates the role of political discourse in shaping memory practices, analyzing how both nations grapple with questions of reparations, national identity, and historical accountability.

This comparative approach illuminates how French literature often navigates the tension between symbolic gestures of repentance and systemic

inertia, while Algerian texts assert memory as a transformative political force. Ultimately, the study argues that the literary engagement with memory is inseparable from the broader socio-political struggle for recognition and justice, offering a nuanced perspective on the politics of postcolonial memory.

Keywords: *Postcolonial memory and politics, Recognition and repentance in colonial history, French-Algerian colonial legacy, Literary resistance and counter-memory, Memory as political transformation.*

Introduction

The memory of French colonialism has re-emerged as a central issue in Algeria, mainly in the aftermath of the Hirak movement. This wave of popular protests revived debates over national identity and unity, as collective memory became a powerful engine for political and social mobilisation. As Blake Carson notes:

> Notable protests (…) underscored a youthful generation's desire to reclaim their nation's narrative. The memories of independence were invoked (...) linking the past's resilience to contemporary demands for dignity, equality and a true democracy. (Blake 223)

However, the question of recognition and repentance has always been part of the political discourse delivered by the successive French presidents during their visits to Algeria. All of them rejected the notion of formal repentance and apology, a matter perceived by many Algerians as a perpetuation of France's deep-rooted policy of denial regarding its colonial atrocities. In this context, my aim here is to explore the politics of memory in French and Algerian colonial and postcolonial narratives, examining how key works such as Henri Alleg's *La Question,* Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma,* and Leïla Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge* not only reflect but also shape the intergenerational transmission of memory through testimony, literature, and collective history. I argue that *La Question* acts as an

urgent act of witnessing compelling historical recognition of colonial violence and preserving memory. In a different but equally powerful form of resistance, Yacine's *Nedjma* functions as a literary intervention that resists obliteration by reassembling a fragmented, colonized Algerian memory. It contributes to the construction of a counter-memory from what has been repressed. Building on these memory shifts, Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge* represents their natural outcome: a second-generation narrative that inherits this legacy, confronts the lingering silence and political denial surrounding colonial violence, and demands justice through the reactivation of repressed memories.

These diverse positions inevitably produced multiple and often conflicting memories. To contextualize this memory work, I first begin with the early phase of French colonialism, marked by pride in the colonial mission despite resistance. I then examine Alleg's *La Question*, which exposes the brutal reality of torture and challenges French intellectual complicity. Next, I turn to Yacine's *Nedjma*, a complex literary narrative that attempts to reconstruct Algerian identity through fragmented narrative, resisting colonial erasure. Finally, I consider Sebbar's novel, which inherits this legacy, confronting postcolonial silences and transforming memory into a tool for justice. The aim of this article is to show that, paradoxically, the persistent denial of colonial violence was a driving force behind keeping the memory of colonial rule in Algeria alive. Attempts to suppress or silence the past have instead, ensured its continued presence across generations particularly through a process of memory transmission wherein early testimonies and literary works have nourished and preserved collective memory.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the dynamics of collective memory, we have to consider Paul Ricoeur's work *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli* (*Memory, History, Forgetting*). Ricoeur argues that memory is not a passive reproduction of the past, but an active and reconstructive process shaped by the present moment. He asserts that collective memory gets constantly reshaped not only by the recollections of individuals but also by the institutional and political forces that decide which

memories are preserved or silenced. The past, according to him, is never truly erased or forgotten; instead, it haunts the present and contributes to the building of identities and social relations. That is why, Paul Ricoeur refers to Ernst Nolte's essay "*A Past That Will Not Go Away*" (Ricoeur 327) to highlight how nations struggle with confronting historical memory. In postcolonial contexts, the legacy of colonialism becomes a persistent source of tension and struggle, often represented through literary works as a means of engaging with these historical wounds.

Memory, for Ricoeur, is not a mere act of recalling past events, but a complex process where the past is continuously reinterpreted through the lens of the present. This ongoing dialogue between past and present shapes the way collective memory is formed and transmitted. Ricoeur's framework also emphasizes the ethical responsibility tied to the act of remembering. He argues that memory carries with it an inherent moral dimension, as it is always subjected to power dynamics and political agendas. Hence, in postcolonial societies, this ethical responsibility becomes even more evident as the act of remembering colonial oppression is not just about recalling historical facts. Rather, it is an act of resistance against the official narratives that seek to suppress the past. In this way, literature functions as a moral act of remembrance, reasserting the voices and histories that have been silenced or marginalized.

Ultimately, in *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli* (*Memory, History, Forgetting*), Paul Ricoeur argues that trauma prevails even when it is inaccessible to conscious memory. He writes, "[T]he trauma remains even though it is inaccessible, unavailable. In its place arise phenomena of substitution, symptoms, which mask the return of the repressed (...)" (Ricoeur 445). This suggests that trauma is not forgotten but it continues to influence both individual and collective memory, re-emerging in distorted forms. Post-colonial literature prevents the past from being forgotten and becomes a means of confronting traumatic histories.

Before delving deeper, it is essential to recall the complex nature of the Algerian War of Independence. Far from a simple Manichean conflict between

colonizer and colonized, the war involved a wide range of actors driven by different ideological and political motivations. Among them were the *Harkis* (Algerians who supported the French army), the pieds-noirs (European settlers in Algeria), French conscripts (*appelés*), and French activists who sided with the Algerian cause (*porteurs de valises*). Alongside the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) fighters, these actors shaped a conflict with multiple dimensions: a war of independence, a Franco-French conflict, and a civil war within Algeria.

This paper focuses specifically on the collective memory of Algeria's colonized indigenous population and their descendants, whether living in post-independence Algeria or as part of postcolonial generations in France, as well as on the memories shaped by witnesses and activists who were involved in the anti-colonial struggle. It is through their lens that the processes of recognition and denial, as well as the politics of memory, are examined in literary and testimonial narratives.

Colonial Domination and the Absence of Denial

French colonialism in Algeria, which lasted 132 years, is often regarded as one of the most brutal episodes in European imperial history. French military campaigns involved large-scale massacres, and colonial records, including official reports and settler accounts, sometimes portrayed such violence with open pride or strategic justification. A clear example of the brutality of French colonialism is found in Colonel Pélissier's military reports, which describe the smoke massacres (*enfumades)* of the Dahra caves in June 1845. During this operation, the French army intentionally asphyxiated members of the Ouled Riah tribe by setting fires at the cave entrances. These reports were published in military communications and newspapers.[i] The indiscriminate killings of civilians, shocked international observers. The *Times*, for instance, On the 14th of July, 1845, published an article entitled "French Atrocities in Algeria", to condemn the brutality of French military actions. The newspaper reported the Courrier Francais reaction to show the French press indignation:

> Colonel Pellissier, commanding an expedianary column in the Dahra (...) found no other means than to burn or stifle 500 Arabs, men, women, and children, who had taken refuge in a cavern. This atrocity, committed in cold blood will cause every man to thrill with indignation. ("French Atrocities")

In addition to these acts, other forms of violence, such as mass rapes, looting, and the widespread burning of land, were common and were justified as necessary for quelling resistance. According to Frantz Fanon, violence was not only a consequence of colonialism but its very foundation. In *Les Damnés de la Terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*), 1961, he asserts that colonialism is inherently violent and sustained through physical and psychological domination. As French colonial rule expanded, the earlier boastful discourse about violence gave way to denial and erasure of facts (Fanon 16). The justification for violent practices became difficult to maintain, especially after World War I, when global awareness of human rights and colonial atrocities grew.

The *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) was founded in 1954 by a group of young Algerian nationalists as peaceful demands for political reform failed. It was officially launched on November 1, 1954, through a series of coordinated attacks across Algeria, an event now known as Toussaint Rouge. This pivotal moment marked the beginning of the Algerian War of Independence with the FLN embracing armed resistance. The memory of the formerly colonized indigenous Algerian population and their descendants, has been shaped not only by historical events but also by a French political discourse of reluctance and denial. This analysis shows that denial is a reaction rooted in colonial practices that preserve a 'glorious' colonial past that still influences French identity and politics toward Algeria today.

Henri Alleg's *La Question* (1958): Exposing Colonial Violence

However, firsthand accounts expose the truth, and Henri Alleg's *La Question* reveals the brutal realities of torture during the Algerian War. In fact,

> [...] everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony, and that, whatever may be our lack of confidence in principle in such testimony, we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past [...]. (Ricoeur 147)

In this respect, Henri Alleg's *La Question*, stands as a pivotal first-person testimonial, exposing the brutal realities of torture during the Algerian War. According to Paul Ricoeur, "(…) testimony constitutes the fundamental transition structure between memory and history" (Ricoeur 21). He emphasizes that memory is not a passive act of storing facts, but an active process of remembering based on personal experience. He differentiates between *mémoire vive* (living memory) which implies immediacy and authenticity, and *mémoire manipulée* (manipulated memory) which is impacted by external distortions.

Accordingly, Alleg's testimony resists manipulated memory by presenting a raw, real-time account that bypasses the filters of time and myth-making. It reflects *mémoire vive*, recorded during the torture itself, making it a rare, immediate act of memory before forgetting or distortion can set in. He described in details the acts of torture he experienced at the hands of French soldiers, denouncing thus, the unhuman practices used to maintain colonial rule. The book's great power derives from the fact that it was published while he was still imprisoned.[ii]

Alleg was supported by Jean Paul Sartre[iii] who wrote the preface in which we can read:

> [...] in 1958, in Algiers, people are tortured regularly and systematically. Everyone from M. Lacoste (Minister Resident for Algeria) to the farmers in

> Aveyron, knows this is so, but almost no one talks of it. [...]. France is almost as mute as during the occupation[iv] [...]. (Alleg 13-14)

In this passage Sartre denounces the unjustified silence of the French community, comparing this silence to the Nazi's imposed mutism during the occupation since the torture in Algeria was not a secret[v]. Alleg's testimony is so haunting that we can almost hear the voices when he said:

> For whole nights during the course of a month I heard the screams of men being tortured, and their cries will resound forever in my memory. I have seen prisoners thrown down from one floor to another who, stupefied by torture and beatings, could only manage to utter in Arabic the first words of an ancient prayer. (Alleg 41)

The reader in 1958 is informed of the presence of other intellectual prisoners who were tortured, men and women, French and Arabs. *La Question* is a true historical document which can be used by historians as evidence.

These prisoners, men and women, had names, which would become the symbols of the Algerian resistance. Among them was Maurice Audin, the French teacher, who was arrested and later died under torture at the age of twenty-five [vi] and Cheikh Tebessi, President of the Algerian Muslim Ulama. Alleg met his friend De Milly, employer at the psychiatric hospital of Blida. According to him, he was tortured "(…) by means of a new technique, he was fastened down, naked on a metal chair through which an electric current was passed, he still has the deep marks of severe burns on both legs" (Alleg 41). He named Djamila Bouhired, Elyette Loup, Nassima Hablal and many others, who were "(…) undressed, beaten and insulted by sadistic torturers, they too have been submitted to the water and electricity" (Alleg 42).

All these people and many others were tortured to answer one central question: The relationship of these prisoners with the FLN (Front de Liberation National), the organization that was leading the Algerian revolution. However, *La Question* transcends the notion of a simple question during an interrogation by the French army. *La Question* symbolizes the moral and political dilemma the colonial brutal and violent policy would impose on all those who had been actors of this policy and on the coming generations. *La Question* is an attempt to bring France in front of a reality which was undermining the Principles the French Revolution was calling for. In other words, the title highlights the moral question of colonization during the Algerian War of Independence.

La Question significantly led to the global recognition of the Algerian anti-colonial fight as a legitimate struggle. The primary audience was French but the French authorities' censorship led to its translation into different languages which enlarged the audience and led to its spread all over the world. This book stirred up the political sphere and compelled the French intellectuals to reevaluate their position on the morality of the French Army. The latter denied the use torture against Alleg which led to the consternation among left intellectuals. François Mauriac, a French Nobel Laureate considered that "Lacoste[vii] dishonoured France by repeatedly denying Alleg's torture (…)". He added: "Lacoste and the entire French nation were to held responsible" (Le Sueur 226).

According to James Le Sueur: "[…] Alleg and Audin affairs no doubt helped contribute to the fall of the fourth Republic […]" by unveiling the weaknesses of the colonial system that led to moral bankruptcy and political paralysis. Thus, the release of *La Question* paved the way for other voices to elevate against the the use of torture in Algeria. In June 1959, the Minuit[viii] published *La Gangrene* (The Gangrene), a shocking exposé of French acts of torture in the prisons. It detailed the painful experience of five young Algerian prisoners who were tortured in Paris by the DST (*Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire)*. The revelation had a great impact on public opinion which led the Government to ban the book and prohibited the press from any coverage of it and

criminal charges were brought against Minuit's director Jerome Lindon. What was striking at the time, as mentioned by Le Sueur, was that:

> [...] the book reviews by most of the French dailies and several newspapers suggested that there were disturbing parallels[ix] between the Nazi occupation of France and the DST use of torture in metropolitan France during the French Algerian war. (Le Sueur 229)

While Henri Alleg represents the engaged intellectual who chose to expose colonial violence, others, like Albert Camus, illustrate an ambivalent and complex stance revealing the moral and political tensions faced by French intellectuals during the Algerian War.

Convenient Silences: Intellectuals and the Algerian War

Albert Camus, despite condemning colonial oppression, refused to support the Algerian independence movement. He, who was born in 1913 to a poor *pied-noir* (French-Algerian) family in Algiers, was aware of the colonial injustices towards the indigenous Algerian population. As a journalist in *Alger Républicain* (1938–1940), he criticized these injustices in his series *Misère de la Kabylie* ("The Misery of Kabylia") and he brought attention to the starvation, and exploitation of Algeria's indigenous Berber population under French rule. However, during the Algerian War (1954–1962), he refused to back the National Liberation Front (FLN) and was against the independence of Algeria. Instead, he called for a "civil truce" and a federated Algeria after establishing a system that would allow French settlers and Algerians to coexist peacefully. In his 1958 essay collection *Actuelles III: Chroniques algériennes*, he argued,

> The only regime which, in the current state of affairs, would do justice to all parts of the population has long seemed to me to be that of a federation, structured around institutions similar to those that allow

> different nationalities to live in peace within the Swiss Confederation. (Camus 110)

For Conor Cruise O'Brien, the position of Camus is a manifestation of the emergence of the "colonial liberalism" which was built on the fantasy of reconciliation while ignoring the FLN's and the Algerians' aspirations[x].

Camus's *The Stranger* (1942) adds layers; the Arab killed by Meursault is not named, which was seen as a symbol of colonial dehumanization even if the novel focuses on Meursault's spiritual disorientation. In his unfinished work *The First Man* (published posthumously in 1994), he presented an overly nostalgic and idealized view of the *pied-noir* life in Algeria, which obliterates the reality of Algerian lives under colonial oppression. His famous quote when he received the Nobel prize in 1957: "I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice" reflected his personal dilemma as he was against colonial oppression but at the same deeply attached to Algeria where his mother was still living in at the time, as were most the *pied-noir* families. Camus's refusal to support the independence of Algeria and his attachment to an Algeria of *pied-noir* reflected the reluctance of a great majority of the French intellectuals and politicians.

However, while Camus embodied a more conflicted or silent position, others like Kateb Yacine, alongside Alleg, chose to confront colonial violence head-on. Yet, unlike Alleg's testimonial approach, Yacine employed fiction and symbolism to express resistance and trauma.

Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*: The Lingering Shadows of Psychological Oppression

In *Nedjma*, Kateb Yacine imposes a non-linear structure oscillating between the past and the present on the reader. This fragmented presentation of the narrative reflects the fragmented Algerian identity during the colonial period. Four central male characters, Lakhdar, Mustapha, Mourad and Rachid, are enamoured with *Nedjma*, who symbolises Algeria. They are four voices with different points of view reflecting individual struggles within a collective trauma caused by

colonisation. Kateb tries to mirror Algerian society caught between the search for its identity and the struggle for independence.

The pursuit of *Nedjma*, the beloved women, the homeland, the national identity, is the struggle to reconstruct the past by piecing together Algeria's dispersed and suppressed history through oral storytelling and fragmented narratives. This concept is precisely what Ricoeur explores when he says: "The work of memory would have attained its aim if the reconstruction of the past were to succeed in giving rise to a sort of resurrection of the past" (Ricoeur 499). Ricoeur's vision of the function of memory stresses the significance of reconstructing the past as an act of revival that resists forgetting.

Nedjma of Kateb redefined oppression into a new form as the characters continuously endure psychological torment alongside physical brutality. Rachid, for instance, is one of the four protagonists with fragmented identities under colonial hegemony. He is trapped in a utopic quest for Nedjma, the unattainable love, and his inner turmoil. In the following passage, the narrator describes his physical and emotional decline:

> One could not doubt that Rachid was in complete distress; he smoked, slept barely one night out of two, staying awake or wandering alone or with me (fevered words, bursts of voices followed by gloomy silence), he spoke to me […] it was always with reluctance […]. (Kateb 52)

The psychological torture is exemplified through his sense of disorientation and alienation. The tension present in this description is a metaphor for the suffocating colonial conditions that impacted the lives of the Algerians for decades now.

Rachid seems lost, uprooted from his village trying to find his way to a safe shore: *Nedjma*. The four men are obsessed with Nedjma, who symbolises what is lost and what has to be found. But who is *Nedjma*?

Nedjma, Symbol of a Fractured Society

Nedjma, the 'star' in Arabic, is portrayed as an elusive character and unreachable figure. Rachid, Lakhdar, Mourad, and Mustapha are obsessed with her, but she is married to Kamel. As a child, she is raised by an adoptive mother, Lella Fatma, but her true parentage is much more complicated. Nedjma is the daughter of a French woman who was kidnapped by four lovers, one of whom was Rachid's father, a notorious seducer named Si Mokhtar. Nedjma was conceived during a night spent by these two men with the Frenchwoman in a cave, where, the following morning, Rachid's father's corpse was discovered. Si Mokhtar is also revealed to be possibly Nedjma's father and he is also Kamel's father, which complicates the situation. Thus, the marriage of Nedjma to Kamel created an incestuous bond that must be interrupted.

Nedjma's existence is a reflection of Algeria's cultural hybridity under French colonialism. Her identity will always be fractured as it embodies indigenous heritage and colonial culture. Algeria remains a land marked by fierce domination, deeply embedded in its culture and history. Nedjma is not responsible for her parentage, yet she remains a distorted consequence of the colonial legacy. Through the character of Nedjma, Kateb denounces the colonial destructive impact on Algeria's cultural and religious heritage. Colonial rule leads to the erosion of religious and moral boundaries within society.

Reclaiming Pre-Colonial Identity against Colonial Erasure

The colonial strategy in Algeria was not confined to the physical appropriation of land and resources; it also sought to obliterate the cultural and historical identity of the colonised. By erasing the collective memory of Algerians, French colonial policy aimed to sever the population from its past, thereby, effacing narratives of resistance and resilience which could be a source of inspiration and legitimacy in organising opposition to colonial rule. In this respect, memory itself became a field of resistance. As Frantz Fanon notes in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Reclaiming the past [...] triggers a change of fundamental importance in the

colonized psycho-effective equilibrium. Colonialism [...] turns its attention to the past of the colonized people to distort it, disfigure it, and destroy it" (Fanon 218).

To dismantle the colonial narrative, the writer makes the memory in Nedjma the guiding thread of the novel. All the young characters struggle to find the truth hidden in the memory of the elderly. The truth about Nedjma's existence reveals a shift from the historical magnificence of Algeria before colonisation and the resistance of Abd El Kader to the current dramatic situation in the figure of Nedjma. This passage portrays this transition:

> [...] The magnificence of the Turks, the concentration of wealth in the coffers of a few tribes [...] could not withstand the upheavals imposed by the conquest [...] The fathers killed in the raids of Abd el Kader (a man of both pen and sword, the only leader capable of uniting the tribes) the French could only root themselves [...] the enslaved Orient became the highlight of the cabarets [...] the wives of notaries gave themselves away at the back of the garden for sale. [...] [T]hree times abducted, the wife of the notary, seductress of Sidi Ahmed and Si Mokhtar, was to disappear [...] from the cave [...] the easy prey of Si Mokhtar, father of what could be Kamel and maybe also Nedjma, Nedjma the replica of the insatiable French woman [...]. (Kateb 56)

This passage encapsulates the essence of the cultural and spiritual decay of Algerian society following the occupation illustrated by the story of Nedjma which is a microcosm of a nation caught between its glorious past and the destructive forces of colonial domination and internal collapse. This situation is the outcome of the colonial policy of limiting access to education for the indigenous population and of imposing coloniser's language, history and values in an attempt to erase the culture, history and identity of the colonised people.

When *Nedjma* was published, the Algerian War of Independence had already started but the issue of torture in Algeria and the questioning of the colonial rules were not widely discussed. It is one of the first novels by an Algerian writer that dared denounce the devastating effects on Algerian society. Written in French, it targeted the French intellectuals who were either indifferent or complicit in the colonial system. His objective was to make them take a position regarding colonialism and to confront the French people with the sufferings of the Algerian people.[xi]

Leïla Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge* (1999)

In fact, "The decades following the end of the war until 1990, would be characterised by a total absence of any official ceremony, memorial activity or remembrance of the events in Algeria in the public sphere of France" (Noussis 30). This situation accentuated the obliteration of memory. Ricoeur explains this when he states: "When memory ceases to be omnipresent, it ceases to be present at all, unless some isolated individual decides to assume responsibility for it" (Ricoeur 404). In *La Seine était rouge*, Leïla Sebbar assumes this responsibility by reawakening the suppressed memory of the 1961 Paris massacre. Through her characters and fragmented narrative, she transforms silence into testimony, actively reconstructing collective, postcolonial memory.

Leila Sebbar is the daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother, in other words, of a colonised and a French settler[xii]. Her very being is in itself both a collision and a fusion of two different worlds living in the same place with a mixed heritage and a loaded memory. She is a product of what the historian, Benjamin Stora, calls the "intimate frontier" of colonialism where people's lives got confronted by imperial politics. This psychological frontier is forged by memories, silences, and unspoken tensions that prevail long after the end of colonial rule. Through her writings, she endeavoured to depict intergenerational memory and the complexities of repentance in a French context.

Leïla Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge*[xiii] scrutinises a collective memory that is related to the Algerian War, shedding light on how the past transcends generations and resists erasure especially for those who did not experience it firsthand. The novel focuses on the 1961 Paris massacre, where French police brutally killed dozens of Algerian protesters and threw their bodies into the Seine, an event long overlooked in France's collective conscience. Sebbar does not merely tell the history, she examines how the children of immigrants, the second generation, cope with this inherited trauma. The three characters: Amel, whose mother and grandmother took part in the demonstration; Omer, a Franco-Algerian journalist; and Louis, whose parents participated in the Algerian War of Independence as *porteurs de valise*, are trying to uncover the past and break the silence surrounding it.

Sebbar presents memory as a living, evolving entity and often in conflict with the official narratives. She seems to be trapped between the tension between silence and storytelling as parents use silence to shelter their kids from pain, yet leave them tormented by questions they cannot answer. She also explores the polemical notion of repentance in France, where Recognizing responsibility for colonial violence, like the 1961 massacre, clashes with a political will that prefers to forget. She makes the Seine appear red to show that when people refuse to speak, the spaces remain as a witness of the unspoken pain.

According to Mildred Mortimer: "She (Sebbar) joins post-colonial historian Benjamin Stora who contends that the state of amnesia surrounding the events of the Algerian war has been harmful to both nations" (Mortimer 1246-1256). One of its symptoms is the silence of Noria. The mother tries to shield Amel from pain, while Amel's father, haunted by his memories, refuses to speak, embodying the burden of unresolved trauma. Consequently, reconstructing history becomes a means to confront oblivion and an act of resistance against the attempts to challenge the dominant colonial narrative. Through testimonies, Sebbar presents memory as a gap that needs filling. The silence surrounding traumatic events creates an emptiness that echoes across generations. For Sebbar,

breaking this silence is crucial for historical justice and recognition of the trauma caused by the massacre in that demonstration. The absence of truth prevents healing and perpetuates the effects of the trauma through time and through generations.

In *La Seine était rouge*, memory is fragmented due to the disrupted relationship between historical repression, personal trauma, and intergenerational rupture. The novel presents memory as a puzzle of different pieces that the characters Amel, Louis, and Omer must piece together. Their role is to maintain this resistance to erasure by recording testimonies, reconstructing what France has tried to bury. For decades, the massacre was absent from public discourse, reflecting a denial of colonial violence.

The French state laboured systematically suppress the archives related to the events of October 17, 1961. For decades, this massacre was excluded from official political discourse. This denial creates gaps in collective memory and the silence imposed by the state fragments the historical narrative, forcing the characters to rely on incomplete or sources to end with an incomplete memory, reconstructed through investigation, imagination, and art.

In terms of trauma, the survivors and witnesses, like Amel's mother and grandmother, carry the trauma of the massacre but prefer silence to revelation. This is a common response to overwhelming pain or shame, particularly within immigrant communities facing the hostility of a foreign country. Their refusal to speak or their partial and vague memories, means that the younger generation inherits only fragments of the history. For example, Amel's quest begins with her mother's reluctance, leaving her with unanswered questions and a fragmented understanding of her family's past.

Leïla Sebbar's novel was published in the same year that Prime Minister Lionel Jospin authorized access to police archives, marking a shift in the political treatment of the October 17, 1961, massacre. This decision followed the publication of an article in *Le Monde* by historian Jean-Luc Einaudi, in which he

stated that a massacre of Algerians had been orchestrated under the orders of Maurice Papon, the then prefect of police. Further investigations revealed that the files documenting complaints filed by Algerian victims in 1961 had been destroyed to erase crucial evidence.[xiv]

Sebbar's novel appeared at a moment when the policy of state denial was becoming unacceptable. Its publication can be seen as a turning point in public discourse, as access to previously restricted archives and renewed historians interest made it difficult to sustain official silence on the events of 1961.[xv] It shows that the work of memory is as painful as the trauma itself. However, writing such a novel has contributed to moving the boundaries.

Conclusion

The politics of memory surrounding the colonial and postcolonial periods in France and Algeria remain highly debated, as both nations continue to grapple with the legacy of colonialism. As explored in this analysis, the process of recognition and denial within the historical narratives about French colonialism is not merely about recalling facts but also about the reconstruction of national identities and political consciousness both for the formerly colonised indigenous population within Algeria and for their descendants, whether living in Algeria or as part of postcolonial generations in France. The refusal by France to fully confront its colonial past, as well as Algeria's legitimate glorification of its liberation struggle, has led to a persistent conflict over memory. These dominant discourses, coupled with narrative engagement by authors such as Henri Alleg, Albert Camus, Kateb Yacine, and Leïla Sebbar, uncover the significant disruptions in collective memory with literature offering a vital space for reflection and reconciliation.

Henri Alleg's *La Question* (1958) denounces the brutal torture practices during the Algerian War, challenging the colonial denial. Similarly, Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma* explores Algeria's fractured identity under colonial rule, embodied by Nedjma, and condemns the cultural damage of colonization. Albert

Camus, though condemning colonial oppression and torture, remained ambivalent about Algerian independence, reflecting the complex intellectual responses to colonialism. Leïla Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge* focuses on the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the silence surrounding the 1961 Paris massacre, calling for the recognition of colonial violence and its ongoing impact on contemporary French discourse.

However, the theoretical framework reveals how memory functions in postcolonial contexts, highlighting the persistence of the traumatic histories in skewed versions and influencing present-day political and social dynamics. Through the lens of literature, we see that memory is not simply a static recollection but a living force that continues to frame identity, societal interactions, and political decisions. In this context, the writers examined the state-sanctioned discourse, calling for a more inclusive and truthful engagement with the past. It is crucial, now more than ever, to initiate work on collective memory independently of political affiliations. As right-wing movements gain popularity, often with nationalistic narratives that seek to distort or even erase historical truths, the need for a balanced approach to memory becomes urgent. Memory, particularly in postcolonial contexts, should be dealt with from a perspective that prioritizes historical truth and justice, not political agendas. This work should be driven by the ethical responsibility to acknowledge the past and its ongoing repercussions, without being swayed by the political discourse that aims at denying its reality.

Notes

[i] For more details on Marshal Pélissier's role and his military report during the extermination of the Ouled Riah tribe in the Dahra caves, see *Le Maréchal Pélissier, duc de Malakoff* by General Victor-Bernard Derrécagaix, particularly pages 174–189.

[ii] In the preface of the English version, George Braziller highlights Henri Alleg's active role in denouncing the colonial regime. Imprisoned in 1957, Alleg was a

member of the Algerian Communist Party and editor of *Alger Républicain*, a newspaper advocating for Algerian autonomy. Charged with endangering state security, his book was confiscated and banned in France. Despite this, the French edition sold 150,000 copies and was translated internationally.

[iii] Jean Paul Sartre was one of the 121 French intellectuals who signed The Manifesto of the 121, an open letter published on September 6, 1960 in magazine Vérité-Liberté. It was supportive of the Algerian War of Independence, considering it a rightful struggle for national liberation from French colonial oppression. It denounced the French government's use of torture.

[iv] In this passage, "the occupation" refers specifically to the German occupation of France during World War II (1940–1944), when censorship and repression-imposed silence on the French population.

[v] When the Algerian war began in 1954, François Mitterrand, as Minister of Justice, gave the military special powers to conduct mass arrests, summary executions, and torture of suspected FLN members and sympathizers, making torture a routine and institutionalized practice.

[vi] On September 13th, 2018, President Macron recognized the Maurice Audin, the anti-colonial French activist was killed under torture by the French army, he was then highly criticized by the far right.

[vii] Robert Lacoste was the Resident Minister and Governor-General of Algeria from February 1956 to May 1958 under the Government of Guy Mollet.

[viii] Minuit is a French publishing house founded in 1941 by Pierre de Lescure and Jean Bruller during the nazi occupation of France. *La Question* was published by Minuit.

[ix] The parallels between the French colonial violence and the Nazi atrocities should have been recognized long before during the early years of the French conquest of the Algerian territories because of the use of asphyxiation (1845 Dahra caves massacres). For a detailed firsthand resource on the Dahra caves massacres, you can read Péllissier's socking description of the asphyxiation process through his report to Marshal Bugeaud in *Revue Africaine*, nos. 266-267, 1907, PP. 116-168.

You can also read *Sessions, Jennifer E. By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria. Cornell University Press, 2016.*

[x] For further insights into Camus's stance on colonialism and Algeria, I recommend reading Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Camus* (1970).

[xi] Before Kateb Yacine, Mouloud Feraoun published "Le fils du pauvre" in 1950, that is before the Algerian war, it also dealt with the harsh daily life of Algerians during the French occupation. The choice of Nedjma is due to its release in the midst of the Liberation war and its strong political resonance. My choice is also motivated by its modernist non-linear structure and complex narrative style which require the readers to focus on the slightest detail to grasp his critical discourse of colonialism.

[xii] Leïla Sebbar's mother was a French school teacher from metropolitan France who moved to Algeria during the colonial period to teach, where she met and married Leila Sebbar's father who was then a teacher of Arabic.

[xiii] Published in 1999.

[xiv] For more details about this issue, read Brozgal, Lia Nicole. *Absent the Archive: Cultural Traces of a Massacre in Paris, 17 October 1961*. Liverpool University Press, 2020.

[xv] To know more about the policy of repression, censorship, and long-term historical denial by French authorities concerning the massacre of October 1961, you can read Peju, Marcel, and Peju, Paulette. *Le 17 octobre des Algériens: Suivi de La triple occultation d'un massacre*. Canada, La Découverte, 2021.

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