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Un Ego au féminin: Gender and Power in Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche's *Histoire de ma vie*

Lynda Chouiten

Abstract

Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche scholars tend to victimize her, underscoring her submission to the patriarchal order, embodied chiefly through her husband Belkacem and the most famous of her sons, the poet Jean Amrouche, under whose instigation she wrote her autobiography, *Histoire de ma vie*. The purpose of this article is to refute such a reading by arguing that this autobiography challenges, rather than complies with, the patriarchal code. Instead of lamenting her poor luck or accepting her condition as a subaltern, the author seeks various empowering compensations, whether they be her advantageous looks, her education and ease with the French language—a rare asset in her time—or a set of idiosyncratic rhetorical strategies. These strategies include an intensive recourse to the trope of appropriation through the use of the possessive adjective “*mon*” (my) and verbs expressing agency and strong will. Simultaneously, Amrouche rejects features supposed to be intrinsic in women’s writing, such as subjectivity, modesty, and meekness of tone, displaying instead both pride and assertiveness. Finally, one major technique deployed by this autobiographer is the reversal of the traditional gender schema through feminizing male characters, particularly her husband and her father-in-law, while endowing women like her mother and herself with the “male” traits of courage and both physical and moral resilience.

Key words: Autobiography, Discursive Strategies, Gender, Power; Fadhma Aïth Mansour

Introduction

In the realm of literary criticism, Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche’s *Histoire de ma vie* has been given little attention. While homage is regularly paid to this author in Algerian newspapers and magazines, academic analyses of the book remain scarce, and critics often dismiss the text as no more than an unsophisticated testimony of the harsh life of Kabyle women within their patriarchal culture (cf. Gans-Guinoune 2009, 67; Kassoul 1999). Although some critics, including the famous Algerian writer Kateb Yacine, applaud Am-

rouche's autobiography as an act of anti-patriarchal resistance, refusing silencing and objectification, other scholars tend to portray her as a victim, emphasizing her submission to the patriarchal order, as represented by her husband Belkacem and the most famous of her sons, the poet Jean Amrouche. The purpose of this article is to argue not only that *Histoire de ma vie* challenges, rather than complies with, the patriarchal code, but that the text attempts to go beyond the denunciation of female oppression; rather, Amrouche's narrative constructs the author, Fadhma, and her mother, Aïni (who seems to be her only role model), as powerful female figures who display superiority in their physical appearance and endurance, intellect, and moral worth.

The essay will show how the autobiography departs from the features traditionally associated with feminine writing. Linguists and critics treating different geographical areas and historical periods have identified subjectivity, meekness, and an apologetic tone as markers of women's speech or texts. Robin Lakoff argues that social norms compel women to express themselves in a manner that displays uncertainty and lack of confidence and "den[ies] her the means of expressing herself strongly" (1973, 48). Lakoff holds that both the way women use language and the way they are represented disempowers them by confining them to "subservient functions" (46). Although the focus of the linguist's study is women's speech, several specialists of women's literature have shown that these characteristics apply to women's literature as well, a literature defined as "[une] parole timorée, non assertive ... hypercorrection], peur des mots" (timorous, non-assertive speech [characterized by] hypercorrection, fear of words) (Yaguello ctd. in Bacali 2016, 422). Illustrating this statement, Elaine Showalter reveals the way 19th century female writers like Margaret Oliphant adopted a meek tone, "preaching submission and self-sacrifice, and ... denouncing female self-assertiveness" (1977, 21). These traits, and indeed a pronounced tendency for self-humiliation, are also present in the texts of Marie-Claire Tremblay and Léonise Valois, two early 20th century Canadian writers whose diaries have been analyzed by Manon Auger. Unlike this seemingly generalized tendency, this article will show that the author of *Histoire de ma vie* opts for an assertive stance, substituting pride for meekness and self-deprecation.

Considered one of the earliest Algerian female writers, Fadhma Aïth Mansour (1982-1967) is a highly respected literary figure. Her name is often mentioned with Assia Djebar and pioneering male authors like Mouloud Feraoun and Kateb Yacine. While sharing with these authors a linguistic and cultural hybridity produced by the influence of the colonial school and which is the mark of Algerian literature—and indeed of postcolonial literature, more generally¹—Amrouche presents a distinct characteristic: she was Christian, converting to Christianity at the age of 16, and the wife of another Christian convert, Belkacem Amrouche. In Algeria, a predominantly Muslim country, her Christian religion and her illegitimacy make her respectable social status in Algeria somewhat surprising.

The unconventional couple she formed with Belkacem gave birth to Jean El Mouhoub and Taos: Jean became a poet, and Taos was a novelist as well as

a diva. While celebrated as the mother of these two renowned literary figures, Aïth Mansour Amrouche deserves recognition for her own ability to deal successfully with her multifaceted marginality. A poor female child born to an unmarried mother in an Algeria that had undergone colonial domination for decades,² she relied on the assets she had—good looks, education, and her own moral strength and determination—to empower herself; and, emulating her no less admirable mother, Aïni, she turned the colonial situation that was supposed to suppress her into a means of self-affirmation. Aïni and Fadhma found the colonial school and the Christian religion to be paths to liberation and empowerment. This article will examine the process of self-empowerment by focusing on the way the literary work deconstructs traditional assumptions about gender roles and female traits. With this goal in mind, the discussion that follows will address Fadhma’s portrayal of her mother and the education bestowed on her, her account of her relationship with her husband, Belkacem (one in which she assigns to herself the tasks of planning and deciding), and the self-empowering strategies she deploys throughout her autobiography, which include a recurrent use of the possessive “my” and verbs conveying agency such as “to decide,” “to declare,” or “to refuse,” when speaking of herself.

As an autobiography, *Histoire de ma vie* is expected to propose a scrupulous compliance with what Philippe Lejeune has termed “the autobiographical pact” (*le pacte autobiographique*), according to which the autobiographer “*jure de dire la vérité, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité*” (swears to say the truth, all the truth, and nothing but the truth) (1975, 20). Few sources, apart from Taos Amrouche’s autobiographical novel *Rue des Tambourins* (1960) are available to measure the degree of such compliance. Yet, regardless of the fact that the novel corroborates many episodes of Fadhma Aïth Mansour’s narrative, this paper contends that what matters here is less “*la ressemblance au vrai*” (resemblance to the truth)³ (Lejeune) than the author’s discursive construction of her life and, more importantly, her personality.⁴ If her narrative is a faithful rendering of reality, it also testifies to her strong and self-willed character. If, on the other hand, she was much less combative and assertive than her autobiography makes us believe, then her untruthful rewriting of herself in empowering terms is significant. In other words, regardless of whether it is part of a lived reality or a discursive product of fantasy, Fadhma Amrouche’s self-portrayal as a proud and authoritative woman confirms a quest for self-empowerment.

It is a well-known fact that Amrouche⁵ wrote *Histoire de ma vie* at the urging of her son, Jean, who believed that her exceptional life story should be known. This detail has often been read as evidence that the mother’s only wish in writing the book was to satisfy her son’s request, and that she wrote the manuscript exclusively for her children with no thought to see it published. Nathalie Malti, in particular, argues that Fadhma Amrouche’s letter to Jean displays the all-too-female apologetic tendency to consider women’s stories worthless and that it bears the mark of woman’s subaltern status in traditional Maghrebi society (2006, 137). Karin Holter holds a similar view, arguing that the insertion of Jean’s request in the eventually published manuscript functions as a pre-text that legitimizes the publication of a woman’s narrative in a culture where female

discourse is supposed to be confined to the realm of the domestic and the private (1998, 57). Through such arguments, these critics represent Fadhma Amrouche as a submissive woman who chose to accommodate, rather than subvert, patriarchy. Yet the very letter used by Malti to support her reading clearly contradicts this. Indeed, agreeing with her son's idea that her story deserves to be told, the mother-author proceeds to give instructions concerning how the book should be published and how any financial profit resulting from the anticipated publication should be divided between her children:

Si j'ai écrit cette histoire, c'est que j'estime qu'elle mérite d'être connue de vous.

Je voudrais que tous les noms propres (si jamais tu songes à en faire quelque chose) soient supprimés et si tu en fais un roman, que les bénéfices soient partagés entre tes frères et ta sœur, en tenant compte de tes frais et de ton travail.

(If I have written this story, it is because I think that it deserves to be known by you.

If you ever envisage doing something with it, I would like all proper nouns to be erased; and if you make it into a novel, I would like the profit you get from it to be shared between your brothers and sister, taking into account the money and efforts it will have cost you). (Aïth Mansour 2009, 19)

Not only is the first sentence in the quotation a departure from women's usual humble tone—Amrouche does consider her story interesting—but it also questions the idea that it is to comply with her son's request that the mother wrote the autobiography. Instead, it presents the author as a full agent of both the decision to write and the act of writing. The introductory line is followed by even more strong-willed instructions, which could be provided only by a woman who had the ambition to make her narrative public. The intention to get the manuscript published is further confirmed by the fact that Fadhma Amrouche did not give up on this project, left unfulfilled at her son's death because of her husband's strong opposition. Instead, she confided the text to her daughter Taos, who carried out the project in 1968.

The passage quoted above nicely summarizes the aspects of *Histoire de ma vie* that this article seeks to highlight. While the autobiographer's will-to-power is signaled through her ambition to become a published writer—and also, though this is secondary, possibly to amass financial gain as a result of this—the fact that she gives precise instructions regarding these two matters reveals some of the empowering discursive techniques deployed in her narrative as a whole. Along with the use of the “I would like” form illustrated in the passage, the discussion below, particularly the last section, will underscore other such strategies, including a boastful tone at odds with the premise of female modesty and a quest for “cold” objectivity that departs from so-called feminine sensitivity. The remaining parts of the essay will address other aspects of the interaction between gender and power, namely the intervention of colonialism in the

indigenous female's struggle against patriarchy and the gender reversal that marks Amrouche's rendering of male/female relationships.

The Heroic Mother and Colonial "Providence"

It is impossible to talk about Fadhma Amrouche without evoking her mother, Aïni. In a conservative culture—even more conservative and morally stricter than the rest of Algeria (Lacoste-Dujardin 1994, 22)⁶—where both the adulterous woman and her illegitimate daughter could have been sentenced to death, Aïni not only makes the courageous decision of keeping her child, but also fights unflinchingly to protect her from the harassment to which their malevolent environment constantly subjects them. Even prior to the birth—and even conception—of Fadhma, this combative woman resists the *diktat* of the tradition which expects widows to return to their parents' homes, deciding, at the age of 22, to remain in her deceased husband's place and raise her two sons alone.⁷ When, later, she "sins" with a young neighbor and gives birth to his daughter, her impulse is to protect the child by suing the father to compel him to admit his paternity. This is not an easy task; as Denise Brahimi notes, she had to make the several-hour journey to the tribunal on foot and in every sort of weather, returning there as many times as required (1995, 19). She loses the court case, however, and in one brief moment of despair, plunges the infant into icy water, only to regret her action and immediately pull her from the water. The child, proving to be as tough-skinned as her mother, survives.

Aïni's rare courage has been unanimously emphasized by critics. While Denise Brahimi calls her "*une femme libre*," "[u]ne très fière jeune femme, incroyable de courage et d'intrépidité" (a free woman, a very proud young woman, whose courage and intrepidity are unbelievable) (18), Karen Holter notes the contrast between the portraits of "*une mère virile et combative et [un] père lié, lâche ...*" (a virile and combative mother and a cowardly father, bound by convention) (1998, 60), a gender reversal which, as will be developed in other sections, marks several parts of Fadhma Amrouche's narrative. In the case of Amrouche's mother, this gender reversal is conveyed through her own, oft-repeated self-masculinizing sentence: "*Ticert-iv xir t'mira gergazen!*" (The tattoos I have on my chin are better than men's beards) (Aïth Mansour 63). Indeed, Aïni displays both physical resilience and moral stamina when, bringing up her children alone, she has to plough her fields, grind wheat and acorn into flour, and saw wood, among so many other tasks.

In "Berber Dreams, Colonialism, and Couscous," Carolyn Duffey infers that *Histoire de ma vie* reads like a traditional tale—of the sort Taos Amrouche, Fadhma's daughter, would later record in her collection *Le Grain magique* (1966). It would be more accurate, however, to refer to Amrouche's autobiography as a feminist rewriting of traditional tales. While such tales usually feature male heroes fighting a formidable ogress, the first part of Amrouche's narrative revolves around "a heroic single mother in a small Muslim village" (Duffey 1995, 71), that is, a female heroine struggling against a mighty patriarchal ogre. The portrayal of Aïni departs from the traditional representation of female characters in both Berber and Western tales, where the heroine is a passive, if beauti-

ful, young woman. Although Fadhma Amrouche insists on her mother's beauty, what is poignant in the narrative is her courage, pride, and physical endurance. It is precisely these features that entitle her life story to be classed in what Northrop Frye has termed "the high mimetic mode"—a literary mode characterized by a hero(ine) superior in degree to other men, but not to his/her environment (Frye 2000, 33-34). But while, in making her fit within this category, the harshness of the Kabyle society where Aïni's life evolves prepares her for a tragic fate, there is a sort of "Providence" that rescues her from a terrible fate and brings her close to the heroes of an even higher mode, which Frye terms "romance." In epics and fairy tales, the hero's bravery and courage are able to defeat his wanton enemies only thanks to the help of a miraculous set of favorable circumstances, which can take the shape of a god, a fairy, or any other supernatural intervention (Frye 33).

In the case of Amrouche's mother, this "providential help" manifests itself through the presence of the colonial administration, without which the undeniable bravery she displays in refusing to yield to the patriarchal order would have been mercilessly crushed. Before seizing colonial justice to get her child's father to recognize his paternity, the courageous mother had already resorted to it to prevent her in-laws from chasing her away from her deceased husband's property and sending her back to her parents' home. The French authorities decreed that the widow may continue to live in her husband's house with her children. Similarly, it is the colonial administration that protects her and her daughter's life following the scandal of Aïni's "sinful" pregnancy. As Karin Holter writes: "*Sans ces magistrats montant au village ... 'décrétant que personne ne devrait toucher à la veuve ni aux orphelins', il n'y aurait pas eu de Fadhma Amrouche, pas d'histoire douloureuse à raconter... En tant que femme, la mère de Fadhma, a été mieux servie par la justice de l'Etranger que par celle des siens*" (Were it not for those magistrates, who came up to the village with the decree that nobody should harm the widow or her orphans, there would have been no Fadhma Amrouche and no painful story to tell ... As a woman, Fadhma's mother was better helped by the Outsider's justice than by that of her own people) (59-60). Later, when the "child of sin" is, in her early years, snubbed and harassed because of her illegitimate birth, her devoted mother turns to another colonial institution for protection. She sends Fadhma to the neighboring region of Ouadhias to be educated by the *Sœurs Blanches*—nuns who, in several parts of colonial Algeria, provided education to indigenous children.

Much has been written about the complicity that brings colonialism and patriarchy together and the double yoke to which these twin systems of oppression subject women. In her famous "Can the Subaltern Speak?" for example, Gayatri Spivak fustigates both Indian nationalists and British colonizers for their silencing of the Indian woman, and casts irony at the British claim of "saving brown women from brown men" (1994, 92). The aid provided to Aïni by the colonial administration seems to contradict such accusations and legitimizes the colonial mission of rescuing the poor, oppressed Muslim woman from the tyranny of her people. Yet what appears to be a noble gesture was probably a calculated move meant to win over those marginalized in their own Algerian

environment to French culture—which indeed seems to happen as Aïni, wanting to spare her daughter the harsh condemnation of her society, confides her education to *les Sœurs*. Ironically, these supposedly morally superior educators reveal their cruelty when they inflict on little Fadhma a most cruel and humiliating punishment.⁸ With her characteristic pride and determination, Aïni withdraws her daughter from the religious school in Ouadhias as soon as she discovers the ill-treatment the child has undergone.

The Mirror and the Book

Amrouche's recording of the above incident and several other comments in *Histoire de ma vie* show that she is as aware of the colonizers' injustices as of the narrow-mindedness of her own people. As Duffey argues, this author "accepts neither set of influences [French and Berber] unquestionably, often providing an oblique criticism of each" (71). For example, she criticizes the racist tendency of the French to ostracize all those who are not French-born, writing that she has always remained the "petite indigène" (the little native). This prejudice toward Algerians manifests itself in two contradictory ways. If, in the orphanage of Taddert-Oufella, the too-strong presence of indigenous pupils is "remedied" by giving these pupils Christian names, thus creating the illusion that all the students at the school are European/Christian, those in charge of the Aïth-Manegueleth hospital do just the opposite. Claiming that Fadhma cannot have a Christian name because she has not been baptized, they strip her of the name that she was given in Taddert-Oufella—Marguerite—and give her the dreary, because marginalizing, name of "Fadhma from Tagmount."

Yet no less obvious than Amrouche's alertness to the inequities of the colonial educational system is her awareness of its empowering potential. Fadhma Amrouche's attachment to books would sustain her during her difficult life. Although the imperative of taking care of her home and her several children makes reading impossible for a while, she resumes this activity as soon as her children begin to grow up. "*J'avais recommencé à lire,*" she writes, "*Paul m'apportait des livres de la Bibliothèque Populaire*" (I had resumed reading. Paul brought me books from the Public Library) (Aïth Mansour 165). These books, which are to her an obvious source of pleasure, are also useful in that they allow her to help her children—two of whom would become outstanding literary figures—with their studies. In the case of Paul, her eldest son, it is with undisguised pride that she writes that her help has contributed to making him a brilliant pupil: "*En littérature, j'avais pu aider Paul: il eut en octobre une très bonne note ... Il fut reçu et même accepté à l'Ecole Normale d'Instituteurs*" (I was able to help Paul with his literature; in October, he obtained a very good grade and was admitted to the Teacher Training College) (Aïth Mansour 165). Needless to say, while thus empowering her children, education empowered the mother as well by enabling her to write her autobiography and, through this, to attain fame. As Julia Clancy-Smith states, "the 'child of sin' not only survived but also rose to fame and posterity thanks to modern schooling" (2016, 213).

Perhaps surprisingly for a woman of her time, Amrouche's attachment to books went hand in hand with a strong attachment to modernity and Western

ways. Unlike her husband—who, notwithstanding his French education and his being Christian, unflinchingly sticks to his Kabyle *chéchia* (traditional headgear worn in Muslim countries) despite long years of exile in Tunis—she goes through the streets of the Tunisian capital city bare-headed and dressed *à l'euro-péenne*. As long as the family lives in European districts, this does not cause any problem, for she is mistaken for “*la Française mariée à un Arabe*” (the Frenchwoman who married an Arab) (Aïth Mansour 172). However, when the Amrouches move to a richer but Arab-populated part of the city, the author understands that her sartorial behavior is viewed with disfavour: “*chez ces gens, une femme indigène qui sort, le visage découvert devant des hommes, n'était pas une femme honnête*” (for these people, a native woman who goes unveiled in men's presence was not an honest woman) (172). Her refusal to renounce her Western clothes in spite of this realization reveals her loyalty to this form of dress as a mark of liberation. Through it, Fadhma Amrouche seems to affirm her freedom from what she perceives to be indigenous women's life of subjection.

More than *Histoire de ma vie*, it is *Rue des tambourins* (1960), an autobiographical novel by Taos Amrouche (Fadhma's daughter), which highlights Fadhma Amrouche's abhorrence of traditions. Taos's novel poignantly depicts the fierce quarrels between her parents concerning their daughter's education. In particular, the novel recounts how the father is strongly opposed to his daughter's wearing (what he considers to be) short dresses, which her mother wants her to wear. The novel teems with other examples that show the mother violently rejecting tradition by despising indigenous medicine, refusing to journey back to her husband's native village, discouraging her eldest son from marrying a woman from the village and, when he does, displaying overt hostility to her fragile and submissive daughter-in-law.

Amrouche fustigates not only indigenous women who remain imprisoned within the walls of tradition, but also those Western wives who get trapped in a patriarchal spiral imposed by an Oriental partner. Both *Rue des tambourins* and *Histoire de ma vie* mention a Sicilian woman who meekly accepts her subjection to a Muslim husband. The tone of the author's judgment of this couple is imbued with a mixture of condemnation of the man, compassion for the woman, and contempt and a sense of superiority toward both. Indeed, although an indigenous woman herself, her own relationship with her husband is clearly more “horizontal”; in Clancy-Smith's words, “she and Belkacem [her husband] lived as a ‘modern’ couple, as that notion was understood at that time” (212). In a sense, her passing as a European woman by donning Western clothes while letting her partner ostensibly retain his *chéchia* as a mark of his indigenousness legitimized the equal treatment (indeed, as will be discussed below, the gender reversal) she demanded of her husband, compensating as it did for her female condition by a borrowed Westernness which, in the colonial context of that time, was perceived as a power signifier.

However, it is possible to think that Fadhma's empowerment within the Amrouche couple included not only her way of dressing but also her own physical appearance. In a manner that departs strikingly from the female traditional requirement of modesty—in both its meanings of humility and abstaining from

showing one's physical assets—the author of *Histoire de ma vie* unabashedly insists on her own beauty, perhaps somewhat exaggerating her looks. Indeed, as Duffey notes, Amrouche's description of herself as blond is hardly credible, since all the pictures of her in the book seem to belie it, and might well be inspired by “a French source”—that is, the influence of French texts (Duffey 72). Such an attitude betrays an inferiority complex reminiscent of the one analyzed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. As a colonized woman, Amrouche interiorized European standards as a mark of superiority in terms of beauty and replaced the quest for whiteness, which characterizes Fanon's Antilleans (see Fanon 1993, 37-79), with an aspiration for European blondness.

Whether blond or not, Amrouche does not hesitate to refer to herself as “*la plus jolie fille du village*” (the prettiest girl in the village) (63), cruelly passing negative judgments on those young women less endowed by nature.⁹ Her good looks were perhaps an important asset to her in her sometimes-stormy relationship with her husband, Belkacem.

Wearing the Pants

One interesting point in *Histoire de ma vie* is the way the author refers to her husband. At a time when Kabyle husbands and wives used euphemisms such as “*amyhar/tamyar*” (old man/old woman) to refer to each other, Amrouche invariably called her companion either “*mon mari*” (my husband) or by his first name, Belkacem. Susanne Heiler notes that this manner is at odds with the imperative of reserve at the heart of Kabyle customs, and concludes that it must have led to the husband's refusal to see the manuscript published (1998, 90). In addition, the emphatic use of the possessive adjective “*mon*” betrays an obvious will-to-self-assertion.

This attitude does not herald a posture of submission of the sort attributed to Fadhma Mansour by Nathalie Malti in *Voix, mémoire et écriture*. In line with her representation of Fadhma Amrouche as a victim of age-old patriarchy, Malti writes that Amrouche was a patient and resigned “*mère de sept enfants [qui] n'a eu ni le loisir ni l'énergie de s'opposer directement au pouvoir des hommes*” (mother of seven children who had neither the time nor the energy to openly confront men's power) (148-149). Yet if the precarious social condition that Amrouche endured most of her life made patience imperative, her text shows that she was anything but submissive and that she certainly never lacked the “energy” to speak her mind to her husband. Again, more than *Histoire de ma vie*, *Rue des tambourins* describes the tempestuous arguments between Yemma (the heroine's mother, who stands for Fadhma Amrouche) and both her husband and her mother-in-law (referred to as Gida, meaning “grand-mother”). While the mother is portrayed as a harsh and uncompromising woman, the father—Yemma's husband—is a weary man, rendered both fragile and helpless by his wife's fiery complaints and long lapses of disparaging silence. For the patriarchal environment in which the family is supposed to be, the powerless and somewhat self-effacing man is oddly torn between two imposing women: a Muslim mother who stands for the traditional order of things and a Christian, fairly Western-

ized, wife who often despises all that her mother-in-law defends. Instances of Fadhma's contempt for tradition have already been discussed in this paper.

This quarrel over the education and the future of one's children is not unusual in "modern" couples, but the fact that the wife's voice is so loud in an early 20th century Kabyle family is most surprising. Fadhma Amrouche rejects the respectful obedience which, according to Kabyle tradition, women owe both the head of the household and his mother. As an illegitimate child growing up in a conservative cultural world, Mrs. Amrouche should have felt this imperative all the more acutely; yet this is not the case. She never looks at her husband as the savior rescuing her from shame and granting her respectability; she sees him as an equal, and even this is an understatement. Indeed, she does not only have her say in questions that relate to her children; as Duffey argues, "she is most certainly her mother's daughter. She makes most of the family decisions" (76), including those pertaining to her husband's own career. When, hoping for a better salary, Belkacem Amrouche wishes to work as a schoolteacher, it is his wife who writes a pathetic application letter on his behalf. Later, as the Amrouche family's finances deteriorate alarmingly, it is again she who urges him to seek employment somewhere else so he might feed his wife and children. Fadhma Amrouche is also in charge of the household finances whenever times are hard and belt-tightening is required. While her several friends, mostly members of religious institutions, help her with donations that include clothes and furniture, little is said of Belkacem's contacts and friendships. In a sense, she is thus also responsible for what might be called the household's "foreign affairs." Belkacem, on the other hand, does not disdain the use of a broom or even a mop to clean the floor (204). Writing of the house they built in Ighil-Ali, Amrouche writes that "*son mari en avait fait un bijou*" (her husband had made a jewel of it) (207), thus emulating the most dutiful wives.

Although Amrouche does fulfill traditionally feminine tasks such as cooking and knitting, the fact that she is the one who runs the family affairs and makes all the important decisions presents her as a masculinized figure, her good looks notwithstanding. On the other hand, her husband, who tends to be passive and altogether powerless in the face of his strong-willed wife, is somewhat feminized. This reversed gender schema is not specific to the Fadhma and Belkacem Amrouche couple. As soon as she arrives in her in-laws' house, the author of *Histoire de ma vie* notices that all the power—and indeed, all the wealth—lies in the hands of the wife of her husband's grandfather: "*On me présenta Thaidhelt, la femme du grand-père de Thizi Aïdhel, gardienne de la maison et de l'argent de l'aïeul. C'était elle qui avait le commandement de toute cette famille*" (I was introduced to Thaidhelt, the grandfather's wife. A native of Thizi Aïdhel, she is the guardian of her husband's house and money. It was she who commanded all this family" (Aïth Mansour 90, my emphasis). The weak and too easy-going father-in-law, Ahmed, depends on this woman both financially and for household affairs. Commenting on this character, Susanne Heiler writes that "*il manque de virilité masculine*" (he lacks masculine virility) and that the dominance of the feminine element in him increases as he becomes more and more financially dependent on his stepmother (102).

Heiler further argues that the feminine and masculine poles are also opposed to each other through the mother, Aïni, and her house, on the one hand, and the in-laws' house, on the other. The in-laws strike Fadhma Amrouche as a lot of idle good-for-nothings, in contrast to her mother's heroic resilience and hard work. The house of the industrious Aïni is "*pleine, nette, propre, le sol comme les murs, tout était blanchi et tenu avec amour*" (full, clean and tidy, and everything in it—the ground and the walls—was whitewashed and lovingly taken care of) (88); by contrast, in addition to being "*vide*" (empty) (88), that of the Amrouche family is "*très grande mais sale, le sol en terre battue, rugueux comme au premier jour de la construction, les murs noirs de suie n'avaient pas été blanchis depuis l'origine*" (very large but dirty; the clay ground was as rough as on the day when the house was built, and the walls, black with soot, had not been whitewashed since that first day) (104). The paternal, and therefore masculine, pole (that of the father-in-law) is thus associated with failure, laziness, and dirt while the maternal, feminine pole (that of the mother), to which the autobiographer's preference obviously goes, is represented in valorizing terms evoking cleanness, wise management, perseverance, and prosperity. Because passivity and weakness of both body and spirit are usually seen as female as opposed to manly strength and good sense, this binary representation of the maternal and paternal poles reverses, again, the traditional gender definitions. Simultaneously, it is possible to argue that this valorization of the feminine bears a feminist agenda in that it celebrates woman's mental and physical power.

Empowering Words

One of the rare instances where Amrouche yields to her husband's will relates to his objection to having her autobiography published.¹⁰ Interestingly, however, the author of *Histoire de ma vie* presents this accommodating gesture less as an act of submission to male authority than a concession made not to hurt or sadden a beloved one. In her epilogue, she writes: "*j'essayai de l'ouvrir [le cahier contenant le récit autobiographique] à Ighil-Ali, en 1953; mais je compris que cela déplaisait au Papa, et, comme je ne voulais pas le chagriner, je remis le cahier dans son tiroir dont, seul, il avait la clef pendue à la chaîne de sa montre*" (In Ighil-Ali, I tried to open the notebook containing the autobiographical narrative; but I saw that this did not appeal to Papa [her husband], and as I did not want to sadden him, I put the notebook back in the drawer to which only he had the key) (Aïth Mansour 199). This formulation, which might as well have been that of a considerate husband wishing to preserve a gentle wife's feelings, confirms our reading of the Fadhma/Belkacem relationship as a reversal of the usual gender schema. With more relevance to the present part of the discussion, Amrouche's self-writing as a strong but benign partner rather than an obedient wife is also indicative of the way the author makes use of words in such a way as to craft an empowering rhetoric challenging the imperative of meekness that the patriarchal code is wont to impose on women.

Amrouche's empowering discursive strategies include a recurrent trope of appropriation. As a lonely schoolgirl in Taddert-Oufella, young Fadhma often finds the readings to which her education gave her access helpful in her soli-

tude. Emulating other famous literary loners, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the fictional Robinson Crusoe, she finds solace in the company of nature, which she makes her own. This appropriating impulse is reflected in her repeated use of the possessive adjective “*mon*” (my), used particularly to refer to a brook in the vicinity of the school: “*mon ruisseau*” (my brook) (34). This impulse to appropriate the brook is not a singular case. The author of *Histoire de ma vie* makes a no less intensive use of the possessive adjective in phrases like “*mon mari*” (my husband) and “*mon argent*” (my money) (166)—the latter phrase being particularly surprising on the part of a woman who does not work outside the home and who, as such, cannot really be said to have any money of her own.

The writer’s assertive manner further manifests itself through strong words which express authority and determination, and which befit her status as the chief decision-maker of her household. Repeatedly in the narrative, Amrouche writes “*je décidai*,” “*je résolus*,” “*je voulus*,” “*je déclarai*,” “*je refusai*,” and “*mon parti fut pris*” (I decided, I resolved, I declared, I refused, and my resolution was taken). In all these cases, the use of the first-person singular pronoun reinforces the impression of power already created by verbs expressing strong will, seeming as it does to exclude Belkacem, the husband, from the realm of decision-making. It is interesting to contrast these words referring to Mrs. Amrouche to those describing her husband. Having urged him to leave his parents’ home to seek a job that might sustain his family—his parents are on the verge of utter bankruptcy—the wife writes that “*il avait peur de l’inconnu, n’étant pas armé pour la lutte*” and that “*son regard [était] désespéré*” (he was afraid of the unknown, for he was not armed for struggle and he had a desperate look) (132). After his actual departure, she adds: “*J’ai su depuis que, jusqu’à la gare, mon mari n’avait cessé de pleurer*” (I learnt, after his departure, that my husband had cried all the way to the station) (133). In another instance, she comments on her son Paul’s decision to emigrate to France, thus following her advice rather than that of his father, who wants him to settle in his father’s homeland: “*il fallut longtemps à mon mari pour digérer sa défaite*” (It took my husband a long time to swallow his defeat) (180). While associating Belkacem with words evoking tears and fear—two traditionally feminine attributes—partakes in his already discussed feminization, the impulse to “pacify” him (suggested in the word “*défaite*”) is reflected in the very syntactic category within which the author locates him. As illustrated by the examples given above, Fadhma Amrouche represents herself as the maker of her own destiny by referring to herself through verbs suggesting or anticipating action; by contrast, her husband is associated either with nouns or adjectives, which, as such, evoke passivity and lack of agency.

The question of gender being at the core of this discussion, it would be interesting to compare Amrouche’s writing to what is usually termed “female writing.” I have already argued that this writer departs from the attitude of meekness and modesty usually expected from women. Her tone is often one of pride—and not only in her good looks. One oft-quoted line in the narrative is an exchange with Father Carisson when he suggests that she work as a maid for an administrator: “*je ne serai jamais la bonne de personne, surtout en pays kabyle*” (I’ll never be anybody’s maid—and certainly not in Kabylia) (81). Similarly, she

abstains from so-called feminine outbursts of emotions and lyrical surges. Indeed, as Susanne Heiler notes, “[e]n général, Amrouche a tendance à mettre en avant les événements ... plutôt qu’analyser ses sentiments” (as a rule, Amrouche tends to focus on events rather than analyze her feelings) (91). This refusal to indulge in pathos or a cathartic unleashing of her feelings, despite the suffering undoubtedly generated by her illegitimacy, poverty, and the numerous difficulties endured throughout her life, might be read as a wish to offer an image of a strong woman governed by reason and able to control her emotions.

Conclusion

The empowering potential of Amrouche’s words is unleashed at the very moment she undertakes to write her autobiography. In a society where women are easily silenced, telling the story of one’s life endows oneself with a voice; in this vein, Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi celebrates women’s writing as an act of courageous resistance that kills oppression and injustice (cf. Malti 131). This essay has demonstrated that *Histoire de ma vie* is an act of resistance, and not only against patriarchy. Although, as Clancy-Smith reminds us, “Fadhma Amrouche ... was more than thrice marginalized—as an ethnic minority (a Berber), a woman, convert, poor, and illegitimate” (204)—she lets none of these markers of disempowerment bend her decidedly assertive ego. Instead of lamenting her poor luck or accepting her condition as a subaltern, she seeks and finds various empowering compensations: her advantageous looks, her education and ease with the French language—a rare asset in her time—and a set of idiosyncratic rhetorical strategies. These strategies include an intensive recourse to the trope of appropriation through the use of the possessive adjective “*mon*” (my) and verbs expressing agency and strong will. Simultaneously, Amrouche rejects features supposed to be intrinsic in feminine writing, such as subjectivity, modesty, and meekness of tone, displaying both pride and assertiveness. Finally, one major technique deployed by this autobiographer is the reversal of the traditional gender schema, feminizing male characters, particularly her husband and her father-in-law, while endowing women like her mother and herself with the “male” traits of courage and both physical and moral resilience.

The contribution of this essay to scholarship is two-fold. On the one hand, it has filled a glaring gap in the literature devoted to Fadhma Aïth Mansour Amrouche, a literature which remains sparse. On the other hand, and on a broader scale, it has questioned the eternal victimization of women—particularly so-called “Third World women”—in scholarly discourse. Although the oppressiveness of patriarchy is not in doubt, it does not follow that all women passively yield to it as helpless sufferers. Because, despite having a hard time fighting the yoke of poverty, the autobiographer studied here effectively conquered both her illegitimate birth and the limitations of her female gender, her example sends a message to women that a refusal of subjection and a guiltless assertion of the self are likely to force respect and earn them recognition.

Biography

Lynda Chouiten is a Professor of Literature in the Department of English at the University of Boumerdès (Algeria). Her PhD, awarded in 2013 by the National University of Ireland, Galway, was funded by the Irish Government under its PRTLI program. She is the editor of *Commanding Words: Essays on the Discursive Constructions, Manifestations, and Subversions of Authority* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) and the author of *Isabelle Eberhardt and North Africa: A Carnavalesque Mirage* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015) as well as about 20 articles/book chapters. Chouiten is also a writer and a poet. So far, she has published two novels. *Le Roman des Pôv'Cheveux*, was on the short list of two prestigious prizes—*le Prix Mohammed Dib* and *L'Escale d'Alger*—in 2018, and *Une Valse* won the Assia Djebar Prize (*le Grand Prix Assia Djebar*) in 2019. Her first short story collection, *Des Rêves à leur portée*, was released in March 2022, while her first poetry collection (*J'ai Connu les déserts et autres poèmes*) was published in May 2023.

Notes

1. The hybridity that inevitably results from the contact between colonizers and colonized has been famously theorized by Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (1994).
2. When Fadhma Aïth Mansour was born, Algeria had been colonized for 52 years, since the French occupation began in 1830; Kabylia, however, was only occupied in 1857. The Kabyles responded to this intrusion by a series of revolts, the most important one being that of 1871. The failure of this insurrection was followed by serious reprisals: the French arrested and exiled Algerian leaders, sentenced others to death, and massively confiscated the natives' lands. They further reinforced their domination by implementing secular and Catholic schools and by spreading colonial myths, like the so-called Kabyle Myth, according to which Kabyles are closer to Europeans than their "Arab" counterparts and, therefore, more prone to accepting the French presence and assimilating to French culture and values. For more on this, see (Direche 2007).
3. Translations are mine throughout.
4. In this connection, Lejeune argues that autobiography has both a historical and psychological dimension in that it relates to memory, self-representation, and self-analysis (1975).
5. Although the name indicated on the cover of *Histoire de ma vie* is Fadhma Aïth Mansour, I will, throughout this essay, refer to the author as "Fadhma Amrouche" or "Amrouche" for short, a name which seems to be both shorter and handier.
6. Only the conservatism of the Mزاب region can equal that of Kabylia. In this latter region, women were confined to domestic chores and were denied the right to choose their husband or to inherit wealth or property (Lacoste-Dujardin 1994, 21).

7. In traditional Kabyle society, widows were expected to return to their parents' home and leave their children to be raised by their deceased husband's family. The only alternative offered to a woman who wanted to keep her children was to marry her dead husband's brother, thus remaining with her in-laws (see Lacoste-Dujardin 2010-2011).
8. Accused of throwing thimbles in the outhouse, little Fadhma is violently whipped and covered with excrement.
9. The women pitilessly criticized for their looks include the "très laide" (very ugly) Yamina T'oulêla, a woman from Ighil-Ali (114), and Amrouche's hostess in Mekla, said to be "d'une laideur impossible à décrire" (ugly beyond description) (48).
10. Although several critics hold that this refusal is a manifestation of the patriarchal belief that woman's discourse should remain within the realm of the private and the domestic, it is legitimate to suppose that it is rather due to the not particularly flattering picture that the autobiographer draws of her weak husband, as the previous section details.

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