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***À contre silence: the violation of women's bodies in Leïla Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hypocrites****

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Patricia Geesey comments in her article, 'Algerian fiction and the civil crisis: bodies under siege' (1997) that the body is 'omnipresent' in much fiction by contemporary Algerian writers, and that 'the very real threat of horrible violence done to the body' in the sectarian conflict/civil war since the start of the 1990s is at the source of this 'corporeal theme' (pp.167-8). For Geesey, the body is figured in such texts both as a 'specific target' of and 'as a metaphor' for violence (p.175). Leïla Marouane is one of the same generation of writers that Geesey is talking about here, but Marouane left Algeria in 1990 after an assault and since then has lived in Paris, refusing to return while Algerian laws work so much against women. Nonetheless, her work does largely conform to Geesey's argument, particularly in relation to *women's* bodies. Marouane's first novel, *La Fille du Casbah* was published in 1996, and three more novels have followed, *Ravisseur* (1998), *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* (2001) and *La Jeune Fille et la mère* (2005). In all of these novels, women's lives are set against the backdrop of the late twentieth-century tide of Islamic fundamentalism and conflict within Algeria, and the, often quite graphic, violence that women's bodies both endure and commit in Marouane's texts – through abortion, rape, pregnancy, sexual desire, physical aggression, murder, madness, etc. – is emblematic, on the one hand, of the violence and oppression suffered by women in Algerian society, and, on the

other, of the broader cultural conflicts that Algeria has been undergoing since the late twentieth century.

I originally intended my paper to cover all four of Marouane's novels but that may have been just to restate Geesey's argument, albeit with particular reference to women. In the end, I felt I could contribute more if I focused on a *single* novel in order to explore in some detail the relationship between the literal and the figurative, to consider the mechanisms of *how* women's bodies work as both targets and tropes. *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* is particularly interesting in that the female protagonist's trajectory mirrors Marouane's own – that is a trajectory from Algeria to France. This is not to insist on the novel's autobiographical elements, although, in interview, the author does refer to its autobiographical dimension.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I want to highlight the fact that, in *Le Châtiment des hypocrites*, the dynamics between body and violence, and between the literal and figurative, take place within the same movement – or move – from Algeria to France that Marouane herself has made. The novel also effects a narrative return back to Algeria, in the form of memory, reflecting Marouane's own kind of return – a literary return, through her writing.

My title, '*À contre silence*', is taken from Algerian writer Maïssa Bey's text of that name, in which she formulates writing for Algerian women as a 'double transgression', that of '*oser dire*', and even more daringly, of '*oser se dire, se dévoiler*' (p.28). In its unveiling of the female body as a site of conflict, both literal and figurative, Marouane's novel functions in accordance with both Bey's notion of *à contre silence* and Geesey's thesis mentioned earlier, but it goes further in each case. Through its troping of the body, combined with the device of memory, it also performs the *process* of this unveiling – a traumatic process of unveiling. Here I draw on trauma theory and, especially, the distinction between traumatic memory and ordinary or narrative memory made by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart

in Cathy Caruth's volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*: 'Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language' (p.176). (Trauma memories consist of fragmented narratives, flashbacks, etc.) I will argue that the narrative of Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* represents a return to the memory of a traumatic event in order, in accordance with van der Kolk's and van der Hart's schema, to try to complete and to integrate it (p.176).

As in Geesey's corpus of texts, the body is everywhere in Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* and, from the very start, this body is linked with violence, from the physical manifestation of fear at the beginning of the text (the female protagonist pees and shits herself when her car is ambushed by three men) to the murder narrated in the epilogue (she drugs, rapes, drowns and electrocutes her husband and then cuts up his dead body). During the course of the novel, the woman is kidnapped, tortured, gang-raped, and, eventually freed, 'profanée, mutilée, l'utérus plein à craquer' (p.26), she leaves the resulting baby for adoption. Subsequently, she walks the streets of Algiers, picking up men, 'à la recherche de sensations plus abstruses les unes que les autres' (p.29) – perhaps in an attempt to feel *something* following her traumatic experiences. She then steals their money and fantasises a particularly gruesome revenge, presumably against men in general, although she does not actually carry it out. (She carries a surgical kit with her and, as we later discover, her idea is to remove the men's testicles and sew them onto their face, 'une bourse sur chaque joue' (p.216)). Once married, and in Paris, she suffers a series of early miscarriages, culminating in one that takes place when she is seven months pregnant, following which she burns the foetus/still-born baby and placenta in the fireplace, in a mad attempt to conceal from her husband that she has lost it.

The narrative structure of Marouane's novel is complex, and this structure is intrinsic to the notion of remembrance that I am suggesting here. The text is divided into two main parts, 'Livre premier' and 'Livre deuxième', both narrated in the third-person. The female protagonist, a midwife, is known as Mlle Kosra in the first part, which relates to her life in Algeria, and as Mme Amor in the second, where she is married and living in France. (Her first name, Fatima, is hardly ever used.) These two parts/books (I'll refer to them as Books 1 and 2) are framed by two short sections in a different typeface: the first, a prologue, consists of only one page, in which the narrative to come is established as a memory: 'Ce jour de canicule exceptionnelle sous le ciel parisien, barbotant dans une mare de sang, Mme Amor se remémora enfin Mlle Kosra' (p.11). The second section in this different typeface, an epilogue, is ten pages in length, in which Mme Amor recounts, in the first-person, the events which follow her miscarriage, including a detailed description of the murder of her husband. Book 1, the Algerian part, is narrated in the past tense and contains a large number of narrative gaps (we get an outline of what happens but not the full picture); in Book 2, the Paris part, the largely retrospective account is interwoven with a narrative present. The narrative of Book 2 begins and ends on the same day – the day of the miscarriage – but it includes many digressions, so that it also functions as the retrospective narrative of Mme Amor's marriage. The move from the third-person narrative of Books 1 and 2 to the first-person narrative of the epilogue, although significant, is actually less graphic than it might suggest. The point of view throughout, whether mediated by the third-person narrative or not, is almost always that of the Mlle Kosra/Mme Amor character – the novel thus functions as a kind of 'monologue intérieur'.<sup>2</sup> The epilogue completes a narrative evolution whereby the distance between past and present, and between Mme Amor and Mlle Kosra, is gradually narrowed.

The narrative of the main text is driven relentlessly towards the 'mare de sang' mentioned in the prologue and at different points in the text. And it is the miscarriage, rather than the murder of the husband, that the 'mare de sang' represents (Mme Amor's husband is so well 'cuit' (p.219) after his electrocution that no blood flows when she cuts up the body). A miscarriage at 7 months is effectively a birth, but here it is also, almost, an abortion since it is partly self-inflicted. It is graphically described in the text. Mme Amor has been sorting out the nursery and installing the baby's cradle, when she feels something tear inside her. At that point, she also discovers that her husband has found, and thus, she assumes, read, her diary of her street-life in Algeria, which she had concealed from him, and she goes into a destructive frenzy, throwing plates at the walls, at the windows and the mirrors, before turning this destruction on herself in an orgy of self-loathing: 'elle se déteste. Elle est une plaie profonde. Un parasite. Une gangrène qui va en se propageant, en se dispersant. Elle est une mygale. Un microbe. Une mauvaise graine. Une infection. Une contagion' (p.187). She punches herself in the stomach, but then, already miscarrying and wracked with pain, she tries wildly to push the foetus back up the birth canal with her fist, though it is too late, and she gives birth to a still-born premature baby boy in a flood of tears and blood.

This horrific birth or miscarriage scene is the point in the narrative at which 'Mme Amor se remémore enfin Mlle Kosra' (p.189). It closes 'la parenthèse ouverte quand elle fut extirpée de cette vieille voiture pour être jetée dans la géhenne' (p.188). The miscarriage, the tears that accompany it and her body in pain lift the veil on the trauma of the past – kidnap, torture, rape, pregnancy and birth – that she had repressed, buried, denied and lied or kept silent about. The miscarriage also sends her into a kind of madness and leads, a few days later, to the murder and dismemberment of her husband, narrated in the epilogue and on which the novel ends.

Now, marriage and the move to France may have rescued Mme Amor from an untenable situation in Algeria – as a woman who had been defiled (first by rape, then by quasi-prostitution) – but she is not much better off in Paris. For all her husband's anger at the misogyny of the Algerian system and his new-man like assumption of household chores in Paris – he is described as a 'fée du logis' (p.172) – in his treatment of his wife, he nonetheless represents a stereotype of Algerian masculinity. Alienated both from herself and from French society, Mme Amor undergoes, in her marriage, a psychological version of the physical rape and torture she suffered in Algeria. This psychological alienation, a figurative rape and torture, is made evident in the cumulative narrative of her marriage in a number of different ways: (i) Her husband refuses to formalise her situation in France by obtaining her residency documents, and puts nothing in their joint names. (ii) He pretends to have relationships with other women, and constantly threatens to divorce her and send her back to Algeria. (iii) He denies her individuality, lumping her in with Algerian women as a group, 'femmes du bled' (e.g. p.120). (iv) He tries to Westernise her first name – as he has done for his own – but ends up changing it completely, so that she no longer knows who she is. (v) On top of her night-shift as a carer in a friend's geriatric clinic, he also sends her out to clean his friends' and colleagues' houses on the black market. (vi) He is not actually violent towards her but his frequent silences and his indifference are nonetheless experienced as a kind of torture. (vii) Initially at least, she returns his physical desire and matches his libido, but she refuses point blank to take part in sodomy and orgies as he wishes. (viii) He does not return her love, but rather considers her 'une porteuse de générations' (p.117), and, given all the miscarriages she suffers, not a very successful one at that. (ix) He is ecstatic about her eventual pregnancy and makes plans for his son's future, but this just makes her feel all the

more alienated. Put all these together and you can see how her marriage acts as torture.

What I want to suggest here is that the narrative of Book 2 of the novel functions as a return to the traumatic events at the start of Book 1, which cannot yet be fully narrated. First, the birth or miscarriage of Mme Amor's 'fausse primipare' (p.187) in Book 2 reflects and fleshes out the nightmare of the real 'primipare', her first pregnancy and the birth of the baby whom she, as Mlle Kosra, left for adoption, the baby who was the result of torture and rape, whose birth was only indicated in Book 1 and never narrated. Second, the processes Mme Amor goes through during the miscarriage in Book 2 – the pain, the self-loathing, and denial (the farcical yet terrible attempt to push the baby back in the womb and the subsequent burning of the detritus) – echo Mlle Kosra's reactions to what happened to her at the start of Book 1. Third, while the attempt by Mme Amor to conceal the miscarriage at the end of Book 2 is a desperate attempt at survival, pregnancy being her security against divorce and an enforced return to Algeria, this cover-up also reflects the silence and lies with which she cloaked her rape and ensuing pregnancy in Book 1. Fourth, through the trope of the miscarriage and also, more expansively, by means of the narrative of her marriage, Book 2 thus returns, fills in the gaps, and goes some way to completing the narrative of what happened to Mlle Kosra during and after her abduction.

But to what extent is this narrative return to the traumatic event a productive or therapeutic return? Arguably, the move to a first-person narrative in the epilogue should attest to the recovery, or at least to the survival of, the Mlle Kosra/Mme Amor character. However, while the assumption of subjectivity, by means of the use of the first-person, works to mend the dissociation between Mme Amor and Mlle Kosra that the text had performed thus far and, in that optic, represents survival, that very survival is manifested in madness and violence. Like the attempted concealment of

the miscarriage, the murder of her husband that Mme Amor narrates in the epilogue is presented as a mad attempt to survive. Moreover, it is explicitly linked with the events in Book 1 through her plan to fulfil her old fantasy of vengeance, that is, to cut off her husband's testicles and stitch them on to his face. However, having drugged him in preparation for this grisly operation, she decides it is more important for her to get pregnant again, and so she rapes him, before going on to murder him (she herself uses the term 'viol' here to describe what she does (p.218), which is to stimulate his drugged body until he ejaculates in her).

So, how can I reconcile these acts of violence that Mme Amor inflicts to my notion of the female body as both target and trope of violence in Marouane's novel? It is possible to argue that they echo the violence done *to* her as well as standing as emblems of vengeance, and thus survival. However, here as elsewhere in Marouane's work, both characterisation and representation are larger than life, improbable, unreal, farcical, and, as for the miscarriage in Book 2, we are invited to read the violent acts as tropes. They do stand for a kind of survival, but, instead of signifying recovery and wholeness, they point, rather, to the survival of a subjectivity that is damaged and not yet cured. As van der Kolk and van der Hart explain, traumatic memory is often prompted by an event similar to the original, traumatic event, and it requires repeated returns before the traumatic event can be integrated into narrative as an ordinary memory. Thus, in Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hypocrites*, the return to the traumatic experiences of Book 1 prompted by the late miscarriage-cum-birth in Book 2, in the form of the narrative of a different kind of torture – her marriage – constitute only a stage in the process of recovery rather than its completion. What we have in this return is a manifestation of traumatic memory, an unintegrated narrative of trauma.



The female body, then, as both target and trope in Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hypocrites*, operates as a figure of personal trauma, on the one hand, and of the personal and public situation of women in Algeria, on the other, even as it also evokes the violent conflicts in the country more generally, of which the ambush, kidnap and rape of Book 1 are a part. But the extent to which the body appears as a figurative device – and, indeed, as a register of violence – in this novel, combined with the narrative structure that operates a return to the traumas of Algeria, means the female body is woven into the very texture of the text, as an omnipresent indictment of a society that not only inflicts and condones violence but also silences its narration. Finally, while Geesey finds that writing in Algeria portrays bodies under siege, Marouane's narrator – mirroring the author – gets away, or, rather, only partly gets away. Thus, the narrative return, the return via traumatic memory that is represented in *Le Châtiment des hypocrites*, mirrors another return – the repeated return to Algeria that Marouane herself makes in her writing. This is undoubtedly a conscious political return, *à contre silence*,<sup>3</sup> an unveiling of the female body as a site of conflict, an unveiling of the body as an emblem of a *society* in conflict. However, on another level, it may also echo the return which the author, in exile, is unable to make, refuses to make, as an embodied woman – and which represents her own traumatic remembrance of a once-loved country torn apart by violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Pascale Haubruge, 'Entretien: 'Le châtement des hypocrites'', *Le Soir* (26 September 2001).

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<sup>2</sup> Loïc Duprès, 'Leïla Marouane: l'humour contre l'horreur', *Nice Matin* (10 November 2001).

<sup>3</sup> See Alain Revello, 'Le cri d'une femme', *Var Matin-Brignoles* (20 June 2002).