

TESTIMONY AND THE UNSPEAKABLE: LITERARY TRAUMA NARRATIVES OF THE ALGERIAN WAR (1954–1962) AND FRENCH NATIONAL MEMORY

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Abstract

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) remains a profoundly contested chapter in modern French history, long designated as a "war without a name" (*guerre sans nom*) within French official discourse. This review article examines how literary trauma narratives have functioned as a crucial counter-memory to the politics of national amnesia in France. Drawing on foundational trauma theories (Caruth, Felman, Laub) and key concepts in memory studies (postmemory, *lieux de mémoire*), this essay analyzes a corpus of texts by Algerian and Franco-Algerian writers—including Assia Djébar, Leïla Sebbar, Zahia Rahmani, and Louisette Ighilahriz—that perform the dual labor of testifying to unspeakable violence and reclaiming excluded voices. The article traces the evolution from state-sponsored silence to fragmented remembrance, arguing that literary testimony operates through unique aesthetic strategies: haunting, spectrality, linguistic rupture, and what has been called "anachronistic memory." By foregrounding the figure of the *harkie*, the female militant (*moudjahida*), and the postmemory generation, these narratives transform trauma from a psychoanalytic impasse into a politically charged mode of ethical witnessing. The conclusion considers the lingering impact of this literary archive on contemporary debates over France's colonial past and the ongoing project of national reconciliation.

Keywords: Algerian War, trauma theory, testimony, postmemory, French national memory, unspeakable, postcolonial literature, *harkis*, Assia Djébar, Leïla Sebbar, amnesia.

1. Introduction

On June 10, 1999, the French National Assembly finally recognized the "Algerian War" as a war, nearly forty years after the Evian Accords ended the conflict. That belated act of naming exposed a deeper truth: for decades, France had engaged in a systematic project of "national amnesia" toward the memory of Algeria, actively repressing the brutal realities of the independence struggle and the colonial system that preceded it. This forgetting was not passive but actively legislated through amnesty laws, censorship, and the euphemistic language of "events" and "police operations".

For historians like Benjamin Stora, this repression was linked to a striking lack of visual images—unlike the Vietnam War, which produced iconic photographs around which

collective memory could crystallize, the Algerian War remained "more written about than seen," depriving French society of the visual catalysts needed for narrative and memorial coherence. In this void of official history and public imagery, literature assumed a singular responsibility. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have argued, "testimony is the literary – or discursive – mode par excellence of our times, and our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony". It is this testimonial vocation that this article examines: how literary trauma narratives of the Algerian War function as a counter-memory, a performative act of witnessing that speaks the unspeakable in the face of a state that preferred silence.

This review proceeds in four parts. First, it situates the Algerian War within the theoretical frameworks of trauma and testimony developed by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and others. Second, it analyzes the political and social architecture of French national amnesia, drawing on the work of Henry Rousso, Pierre Nora, and Benjamin Stora. Third, it offers a close reading of key literary texts—from Assia Djebar's polyphonic novels to the haunting testimonies of harkies and moudjahidate—to demonstrate the aesthetic strategies through which trauma is narrated. Finally, it reflects on the ethical and political stakes of this literary archive for contemporary France's ongoing "memory war" with Algeria.

2. Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Testimony, and the Unspeakable

2.1. The Structure of Traumatic Experience

Contemporary trauma theory emerged largely from the study of Holocaust testimony, but its principles have proven indispensable for analyzing postcolonial violence. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an event that is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence because it exceeds the subject's cognitive and emotional capacity for integration. Trauma therefore returns belatedly, in intrusive and repetitive forms—flashbacks, somatic symptoms, narrative gaps—that resist linear representation. Caruth emphasizes the "inherent latency" of trauma, arguing that the most powerful artistic representations of traumatic events demonstrate "a seeing and a listening from the site of trauma".

This latency has profound implications for literary testimony. If trauma cannot be spoken directly, it demands aesthetic strategies of indirection: fragmentation, repetition, silence, and what Dominick LaCapra has called "acting out" versus "working through." As Caruth, Felman, and Laub collectively suggest, testimonial literature does not merely report events but accomplishes a speech act, creating the conditions for a new kind of historical knowledge precisely where conventional historiography falters.

2.2. The Differend: Lyotard's Challenge

Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the differend offers a crucial supplement to psychoanalytic trauma theory. A differend occurs when a dispute cannot be litigated under the rules of any existing discourse because the very terms of judgment are incommensurable. In the context of the Algerian War, the differend operates at multiple levels: between French and Algerian national narratives, between official accounts of "maintaining order" and testimonies of torture, between the dead and the living. Lyotard argues that the task of the writer is to bear witness to the differend—not to resolve it but to testify to the impossibility of adequate testimony. This philosophical framing helps explain why Algerian War literature so often adopts fragmented, unresolved, or haunted forms.

2.3. Postmemory and Generational Transmission

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory has been especially generative for second-generation writing about the Algerian War. Postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—events they remember only through stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. However, as scholars of Franco-Algerian literature have noted, the postmemory dynamic in this context is often inverted. Unlike Holocaust survivors who spoke of their experiences, many veterans of the Algerian War observed a code of silence, leaving their children to actively seek out the past. This phenomenon has been termed "deferred postmemory" or "crisis of postmemory": a situation in which the second generation must reconstruct traumatic history without the mediation of the first. In such a context, literature becomes an archaeological site, a forensic excavation of a past that refuses to stay buried.

3. French National Memory and the Politics of Amnesia

3.1. The Vichy Precedent: Rousso's Syndrome

The pattern of French memory management of the Algerian War cannot be understood without reference to the earlier case of Vichy. Henry Rousso's influential study *The Vichy Syndrome* traced how France struggled to integrate the memory of collaboration and defeat into its national narrative, oscillating between repression, myth-making, and eventual confrontation. Rousso described a process of "obsessive remembrance" that emerged decades after the event, shaped by legal trials (Barbie, Touvier, Papon) and cultural productions that forced a reckoning.

The Algerian War followed a similar trajectory but with an even longer latency period. Benjamin Stora, often described as the heir to Rousso on colonial memory, has detailed how France maintained a "politics of amnesia" toward the war, a forgetting that was also a form of denial of the Arab element in French identity. As Stora has written, the memory of

colonization and the Algerian War is "a bit like the ghost in the cupboard"—always present, never fully exorcised.

3.2. Pierre Nora and the Proliferation of Lieux de Mémoire

Pierre Nora's monumental project *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Realms of Memory) argued that modern societies have lost "real environments of memory" and compensate by creating sites—archives, monuments, commemorations—that stand in for living tradition. While Nora's framework has been enormously influential, it has also been critiqued for its implicit Franco-centrism. In the context of the Algerian War, as Jonathan Lewis has shown, literary works function as contested sites of memory, not serene repositories of consensus. Lewis's study of over forty French Algerian texts demonstrates that "greater engagement does not necessarily lead to reconciliation or any consensus of memory". Indeed, literature reveals that the work of memory is inherently agonistic, plural, and unfinished.

3.3. The "War Without a Name": Official Euphemism and Its Consequences

For nearly four decades, the French state referred to the Algerian conflict not as a war but as "operations to maintain order" or simply "the events." This linguistic erasure was not trivial. As Stora notes, "querelles de mots ont leur importance car ceux-ci traduisent et forgent les imaginaires" (quarrels over words have their importance because they translate and forge imaginaries). The refusal to name the conflict as a war meant refusing to recognize its combatants as soldiers (and therefore entitled to pensions and honors), its tactics as torture (rather than legitimate coercion), and its dead as casualties of a war (rather than victims of a crime).

The 1999 recognition of the term "Algerian War" was therefore a watershed, but it did not end the debate. As Stora points out, the law speaks of "the Algerian War" (*guerre d'Algérie*) rather than "the war in Algeria" (*guerre en Algérie*), a subtle but significant distinction. The former implies that Algeria was part of France (since Algeria was constitutionally three French départements), while the latter would acknowledge that the war was fought between two separate nations. This terminological instability is itself a *differend*, a dispute that cannot be resolved within existing legal or political frameworks. Literature, as we shall see, has often found ways to inhabit and expose this instability.

4. Literary Trauma Narratives: Reading the Unspeakable

4.1. Assia Djebar: Polyphony and the Feminist Archive

No writer is more central to the literary memory of the Algerian War than Assia Djébar. A novelist, historian, and filmmaker, Djébar was also a witness: she was in Algeria during the war, and her works repeatedly return to the role of women in the struggle for independence. Her magnum opus, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), interweaves three registers: a personal memoir of her childhood in colonial Algeria, a history of French conquest written from archival sources, and testimonies of Algerian women combatants whose voices have been suppressed by both colonial and patriarchal authorities. Djébar describes this method as "writing in the feminine," a strategic use of language that both appropriates the French literary tradition and subverts it from within.

Djébar's work exemplifies the trauma narrative as performative counter-memory. By giving voice to the *moudjahidate* (female freedom fighters), she reclaims the war story from both the French narrative of counterinsurgency and the Algerian nationalist narrative that often marginalized women's contributions. As one study notes, Djébar "weaves together the trauma of colonisation with that of the civil war, evoking both historical and literary ghosts to unite the two periods". In her later work, especially *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1995), written after the assassination of several Algerian intellectuals during the "Black Decade" of civil war, Djébar extends her meditation on violence, mourning, and the possibility of literature in the face of unspeakable horror.

4.2. Louïsette Ighilahriz: The Body as Testimony

Louïsette Ighilahriz's 2001 autobiography *Algérienne* represents a different kind of testimonial intervention. Ighilahriz was a *moudjahida* who was captured, tortured, and raped by French paratroopers. She had remained silent for decades, but in 2000, she broke that silence in an interview that caused a political firestorm, leading to a public debate about the use of torture during the war. Her book was taken as "the definitive testimony on tortures perpetrated by the French paratroopers during the Algerian War of Independence".

However, as Helen Jaccomard has argued, reading *Algérienne* solely as a document of torture is reductive. The book is structured by a powerful synecdoche that links "the female body to the national body": Ighilahriz's individual trauma comes to stand for the collective trauma of Algeria. The title *Algérienne* asserts an identity that the torture sought to destroy, and the narrative's "ethical architecture" aims to evoke an empathic reception from its French readership without glossing over violence. Ighilahriz's testimony thus performs a double movement: it exposes the unspeakable (torture, rape) to public view, but it also insists on the limits of representation, on what cannot or should not be said. In this, it embodies the core paradox of trauma testimony: the imperative to speak and the impossibility of full speech.

4.3. Zahia Rahmani and Saliha Telali: Haunting as Postcolonial Testimony

The most innovative recent work on literary testimony of the Algerian War has come from scholars examining the writing of daughters of harkis—the indigenous Algerian men who served as auxiliary soldiers in the French army. The harkis occupy an impossible position: regarded as traitors by Algerian nationalists and as undesirable reminders of colonial violence by many French citizens, they and their descendants have been subjected to decades of silence, shame, and stigma.

Cliona Hensey's analysis of Zahia Rahmani's *Moze* (2003) and Saliha Telali's *Les enfants des harkis* (2009) demonstrates how these authors deploy the tropes of haunting as a deliberate, subversive mode of testimony. Rather than representing "a static, passive symptom of trauma's inherent unspeakability, spectrality functions in these texts as a deliberate, subversive force of resistance to silence, stigma and shame". By conjuring familial and collective spectres, these authors create "ghostly encounters" that expose the unfinished business of colonial history.

Hensey argues that the multivocal nature of these works ultimately positions the reader as an active witness, "called upon to take up the dialogues which are often foreclosed or interrupted within the confines of the texts". In this way, haunting becomes a performative political act, transforming decontextualized forms of bearing witness into "ethically-attuned, historically-situated dialogic speech acts". This approach moves beyond the individualistic model of trauma that dominates earlier theory, emphasizing instead the relational and intergenerational dimensions of testimony.

4.4. October 17, 1961: The Massacre That Would Not Be Named

One event, more than any other, crystallizes the politics of French amnesia: the massacre of October 17, 1961, when police under the direction of Maurice Papon attacked a peaceful demonstration of Algerian workers in Paris, killing dozens (estimates range from 50 to over 200) and throwing bodies into the Seine. The French state denied the massacre for decades, and it was only through the work of historians and writers that the truth emerged.

Michel Laronde has analyzed how the October 17 event resurfaces in beur literature and mainstream French fiction from the 1980s onward, appearing as "memorial fragments naturalized in the novels". These literary traces signal a "postmemorial mentality where the past bears on the present of the nation's postcolonial process of correcting the distortions of silenced history". Laronde shows how the situation of repressed memory spanning more than one generation resonates with Hirsch's concept of postmemory, serving "as a call to revisit the official history of the traumas of the Algerian War in an unending process of healing and repair of the colonial past".

The October 17 massacre has been fictionalized in numerous novels (including Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire* and Leïla Sebbar's *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique*), and each retelling constitutes a small act of resistance against the state's original erasure. As one scholar notes, these works "transform literature into a forensic medium" for excavating histories that official archives sought to bury.

4.5. Second-Generation and "Anachronistic Memory"

Madeleine Dobie has recently drawn attention to a phenomenon she terms "anachronistic memory"—the belated testimonies of aging veterans and militants who return to the events of their revolutionary youth decades later. Adjacent to these works are those in which the child of a former militant speaks in the voice of their parent, complicating theories of memory ranging from trauma and amnesia to multidirectional and post-memory. These works raise "epistemological, narrative and ethical questions about memory and memorialization".

Such anachronistic memory is especially evident in the work of Leïla Sebbar, whose trilogy *Shérazade* (1982–1991) follows a young Franco-Algerian woman's search for her roots. Sebbar's characters are postmemory subjects par excellence: they inherit a silenced history and must reconstruct it through fragments—photographs, rumors, archival traces, and encounters with those who were there. As Jane Hiddleston has noted in an interview with Sebbar, this literature occupies the space between memory and oblivion, refusing resolution in favor of ongoing inquiry.

5. Aesthetic Strategies of Testimony: Silence, Rupture, and the Unspeakable

Across this diverse corpus, several recurring aesthetic strategies merit analysis.

Silence. Many texts adopt silence not as a failure of testimony but as its condition. The unspeakable is not something to be overcome but rather something to be marked, framed, and inhabited. As Kenneth Olsson has shown, a generation of French writers too young to have participated in the war is "questioning the silence that surrounds this part of history and the secondary effects it seems to exert on contemporary French society". Silence becomes a character in its own right, a structuring absence around which narrative circles.

Haunting and Spectrality. As we have seen, ghostly figures proliferate in Algerian War literature. They are the dead who were never properly mourned, the disappeared whose bodies were never recovered, the harkis who are neither French nor Algerian. Spectrality functions as a postcolonial mode of testimony precisely because ghosts exceed the binary

categories of presence/absence, life/death, past/present. To be haunted is to acknowledge that the past is not over.

Linguistic Rupture. Many Franco-Algerian writers write in French—the language of the colonizer—while simultaneously disrupting its syntax, introducing Arabic words, or translating untranslatable concepts. Djébar famously called French her "stepmother tongue," a language of alienation and appropriation. This linguistic tension mirrors the structure of traumatic memory itself: the event is experienced in one register but must be narrated in another, with inevitable gaps and distortions.

The Fragment. Few texts about the Algerian War attempt totalizing narratives. Instead, they adopt forms—collections, diaries, letters, testimonies, oral histories—that embrace incompleteness. The fragment refuses the false closure of a single authoritative account, insisting instead on the multiplicity of perspectives and the irreducibility of suffering.

6. Conclusion: Literature and the Ethics of Remembrance

The Algerian War of Independence remains, more than sixty years after its end, an open wound in French-Algerian relations. The Stora Report of 2021 (commissioned by President Macron) acknowledged that the war has produced a "never-ending memory war" between the two nations, and that France has yet to confront its colonial past in a sustained and honest way.

This review has argued that literary trauma narratives have been, and continue to be, the most powerful archive of that confrontation. Operating outside the protocols of official historiography, working in the gaps left by law and public policy, these texts perform a labor of mourning, witness, and repair. They give voice to those who were silenced—the moudjahidate, the harkis, the victims of October 17, the disappeared. They expose the aesthetic and ethical complexities of testifying to the unspeakable, refusing easy catharsis in favor of more difficult forms of acknowledgment.

If France is ever to achieve a genuine reconciliation with its colonial past, it will need to listen to these voices. As Felman and Laub wrote, literature and art can function as "a precocious mode of witnessing – of accessing reality – when all other modes of knowledge are precluded". The unspeakable can never be fully spoken, but literature teaches us that this is not a failure; it is the condition of ethical testimony. To try to speak, knowing that one will fall short, is itself an act of courage. And to listen, without demanding closure or resolution, is the beginning of justice.

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