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Silenced Tongues and Inaccessible Spaces: Home and Language in the Work of Leïla Sebbar and Emine Sevgi Özdamar

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Silenced Tongues and Inaccessible Spaces: Home and Language in the Work of Leïla Sebbar and
Emine Sevgi Özdamar

by

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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This thesis entitled:
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Emine Sevgi Özdamar
has been approved for the Department of Comparative Literature

Ruth Mas

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
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Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Carley, Erica Grant (M.A., Comparative Literature)

Silenced Tongues and Inaccessible Spaces: Home and Language in the Work of Leïla Sebbar and

Emine Sevgi Özdamar

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Ruth Mas

Abstract:

Home has often been understood as a stable point of origin or a location of belonging, where one understands and is understood. However, the existence of multinational and multilingual homes prompts a reimagining of home as a concept. It cannot be considered a stable location through which identity and origin may be determined. Rather, home must be understood as an ever-changing set of feelings and experiences. As such, it is inextricably joined to language. It is through language that home is defined, experienced and constructed. In this paper, I discuss the varied notions of home and language in the autobiographical and fictional work of two postcolonial, post-migrant writers, Leïla Sebbar and Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Through their work, I will show that ultimately home is a continuous project to be realized, not a stable space to find or return to.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: WHY LANGUAGE AND SPACE?

Ce coeur obsédant, qui ne correspond
Pas à mon langage ou à mes costumes
Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes
D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D'appivoiser, avec des mots de France,
Ce coeur qui m'est venu du Sénégal?

~ Leon Laleau, *Trahison*

Where is the character at home? The question bears less on a geographical territory than a rhetorical territory...The character is at home when he is at ease in the rhetoric of the people with whom he shares life. The sign of being at home is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others without any need for long explanations. The rhetorical country of a character ends where his interlocutors no longer understand the reasons he gives for his deeds and actions, the criticisms he makes or the enthusiasms he displays. A disturbance of rhetorical communication marks the crossing of a frontier, which should of course be envisaged as a border zone, a marchland, rather than a clearly drawn line.

~ Vincent Descombes

Home is: a place, a feeling, a complex set of cultural ideals, a point of origin. As such, every individual has feelings and opinions about what is or is not homelike, and who may or may not experience a particular space as home. At issue in the concept of home is a sense of belonging, comfort, origin and understanding: as Descombes observes, home is a place where one understands and is understood (Descombes 179). What happens, then, when the space that is supposed to be homelike, that is, the family dwelling place, is a site where understanding is precluded by a linguistic lack? Or when

the language associated with homeliness¹ is lost or forgotten? The existence of multinational and multilingual homes must prompt a reimagining of home as a concept. It cannot (and never could) be considered a stable location through which identity and origin may be determined in a defined way. In fact, home must be understood as an ever-changing set of feelings and experiences. As such, it is inextricably joined to language. It is through language² that home is defined, experienced and ultimately constructed.

Although the relationship of language to home is found in the traditional, monolingual home of the European nuclear family, it is most evident in the context of multilingualism. Multilingualism within the European home occurs in any number of circumstances, but especially as the product of immigration or as a legacy of colonialism. Under European colonialism, the language of the metropole became the language of the public sphere, while indigenous languages continued to be spoken within the home, particularly the homes of the rural or less-educated populations.³ Thus the European

¹ For the purposes of this project I will use “homeliness” and “unhomeliness” to discuss the physical and discursive features of the spaces we distinguish as home. These two words, at least in the German *heimlich* and *unheimlich* are inextricably linked to Freud and his concept of the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 825). I discuss “homeliness” and “unhomeliness” as presence and absence of comfort, safety, and belonging, and do not consider the aspects of Freud’s uncanny.

² A brief note on terminology is necessitated here. I use the term language to denote the idiom spoken, for example French or Arabic, as well as the broader sense having to do with the formal elements of communication. Generally I am not, unless otherwise noted, referring to discourse in the sense developed by Michel Foucault in *L’Archéologie du savoir* as well as many of his other works, that is what is said about a particular topic (in Foucault’s case, governance, sexuality, madness, etc.) and how it relates to structures of power. Discursive violence, then, is violence propagated discursively, through speech and, necessarily, through language.

³ In some cases however, indigenous languages were effectively banned. I think specifically of the case of Irish, but there are myriad examples. Chinua Achebe has a fascinating discussion of his decision to write in English (contrary to African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o) and why he embraces English as an alternative to the numerous

language was (and still is, in many countries) the language of privilege, and of education, while the indigenous language was relegated to a foreign language in schools.⁴ Not speaking the language of the *métropole* meant being denied access to this privileged space. Although immigration into Europe presents very different circumstances, language quickly becomes a central issue in defining who does or does not belong, a similarly privileging process. Language is one of the central factors that defines who is allowed to be “at home” in Europe. The two writers I discuss here, Leïla Sebbar and Emine Sevgi Özdamar, are acutely aware of the relationship between language, belonging, and home. They come from two very different sets of biographical circumstances, but their writing explores homeliness within language, and how language shapes the physical and metaphysical space.

Leïla Sebbar writes of her childhood home in Algeria as a “Petite France” (Sebbar 2001 120) fortified against the incursion of Algerian influence. The child of a French mother and Algerian father, Sebbar and her sisters were brought up exclusively French, and the Arabic language was forbidden within the domestic space. This fortress of language and culture both isolated and protected its inhabitants from the tumultuous state of affairs of the outside, but also cut them off from relationships with Arabic speakers, including Sebbar’s father and his family. Sebbar’s prolific writing about her relationship with her father, and with Arabic, seems an attempt to come to terms with this part of her identity to which she was denied. It seems that only through writing can she approach a linguistic home, as I argue below. In her novel *La Seine était rouge*, Sebbar addresses

languages spoken in Nigeria, in his essay collection *The Education of a British-Protected Child*.

⁴ Derrida writes of the absurdity of teaching Arabic as a foreign language in Algeria in *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*, a text I discuss at length below.

many of the issues that inflect her autobiographical work. She takes on issues of language, origin and memory, and shows how language, while shaping domestic space and notions of home, may also render the space inaccessible. The novel shows how domestic space may become unhomely, and also how assumedly unhomely spaces such as prisons and shantytowns become homely, through associations with community and belonging. Amel, Sebbar's protagonist, ultimately discovers that homeliness must be cultivated and created: it is not something that she may merely find or be given.

Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who was born in Turkey but spent most of her adult life in Germany, also addresses language and domestic space in her work. Her short story *Grandfather Tongue* recounts her return to Turkish through Arabic, the language that was excised by Atatürk's reforms. The narrator of the novella begins to study Arabic while living in Germany. Here, language constructs a different sort of fortification: the imprisoning practice of *pardah*. Domestic space in the novella is carefully constructed as gendered, and the female narrator is unable to leave it, which coincides with a sexual relationship with her teacher. She is seeking a return to the traditional Arabic language, and is able to access this history through submitting to the most confining experience of female subjectivity. Meanwhile, the narrator is also engaged in a project of word collection. She gathers words in Arabic and Turkish, searching for the shared words, unsuccessfully expunged in the reforms. She carefully constructs a linguistic home through the relationship between Arabic, Turkish and German, and when she has done so she is able to leave the secluded apartment and re-enter Berlin.

Sebbar and Özdamar present a productive point of comparison because, while Sebbar describes her relationship to a language she has never spoken, Arabic, Özdamar

shows how it is possible to lose a previously established home within language. In the texts I discuss, Sebbar is primarily concerned with home in terms of the paternal or maternal familial space. This is often how home is imagined: a stable familial dwelling place to which the adult child may return indefinitely. As I argue, this notion is problematized in Sebbar's work, first because the political circumstances in Algeria prevented any sort of physical homecoming, but also because the childhood home is artificially cut off from any sort of outside influence. Rather than producing a stable identity this provokes a continuous and unrealized attempt to access the language and culture that has been denied. Özdamar, more obviously than Sebbar, imagines home as something that must be created and cultivated. The home as it appears in *Grandfather Tongue* is the one that is created by a marital union, not a childhood dwelling place. The narrator of the short story, like Sebbar's protagonists, must foster a sense of homeliness that is ultimately independent of physical space or familial connection.

In this paper, I first give a critical overview of the concept of housing and dwelling, beginning with Heidegger's 1954 essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." I show how the discourse around housing and homeliness has evolved to incorporate a conception of home that Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling term a "spatial imaginary." For a discussion of language and belonging, I turn to Derrida's *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* and examine how he problematizes the notion of possessing, or belonging to, a language, and its relationship to citizenship. Heidegger's work emphasizes and privileges the space-making qualities of building over the activities related to dwelling. I examine how language is equally responsible for creating and delineating space, a premise that becomes clear in Sebbar's and Özdamar's explorations of the multilingual colonial and

immigrant experience. Derrida is interested in the possession of language and the possibility of being-at-home within language while the language itself remains foreign. Language is the means through which one experiences the world, and when being-at-home within one's own language is prohibited or unattainable, this produces a destabilized and irresolvable relationship to origin and identity. For this project, I am interested in how the feelings associated with homeliness or unhomeliness relate to physical spaces, and how language is connected to the spatial and non-spatial conceptions of home. Using these theorists and the work of Sebbar and Özdamar, I demonstrate the home-like qualities of language and demonstrate how it functions in a post-colonial, post-migrant condition.

CHAPTER II

DWELLING, HOME AND LANGUAGE

In 1954 Martin Heidegger posed two questions that have since directed much of the theorization of housing and space: “What is it to dwell? How does building belong to dwelling?” (Heidegger 145). In his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger discusses many of the facets of how we think about and conceptualize greater theoretical problems of dwelling and how it relates to his greater ontological question of defining that it means to be human. For Heidegger, building and dwelling are interconnected as two sides of the same activity, and it is through building and dwelling that humans relate to and are conscious of space. However, the activities of building and dwelling are set in opposition to each other in the essay. Building is defined as the activity of creating spaces, or setting them aside as locations:

Building, by virtue of constructing locations, is a founding and joining of spaces. Because building produces locations, the joining of the spaces of these locations necessarily brings with it space, as *spatium* and as *extensio*, into the thingly structure of buildings (158).

Heidegger uses the example of a bridge, which functions both to gather space (by uniting two sides of a body of water) and to produce a location, in the physical location of the bridge itself, a location that did not exist before its construction. Building then for Heidegger is an activity of creation and definition of space, a claim from which later theorists will diverge.

Dwelling, though it functions as a defining quality of being human, is a quieter activity. Dwelling is defined as a “taking shelter” (145), or “remaining” (160), and Heidegger argues that “dwelling... is *the basic character* of Being in keeping with which mortals exist” (160). Being is, for Heidegger, the quality of remaining, or dwelling, in a designated location. He rightly notes that “not every building is a dwelling...[Some] buildings house man. He inhabits them and yet does not dwell in them, when to dwell means merely that we take shelter in them” (145). Heidegger is certainly aware that building is not enough to define a location as a dwelling place, though he avoids mention of “home,” the category I turn to shortly. His use of the word shelter makes this eminently clear: as I will discuss further on, housing is not always associated with shelter or safety. However, space, as a designated location, only comes into being through the activity of building. While building, as Heidegger has already argued through the example of the bridge, does not depend on dwelling, dwelling depends on building.

It is precisely this privileging of building over dwelling that incites Luce Irigaray’s feminist critique of Heidegger’s essay. Although she only rarely references Heidegger directly, her work *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* is in many ways a direct critique of the argument posed by Heidegger in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” While Heidegger is concerned primarily with the spatial considerations of building, Irigaray brings a critique of the implications of space formation and, though she does not discuss place in terms of *home*, (*chez-soi*) she is much more aware of having or not having a place for oneself. According to Irigaray, the theories of housing as established by Heidegger deny woman a place for herself. “Le maternel-féminin demeure le *lieu séparé de « son » lieu*, privé de « son » lieu. Elle est ou devient sans cesse le lieu pour

l'autre qui ne peut s'en séparer. Menaçante donc, sans le savoir ni le vouloir, de ce dont elle manque : un lieu « propre »” (Irigaray 1984 18).⁵ Woman becomes the location of man's dwelling, as he builds in order to return to the womb. She is then the dwelling place for man, or in Irigaray's terms, the “envelope,” but is herself left homeless. While woman is responsible for cultivating and maintaining the physical space of home, the metaphysical homeliness, defined by the original ejection from the mother's body, can never be regained, or even approached through the masculine activity of building. I find that Irigaray's conception of woman's homelessness is limiting in that it fails to account for female agency in the project of space creation, and furthermore essentializes both housing and dwelling as male activities. I will return to this argument presently in my discussion of the literary works of Sebbar and Özdamar, but for the moment Irigaray is useful principally as an engagement with the notions of housing and dwelling as defined by Heidegger.

Iris Marion Young picks up Irigaray's critique of Heidegger in her essay “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme.” Young agrees with feminist critiques such as Irigaray's that contend that the home, while providing a nurturing space for men and children, deprives women of the same subject position. However, while these critiques have often advocated for the destruction of the very notion of home, Young departs from this suggestion. She argues, “Despite the oppressions and privileges the idea historically carries, the idea of home also carries critical liberating potential because it expresses uniquely human values” (Young 134). Young sites these values in the “meaning-making

⁵ “The maternal-feminine remains the *place separated from “its” own place*”, deprived of “its” place. She is or ceaselessly becomes the place of the other who cannot separate himself from it.” (Irigaray 1993 10.)

activity” of domestic work. This activity, which Young identifies as preservation, is largely ignored in Heidegger’s text in spite of his claim, early in the essay, that “the fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving” (136). Young criticizes Heidegger for ignoring the activity of preservation in favor of a focus on “the heroic moment” of building (136). Preservation, as Young contends, is a largely female activity, and encompasses domestic work.

According to Young, “homemaking consists in the activities of endowing things with living meaning, arranging them in space in order to facilitate the life activities of those to whom they belong, and preserving them, along with their meaning” (152-153). This “meaning-making” stands in contrast to Heidegger’s “location-making” as an equally important and theoretically relevant approach to how the home functions in subject-formation. Young is careful to point out that she does not by any means understand the home or meaning-preservation as fixed, but as an ongoing process of creation and preservation.

There are no fixed identities, events, interactions, and the material changes of age and environment make lives fluid and shifting...Homemaking consists in preserving the things and their meaning as anchor to shifting personal and group identity. But the narratives of the history of what brought us here are not fixed, and part of the creative and moral task of preservation is to reconstruct the connection of the past to the present in light of new events, relationships, and political understandings (152-154).

Young notes the importance of material objects in constructing identity, and the particular meaning of objects as a way to tie together distant temporalities. She uses the examples of the objects one amasses over a lifetime, and how their presence in the home provides a site of commemoration of earlier temporalities. Collection of objects eventually transcends generations and involves “teaching children the meanings of things

among which one dwells” (153). Though the objects are material, their meaning is preserved first through the memory of the collector, and later through discourse around them. These histories and remembrances are preserved and cultivated through homemaking, and is thus traditionally a female task. Therefore, though the male activity of building functions to delineate space, the female activity of preservation acts to define the space as a source of meaning and identity.

In Young’s work, there is a shift from the discussion of the house and physical space to an awareness of the home which functions differently in theoretical discourse. Young has already introduced the notion of the home as a site for “meaning-making” and identity formation. In their geographical exploration of home, entitled simply *Home*, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling define it as:

A spatial imaginary: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places...Put most simply, home is: a place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and the relations between the two (Blunt and Dowling 3-4).

Home is clearly far more than the sum of the physical space it encompasses, and is intimately connected to a very specific cultural ideal. As Blunt and Dowling note, “Public discourse ... presents a dominant or ideal version of house-as-home, which typically portrays belonging and intimacy amongst members of a heterosexual nuclear family, living in a detached, owner-occupied dwelling, in a suburban location” (101). This concept of home is of course most notable in its exclusionary framework: it fails to account for urban dwelling or familial situations other than that of the normative nuclear family. It also suggests that spaces that fail to reach this ideal are lacking or, worse, are not legitimate homes at all.

In the ideal described above, another qualifying feature of the home is permanence: it is a space to which its inhabitants, previous or current, may return, and represents a stabilizer of identity and point of origin. This is precisely the kind of understanding Iris Marion Young criticizes above, but I am interested in it for the assumptions it makes about homeliness or lack thereof. Permanence as a necessity of home precludes any experience of home in migrant or transnational communities, such as the circumstances Sebbar and Özdamar discuss in their work. Blunt and Dowling observe that “transnational homes are shaped by ideas and experiences of location and dislocation, place and displacement, as people migrate for a variety of reasons and feel both at home and not at home in a wide range of circumstances” (203). Thus the realities of a transnational or migratory home raises the need for an alternate theoretical framework than that which Heidegger, and later and to a lesser degree, Irigaray, propose. Home can no longer be understood only through its assumed physical permanence, if this was indeed ever a central feature of homeliness. Although permanence is no doubt an element of the nostalgic renderings of home, the reality in both the transnational example as well as, increasingly, *non*-transnational homes, is one of impermanence and shifting from one space to another.

In the work of Sebbar and Özdamar, homeliness is not only a state of impermanence, but it is experienced outside of the traditional considerations of housing. Language is a central feature of what constitutes homeliness, acting both to define the space designated as home and also to create homeliness within spaces that are not conventionally homelike. Language and belonging has been critically addressed by Jacques Derrida, who turned to these issues towards the end of his career. Derrida was

born in Algeria to a Jewish family in 1930, when Algeria was, at least nominally, a French *Département*. Algerian Jews had been granted French citizenship in 1870 and as such enjoyed the privileges therein. Then, as Derrida explains in his essay *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse d'origine*, in 1940 this citizenship was taken away. *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* is a rumination on language and belonging, and how both relate to identity, a concept Derrida admittedly finds objectionable and problematic. He asks if it is ever possible to allege to lay claim to a language, and observes the stakes in assertions of having or not having a language. In doing so, Derrida questions the very basis of language, and how it becomes understood in terms of origin, belonging and identity.

In the opening paragraph of *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* Derrida posits his claim “Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne” (Derrida 1996 13).⁶ Derrida acknowledges the peculiarity of this statement: how can he say, not only in French but in good French, that the language he is speaking is not his. In this simple statement Derrida evokes the problematic of the postcolonial subject who, no matter how long or how well she speaks, cannot lay claim to the normative tongue. Derrida continues, “Je suis monolingue. Mon monolinguisme demeure, et je l’appelle ma demeure, et je le ressens comme tel, j’y reste et je l’habite” (13).⁷ He has here shifted from ownership to dwelling. Thus while he cannot possess French, he can and does dwell in it and it dwells in him. Possession and dwelling are set in opposition to each other. One can dwell without

⁶ “I have only one language; it is not mine” (Derrida 1998 1).

⁷ “I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me” (Derrida 1998 1).

possessing, but it is a precarious way of dwelling, not unlike Derrida's lost and regained French citizenship. He explains:

Je ne doute pas non plus que de telles « exclusions » viennent laisser leur marque sur cette appartenance ou non-appartenance de la langue, sur cette affiliation à la langue, sur cette assignation à ce qu'on appelle tranquillement une langue. Mais qui la possède, au juste ? Et qui possède-t-elle ? ...Quoi de cet être-chez-soi dans la langue vers lequel nous ne cesserons de faire retour ? (36).⁸

This series of rhetorical questions further challenges the previously seemingly straightforward question of having or not having a language to call one's own.

Language, after all, is not merely a system of communication, but is also tied to a people who share a common linguistic and cultural heritage, and may be said to "belong" to a particular nation-state. No state is more invested in its language than France, with its Académie Française, so here the link is especially clear. As a citizen his French language was legitimate, but when citizenship is revoked so too is his linguistic *chez-soi*, and casts doubts on whether he ever had any legitimate claim to French. In spite of speaking, reading, writing French (perfect, *French* French, as he assures us), he can never achieve homeliness within his only language. Just as exile takes away the home tied to a particular place, linguistic homeliness may also be revoked, further demonstrating the precarious nature of home.

When discussing home, it is difficult to see beyond a state of permanence: home is a place, to which we may return, in order to experience a never-ending homeliness.

⁸I do not doubt either that such 'exclusions' [of citizenship] come to leave their mark upon this belonging or non-belonging of language, this affiliation to language, this assignation to what is peacefully called a language. But who exactly possesses it? And whom does it possess? ... What of this being-at-home [*être-chez soi*] in language toward which we never cease returning?" (Derrida 1998 17).

Heidegger's description of building emphasizes this: in his language about the project of creating locations, locations have a permanent quality, and cannot be undone. The assumed permanence of home is also perhaps why it is often over-simplified and coupled with origin. Language, at least in the last half-century of theoretical work, has come to be understood as an unstable, constantly shifting category, but language too is often normatively associated with a stable origin: the notion of a "native" or "mother" tongue cements this. When language is brought into a discussion of home, both concepts are destabilized. Language is understood in terms of the processes of space creation, for language is responsible for many of the affective qualities associated with home. If language shapes homeliness, this also means that homeliness depends on a home within language, and when this being-at-home is denied a different sort of home must be constructed through language. Home must be created and cultivated, for it can easily be lost. The work of Leïla Sebbar and Emine Sevgi Özdamar directly engages with home, language, and home within language, although each approaches these subjects in different ways, Sebbar through memory, particularly of childhood, and Özdamar through her multinational adult protagonist. Each demonstrates that home is a continuous project to be realized, not a stable space to find or return to.

CHAPTER III

JE NE PARLE PAS L'ARABE: LEÏLA SEBBAR'S *RÉCITS*

It is often methodologically suspect to use a writer's personal history to discuss her literary work, but Leïla Sebbar presents an exception. She has written extensively about her childhood in Algeria, in a series of *récits*⁹ she has published throughout her career. The *récits* are book-length; her ninth, *L'arabe comme un chant secret*, was published in 2007. These narratives often revisit the same stories: hearing her father speak Arabic to the household staff, the violence experienced by Sebbar and her sister when they ventured outside the family home and encountered a language they did not speak, and how Sebbar's French mother came to be married to an Algerian Arab¹⁰. Space does not permit me to explore all of these narratives in more than a perfunctory manner, but it is important to observe how Sebbar seems almost compulsively compelled

⁹ I will use Sebbar's word for these narratives, *récit*, or tale, rather than the English equivalent of memoir or autobiography. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as "*Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité*" (Lejeune 14) [italics his]. ("*Retrospective tale in prose that a real person tells of his own existence, while placing the emphasis on his individual life, and in particular on the history of his personality.*" (Translation mine.) By this account, Sebbar's work is indeed autobiographical, and she claims it as such. However, her work does not follow a linear narrative such as a traditional autobiography might, and she only rarely provides temporal indicators, other than delineating between her life in Algeria and her life in France. Therefore, her terminology of *récit* remains the most apt in discussing this work.

¹⁰ Although Sebbar rarely engages directly with the issue of race, she does identify her father as Arab, a racial designation. She also leaves out the Muslim question: it is taken for granted that her father is secular. There is certainly more to be said about race and religion in Sebbar's work, but I do not attempt to address them here.

to tell and re-tell her personal history. Sebbar is admittedly a prolific writer, having published over a dozen novels and countless short stories and articles, but something in her past keeps driving her to tell her own story, again and again. That something, in my view, is language. It seems that through writing about Arabic, even though she still, many years after leaving Algeria, doesn't speak it, Sebbar begins to approach the homeliness within language that eludes her.

In a short essay "Le silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe," Sebbar presents many of the memories she explores in depth in her various *récits*. Sebbar's essay, originally presented at a conference in the United States, tells how one's "own" language, a language of history and heritage, can become foreign. As a child of an Algerian father and French mother, she grew up in a country where Arabic was the native language of the populace but it was kept from her. She writes "la maison de ma mère...devient une *Petite France* édifée au nom de la République française, à l'intérieur des murs et de la clôture qui cernent l'école et la séparent des pauvres maisons arabes" (Sebbar 2003 120).¹¹ The family home is a physical extension of the French presence in Algeria. It belongs not to Sebbar's mother and father, but quite literally to the state, attached as it is to the state-operated "École de garçons indigènes." The house, ruled by Sebbar's French mother, becomes a fortification against the "foreign" influences of Arabic and Arabs, the irony being of course that in Algeria it is French that is foreign, not Arabic. Moreover, within this most French of dwellings, the presence of the Arab father and half-Arab daughters casts doubt on the success of the mother's project to expunge the so-called

¹¹ "My mothers house...becomes a Little France, erected in the name of the French Republic, within the walls and enclosure that encircle the school and separate it from the poor Arab houses" (Sebbar 2003 103).

“foreign” influences. Still, Sebbar and her sisters are kept separate not only from the school of their father, but from his language and community.

The family home is not just *Petite France*, but more French than France, where perfect spoken French is required and the only reading materials available are classical French texts. The French mother, having married a non-European man and borne his children, attempts to preserve her own national identity through the enforcement of perfect French and the rejection of Arabic. This activity is accomplished through the kind of space-preservation that Iris Marion Young examines in her work. Young writes, “Preservation entails remembrance...[which] faces the open negativity of the future by knitting a steady confidence in who one is from the pains and joys of the past retained in the things among which one dwells... Remembrance is the affirmation of what brought us here” (Young 154). In this passage, Young is concerned with the material objects that prompt remembrance, but it seems that her conception of preservation holds even when material objects are not involved, as in Sebbar’s description of her family home.

Sebbar’s mother accomplishes the task of preservation through a kind of linguistic hailing,¹² identifying her home, and the children who come from it, “what brought us here,” as exclusively French.¹³ Sebbar’s experience of French and Arabic was unusual for an Algerian woman in the mid-20th Century. As Mildred Mortimer describes in her article “Language and Space in the Fiction of Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar,” in the

¹² I am using Louis Althusser’s terminology of “hailing,” by which the individual is interpellated as a concrete subject. Althusser argues that “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals” through the process of hailing which, in his example, is as simple as calling out to an individual on the street anonymously (“Hey, you there!”) and the individual then turns around (Althusser 1357).

¹³ Interestingly, both Sebbar’s surname and her given name are undeniably Arabic: Leïla means “night.”

male-dominated French colonial system, French was the language of the public space, a space to which the largely uneducated female population had little access.

The language of the colonizer, the official public written language, became an adopted paternal language because Algeria was administered by a French colonial bureaucracy supported by an indigenous male labor force. In contrast, the unofficial private oral languages, Arab and Berber dialects, remained maternal languages; Algerian women rarely had access to French schools and were excluded from most if not all forms of public activity...Only in the case of mixed marriages, like Sebbar's family, would the maternal language be French (Mortimer 302).

Sebbar's family would therefore have stood apart from most of the Algerian population, not just due to their mixed racial and national heritage and the class distinction, but due to the clear linguistic divisions between Sebbar and her sisters and their peers in the community.

This same linguistic difference affects the relationship Sebbar and her sisters have with their own extended family. In an especially telling passage of *L'arabe comme un chant secret*, Sebbar describes the home of her father's mother.

La grand-mère est vivante, je la vois en visite, elle me regarde de ses yeux, petits et noirs, comme elle regarde ma mère, la Française. Elle parle en arabe avec son fils, le mari de la Française. Je ne sais pas ce qu'elle lui dit. Je ne saurai jamais ce qu'elle pense, lorsqu'elle me regarde ainsi je sens les yeux de l'inquisition (Sebbar 2007 23).¹⁴

It is clear in this passage the extent to which this particular domestic space is defined by and experienced through language. If home is, according to Descombes, where one understands and is understood, this mostly French child is clearly not home. Here Sebbar

¹⁴ "The grandmother is living, I see her when we visit, she looks at me with her eyes, small and black, like she looks at my mother, the Frenchwoman. She speaks in Arabic with her son, the husband of the Frenchwoman. I don't know what she tells him. I will never know what she thinks, while she looks at me like that I sense the inquisitive eyes." (Translation mine.)

and her family are identified by their Frenchness rather than their place within the family; their mother is merely The French Woman, not daughter-in-law, and both father and children are named in relation to her. It is clear that Sebbar and her family, even her father, are *étrangers*, a word that contains the meanings of both strangers and foreigners in French. The language of this space however, is the universal language of domesticity: “à nous les enfants, les sœurs parlent la langue nourricière des femmes, universelle. Les mots ne sont pas les mots d’une langue à comprendre, les mots sont juste des sons qui accompagnent les gestes domestiques” (24).¹⁵ While Sebbar’s mother remains a foreigner to this space, and her children do too, the children are privy to the language that transcends linguistic difference, that of women fussing over children. Still, there is a sense that the children may not always have access to this space, that as they become older they will be defined further in relationship to “La Française,” and the linguistic difference will no longer be permeable.

The Arabic spoken in the paternal home is very different from the Arabic to which Sebbar and her sisters are exposed when they venture outside the home. Arabic here is not the language of their paternal relatives’ domesticity, but rather the language of the perilous outside, of insult and sexual violence. In her article “Le silence de la langue de mon père, l’arabe,” Sebbar describes “des insultes, il n’y a pas de doute, où se mêlent des mots que je comprends...et le mot répété cent fois, agressif, sexuel...*Nique...Nique*”

¹⁵ “To us children, the sisters speak the universal nourishing language of women. The words are not in a language to understand, the words are merely sounds that accompany the domestic gestures.” (Translation mine.)

(Sebbar 2001 122).¹⁶ By withholding access to their father's tongue and father's heritage, the French mother leaves her daughters defenseless outside the linguistic fortress of the family home. It is language, and exclusion from it, that produces privilege and lack thereof in this context, though this is precisely where the French mother has tried to privilege her daughters: French is the language of her homeland, but also of the colonial authority and source of power, having been forced on the indigenous population of Algeria¹⁷. In another of her *récits*, "Si je parle la langue de ma mère," Sebbar considers the violence done to Arabic by French, which according to Carine Bourget "echoes the colonial violence done to Algerians by imposing the French language, and creates a parallel between [Sebbar] and her father" (Bourget 124). Just as, in the colonial context, French *should* be the language that exerts violence, it should also be the language of privilege, but in "Le silence de la langue de mon père, l'arabe," Sebbar shows that in her case the opposite could also be true. The persistent silence of her father, both in Arabic and French, fails to protect her from the feeling of foreignness within her own country.

Contradictorily, ignorance of language also forms a sort of protective barrier between Sebbar and her sisters and their tormentors. It is true that they are unable to respond to the taunts in any meaningful way, but at the same time they remain ignorant of the more nefarious offensives hurled at them. The word *nique*, a profanity whose roots are Arabic but which jumped the Mediterranean at some point during the French

¹⁶ "Insults, I have no doubt, where words that I cannot understand are mixed in with words I do understand...and the word repeated a hundred times, aggressive, sexual...Nique...Nique...Fuck...Fuck." (Sebbar 2001 106.)

¹⁷ Although French was the official language of the colonial rule of Algeria, since Algeria's independence in 1963 French has had no official status, and the only recognized official language of the country is Arabic.

occupation of North Africa, is the one that most sticks in Sebbar's mind. It is certainly possible that the boys yelled much more disturbing insults as well, but Sebbar was protected by her ignorance. It is also possible that her lack of Arabic allowed her to separate the language spoken in the cozy recesses of her father's ancestral home from the shouts on the street, allowing her to maintain her fondness for the language. As Elizabeth M. Knutson notes, Sebbar has never really been interested in learning Arabic, though she has undoubtedly had many opportunities. "[Sebbar] attests to her ineptitude as a student of classical Arabic in secondary school and remarks more than once on her fondness for hearing a foreign language in the background, taking in its sounds and particular rhythms, without knowing what is being said" (Knutson 259). Arabic provides the soundtrack for her memories much as a film score might, but it is "freed of its referential meaning" (259), which allows Sebbar to explore its influence on her own subjectivity without being distracted by its actual meaning. It also allows her to dissociate from the trauma she experienced in Arabic (the bullying boys) from her homely memories of Arabic (her father speaking to the laundry women and the chattering of her aunts).

In Sebbar's *récits*, domestic space is clearly defined through its exclusionary linguistic practices: it is where French, not Arabic, is spoken. If language in Sebbar's *récits* is about access to the discursively defined homely and unhomely spaces, it is through the writing that Sebbar comes to terms with her linguistic and cultural exile. Knutson observes that for Sebbar "exile—the cultural in-between—is both origin and destination, an ongoing, unending 'natural' mode of being" (Knutson 268). It is, ultimately, what allows her to write, and the same issues of cultural estrangement inflect her fictional work. Bourget suggests that "Sebbar's affiliation with Arab women through

her particular attention to them in her creative work becomes the substitute for the broken linguistic and cultural filiation with her Algerian family” (Bourget 132). It is through her writing, both autobiographical *révits* as well as her fictional narratives, that Sebbar seems to find a homeliness within her self-described exile. Sebbar herself concludes her article with the same conclusion.

J'écris. Des livres. J'écris la violence du silence imposé, de l'exil, de la division, j'écris la terre de mon père, colonisée, maltraitée (aujourd'hui encore), déportée sauvagement, je l'écris dans la langue de ma mère. C'est ainsi que je peux vivre, dans la fiction, fille de mon père et de ma mère.

Je trace mes routes algériennes dans la France (Sebbar 2001 123).¹⁸

Sebbar's explanation is in the present tense. She uses the verb “vivre” to describe her living, but she could just as easily have used “habiter,” living in the sense of inhabiting or dwelling, much as Derrida explains his monolingualism: “Je l'habite. Il m'habite” (Derrida 13).¹⁹ For Sebbar, writing about her father in the language of her mother, is how she can safely inhabit her monolingualism. She is able to build a home in writing, but it is a home that must be constantly tended and revisited, or risk being lost.

¹⁸ “I write. Books. I write about the violence of imposed silence, of exile, of division, I write about my father's land, colonized, mistreated (still, today), savagely deported, I write this in my mother's language. It is how I can live, in fiction, as daughter of my father and of my mother. / It is in France that I trace my Algerian routes.” (Sebbar 2001 109).

¹⁹ “I inhabit it. It inhabits me.” (Derrida 1998 1.)

CHAPTER IV

LANGUAGE AND MEMORY: *LA SEINE ÉTAIT ROUGE*

I now turn to *La Seine était rouge*, perhaps Sebbar's best-known novel. The novel addresses many of the same issues Sebbar contends with in her autobiographical work: homeliness defined by language or lack thereof, cultural hybridity and memory. It is the last category, memory, that has driven much of the critical conversation around Sebbar's work²⁰, but I am primarily interested in the novel for how Sebbar defines spaces through language, and how her French-Algerian protagonist, Amel, contends with the fraught relationship between French and Arabic, and France and Algeria. Mildred Mortimer explains that "For Maghrebian women in France... the French language enters the home as both a written and spoken language...*Beur* children of the immigrant population loosen their hold on their mother's language and begin to favor French" (Mortimer 301). This is precisely the reality that Sebbar explores in the novel, as Amel's frustration stems from feeling that she has been kept from knowing about her mother and grandmother's past due to her ignorance of Arabic. Memory and history is certainly involved in this process, as I argue below, but ultimately, as in Sebbar's biographical work, homeliness is something that must be created, and this is done through language.

²⁰ Examples of this approach include Mildred Mortimer's excellent introduction of her English translation of *La Seine était rouge*. Annedith Schneider's article "Rewriting the Algerian War on French Soil: Family Memory, National Memory" and Michel Laronde's article "'Effets d'histoire': Représenter l'Histoire coloniale forclosée" are additional examples of a focus on memory.

The novel was first published in France in 1999, and its timing is relevant for a number of reasons. First, Algeria in the 1990s was mired in a long and bloody civil war that called to mind the violent struggle for Algerian independence in the 1960s, and was therefore left truly inaccessible to the generations of immigrants who had made their lives in France. In a separate but simultaneous historical moment, in 1997 Maurice Papon, the former Prefect of Police of Paris, was brought to trial for involvement in the Jewish deportations during World War II. In addition to his dealings in Vichy France, Papon imposed the curfew on Algerians in 1961 that led to the October massacre of Algerian protestors, the event at the center of Sebbar's novel.

The plot, if I may call it that, follows Amel's attempts to uncover the pasts of her mother and grandmother and their involvements in the protests. The narration seems strikingly cinematic: there are frequent temporal and spatial leaps, alternating between the third-person narrative that follows Amel, and the first-person narratives of her mother and other witnesses to the 1961 massacre. The first-person narratives are captured in a documentary film that Louis, the son of a Frenchwoman involved in the protests, is in the process of making. Amel, a teenager, has known Louis all her life, as his mother established a strong bond with Amel's grandmother when they were in prison following the protests. She leaves home and wanders around Paris with Omer, an Algerian journalist who has gone to France to escape from the violence there, and is the son of another of Amel's grandmother's companions from prison. The three members of this generation, connected through a history of trauma that they did not experience, are all compelled to uncover a past long buried by their own parents.

Part of the reason this past has remained obscured, in Amel's case, is because she does not understand the language in which, she assumes, this past is discussed. The novel begins:

Sa mère ne lui a rien dit ni la mère de sa mère. Elles se voient souvent, la mère et la fille, elles bavardent en français, en arabe, Amel ne comprend pas tout. Elle les entend de sa chambre. Si elle demandait ce qu'elles disent dans l'autre langue, "la langue du pays" dit Lalla, sa grand-mère lui répondrait, comme chaque fois: "Des secrets, ma fille, des secrets, ce que tu ne dois pas savoir, ce qui doit être caché, ce que tu apprendras, un jour, quand il faudra" (Sebbar 199 15).²¹

Language here becomes a generational gap, a chasm between daughter and mother/grandmother. Noria, Amel's mother, and Lalla, the grandmother, chatter in a mixture of French and Arabic, and while Amel understands some of what they say, there are gaps of ignorance when Arabic takes over. She assumes that when the language switches to Arabic her mother and grandmother are deliberately leaving her in the proverbial dark, a suspicion that is confirmed when Lalla tells her that they are sharing secrets, secrets she should not know. Worse, Amel fears that she is being punished for not knowing Arabic. Much as parents spell words to one another to prevent young children from understanding, Amel, now a young woman, is still prevented from accessing the adult conversation, even while she is promised to be let in on the secret in an undefined future. In her analysis of the novel, Dawn Fulton observes that "this perpetually postponed day of revelation thus gnaws at both Amel and the narrative,

²¹ "Her mother said nothing to her, nor did her mother's mother. Mother and daughter see each other often. They chat in French and Arabic. Amel doesn't understand everything they say. She hears them from her room. If she were to ask them what they were saying in the other language, 'the language of the homeland' as Lalla calls it, her grandmother would say as she always does: 'Secrets, my girl, secrets that you shouldn't know, that must be kept hidden. But you'll learn them some day, when you need to'" (Sebbar 2008 1).

framing subsequent accounts of the massacre as responses to and reminders of this familial rift” (Fulton 28). Indeed, though Amel eventually learns about the events her mother and grandmother refuse to discuss, she is never able to access this history directly, instead hearing it through the mediator of Louis’s camera.

In the novel, just as in Sebbar’s own story, the language of the home or “maternal tongue” is different from the language outside the home. Indeed, there is an interesting parallel to a conversation Sebbar recounts in *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*. “Je voudrais savoir...—Qu’est-ce que tu veux savoir encore ?... Pourquoi tu veux savoir tout ça ? À quoi ça sert ?...Il faut oublier...” (Sebbar 2003 12).²² The conversation between father and daughter continues like this, stilted, until the father finally says goodbye. Though between Amel and Sebbar herself the languages of home and outside the home are reversed (French or Arabic as the language of the outside or the language of the home), in both there is the distinction between the linguistic spaces. The difference is, of course, that Amel cannot speak the supposedly “mother tongue,” which in this case is quite literally the language of her mother and grandmother. The gap between generations is widened due to linguistic difference, and in the case of both Amel and Sebbar herself, this break is further enforced by the silence of the preceding generation. In *La Seine était rouge*, Amel tries to transcend the linguistic borders separating her from her mother and grandmother by uncovering the past history of trauma, both the colonial trauma of French rule in Algeria and then the “secrets” the older women have tried to keep hidden about their involvement in protests in France. Although the 1961 protests provide the catalyst for Amel’s investigation, she and the other members of the younger generation also must

²² “I want to know...—What do you still want to know?...Why do you want to know all that? What’s the use? One should forget.” (Translation mine.)

confront the legacies of colonialism as a whole in order to come to terms with being both French and Algerian. It is through this uncovering of a history of trauma that Amel finds a spatial and linguistic home.

At the outset, however, Amel's interactions with her family's domestic space and linguistic borders are defined by a sense of unhomeliness, even within the spaces designated as homelike. The spaces and locations of *La Seine était rouge* are notable for their multiplicity. Over the course of the novel, the narrative is transported from the streets of Paris in 1961 to an apartment in Nanterre in the 1990s, to a café in Alexandria. Along the way, there is a prison, a *bidonville*, the metro, a seaside city in Algeria, and countless others. I will not attempt here a catalog of all of the locations Sebbar describes, but several are important in the novel in order to establish a contrast with the dislocation Amel experiences in the home of her mother and grandmother. Over the course of the novel, spaces often considered universally unhomey, such as the prison and a slum, are established as sites of refuge and community, while Amel's family home is a space that is foreign and inaccessible to her.

Bidonvilles, or shantytowns, possess few of the qualities normally associated with home. They are thrown together haphazardly and lack the stability that is one of the central qualities of the traditional family home. There is little distinction between the private and public spaces. Indeed, by Heidegger's definition, shantytowns are non-locations: they are not "set aside" or built in any defined way, but rather seem to spring up out of nowhere to house a precarious and ever-changing population of unsettled peoples. Yet, as Blunt and Dowling observe, home may be created in the most unhomey of spaces. They note that "houselessness and homelessness are not the same. It is

possible to be homeless even while physically sheltered” (Blunt and Dowling 127).

Conversely, dwelling spaces that are not traditionally homely, including shantytowns, can become the site of all of the sentiment normally associated with home.

This is precisely what happens in the accounts of Amel’s mother, Noria, who as a young child witnessed the events of October 1961. She recalls the *bidonville* where she grew up, an area known as *La Folie*, literally madness. The name itself designates the space as unhomely. Noria, now an adult, also notes that the neighborhood was later razed to make way for apartment buildings. She describes *La Folie* as a disorienting and disorganized space.

Je me rappelle. On habitait au numéro 7... Des rues sans nom, des noms fantaisistes, souvent illisibles, des rues...Si on peut appeler ça des rues...Nous, c’était rue de la Fontaine, parce que le point d’eau n’était pas loin. On devait pas faire des centaines de mètres pour l’eau, comme d’autres qui la rapportaient dans des bidons de lait géants sur des chariots. Tu imagines l’hiver, le gel, la pluie, la boue...Pour nous, c’était pas si affreux...enfin, pour moi. La cité de transit, j’ai pas aimé. Mais notre baraque dans le bidonville, elle me déplaisait pas. Le bidonville il s’appelait : La Folie, je sais pas pourquoi, c’était le nom du quartier de Nanterre, un terrain vague, sûrement, avant les baraquements. C’est mon village natal (Sebbar 199 25).²³

This passage demonstrates the extent to which Noria’s childhood home stands in contrast to her daughter Amel’s. The *bidonville* is described as one might expect, with endless “streets” twisting and merging into others, no clear structure, and crushing hardship.

²³ “I remember that we lived at number 7...Streets without names, other streets with weird names, street signs that were often illegible...Those streets...if you could even call them streets. Ours was called Rue de la Fontaine, because the fountain wasn’t far. We didn’t have to go several hundred yards for water, like the others who carried their water back in giant milk cans on dollies...It wasn’t too horrible for us, I mean for me. I didn’t like the transit housing project. But our shack in the shantytown didn’t bother me too much. The shantytown was called La Folie. I don’t know why. It was the name of a section of Nanterre, surely a vacant lot before the shacks were built. It’s the town where I was born.” (Sebbar 2008 19).

Still, Noria describes it as her “village natale,” her native village. She knows that to some, the privations were overwhelming, but to her it did not seem a miserable place at all. This space that, by Heidegger’s definition, is not a location at all, and still less a house or appropriate place for dwelling, is for her comfortable and homelike. It is where she feels she belongs. That she contrasts it with the later residence in a housing project is further evidence that the *bidonville*, lacking as it is in material comfort, demonstrates the extent to which homeliness is independent of the material attributes of a particular space.

The community operates much as it might in a rural village, perhaps because most of its inhabitants hail from such places in Algeria. Noria describes how her mother became the neighborhood dressmaker, later hiding political pamphlets in the folds of the dresses she makes. The shantytown is home to a close-knit community where families help one another out. It is where Noria feels she belongs. Although the language spoken in *La Folie* is not mentioned in her descriptions, we can assume, based on Noria’s bilingualism, that Arabic is the language of her house at the very least, and likely the community as a whole. Thus the sense of belonging is magnified, for the inhabitants have a shared cultural background and a common language. Noria herself has taken ownership of it: when telling a story she refers to “our fountain.” “‘Quand j’ai vu des fontaines à Paris...j’ai su que notre fontaine...’ Sa mère s’interrompt et rit, elle répète ‘notre fontaine...je continue à l’appeler la fontaine’. Son visage devient grave” (33).²⁴ In fact, it is not the space of the shantytown that is responsible for the traumatic events of Noria’s childhood, but rather when the sanctuary is pierced by violence from the outside.

²⁴ “‘When I saw water fountains in Paris...I knew that our fountain...’ The mother stopped speaking and laughed; she repeats “our fountain...I still call it our fountain.” Her face grows grave” (Sebbar 2008 28).

First her uncle, a member of the MNA, is killed near the fountain by the FLN, and then many other members of her community are injured or killed by the police in the events of October 1961. The shantytown is positioned as a refuge of community, at least in the eyes of a small child, not the source of violence imagined by the Paris police.

Another space in the novel that is, nearly by definition, *not* home becomes homelike in its associations with community and solidarity: the women's prison, where Lalla, Mina and Flora form bonds strong enough to pass down to the next generation. In the very beginning of *La Seine était rouge* Amel visits Flora's apartment. The rug on her floor, the sort of material object that Iris Marion Young identifies as a home-making construction, was woven for her by an Algerian woman in the prison. Mina, Flora's friend from her prison days and the mother of Omer, recounts her experience to Amel.

On a parlé, le jour, la nuit, chacune dans sa langue et la langue commune, le français... Tu vas dire que j'ai la nostalgie de la prison...De ces jours, de ces semaines passés ensemble en cellule, oui. Une complicité, une amitié, des découvertes malgré les disputes...Les interrogatoires, les menaces... les vexations, les humiliations, je ne les ai pas oubliés, mais jamais je n'ai retrouvé cette solidarité profonde, réelle, sincère (15).²⁵

Like Noria, who acknowledges the unavoidable discomfort of life in the shantytown, Mina does not seek to gloss over the "menaces" of her time in the prison. Still, she remembers that the relationships that soon developed between the women produced a sense of solidarity that she has not experienced ever since. Her nostalgia, which she admits that she maintains, is for this site where women of different classes, ethnicities,

²⁵ "We would talk, during the day, at night, each one in her native tongue and in the common language, French.... You're going to say I'm nostalgic for prison...for those days, those weeks we spent together in jail cells; yes I am. There was complicity, friendship, there were discoveries in spite of our disputes...Interrogations, threats...persecutions, humiliations, I haven't forgotten them, but I never again found that profound, true, sincere solidarity" (Sebbar 2008 9).

languages and nationalities came together to form a solidarity that could transcend the discomfort and humiliation they experienced. Like in the shantytown, the homeliness of the prison is reached through the sense of community and mutual caring. The French language is the means by which the community is constructed and through which communication between the women is established. Here, again, there is an opposition between Amel's home, where linguistic difference is not overcome, and in the prison, where a common goal allowed the women to unite in solidarity in spite of the marked difference between them.

The novel reaches its resolution, if one may call it that, in Egypt. Egypt, even before Algeria, was the location of France's first excursions and attempted conquering missions in North Africa, beginning with Napoleon's campaigns. Louis's connection to Egypt is through his father, who once worked with Egyptian workers and learned some Arabic. He daydreams of taking a trip there with Amel but eventually goes on his own. Egypt in the novel represents a kind of stand-in point of origin for Amel, Omer and Louis. Fulton argues that this movement to Egypt situates the identities of these three characters outside metropolitan France.

The novel's trajectory from Nanterre to central Paris to Orly to Alexandria marks a recapitulation and a continuation of the October 1961 demonstrations, embedding the traces of French national identity in modern Egypt just as Amel's mother found her origins in the Creolised metropolitan landscape (Fulton 37).

The sons and daughter/granddaughter of the women involved in the 1961 protests must first, over the course of the novel, retrace their parents' steps around Paris, but finally widen their movement to include the broader history of colonial trauma. Algeria, the proverbial homeland for Amel and Omer, is inaccessible, mired in a civil war. Moreover,

even if Amel could go to Algeria, she would be a foreigner there, speaking no Arabic. Therefore they go back still farther into France's colonial past. Sebbar concludes her essay "Je trace mes routes algériennes dans la France." Amel, it seems, must trace her Frenchness outside of the metropole.

La Seine était rouge, like Sebbar's autobiographical work, situates homeliness and belonging inside of language. However, in the novel language is about not only access to the family home, but also to a buried history. Amel never hears her mother's and grandmother's stories directly, but rather listens to her mother through the detached medium of Louis's film. She then bypasses personal memory by retracing herself the geographies of the events of 1961. At the end of the novel Amel is not home in the sense that she is settled, or has closed the narrative, but she seems to approach an alternate homeliness, much as Sebbar does through her autobiographical writing. Amel's home is created through the uncovering and the retelling of the stories she has been denied, and then finally participating in them through theater and film. Omer is writing a play, and Louis a film, and both envision Amel as the heroine. Home is ultimately not given, but rather created, and this is accomplished by coming to terms with both Frenchness and Algerianness, through the process of memory.

CHAPTER 5

LOST LANGUAGE AND CONJUGAL SPACE: EMINE SEVGI ÖZDAMAR'S

MUTTERZUNGE

Thus far, I have been discussing the issue of homeliness in language in a context defined by lack of language. I now turn to the work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who writes about what it is to lose a “home” language. Özdamar has a very different relationship to a native or mother tongue than Sebbar and Derrida, in that she has an obvious native tongue, Turkish, which she speaks, though as I discuss she has become alienated from it due to her long stay in Germany. She also, however, has a language from which she has been exiled: Arabic, which was at least nominally abolished from the Turkish language during Atatürk’s reforms in the 1920s. The first two sections of her work *Mutterzunge*, published in short story form though it was originally intended as a theatrical piece, trace the narrator’s efforts to return to a sense of home within her mother tongue, Turkish. This return is accomplished through the task of word collection in three languages: Arabic, the *großvaterzunge* or grandfather tongue, Turkish, the mother tongue, and German, the language of her current dwelling.

Born in Turkey, Özdamar immigrated to Germany on the guest worker program. Much of her personal history from her early time in Germany, first speaking no German at all and then returning after having learned German in Switzerland, is recounted in her

novel²⁶ *The Bridge of the Golden Horn*, published in Germany as *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* in 1998 and translated into English soon after. The narrator first finds Germany a forbidding place. She is constantly disoriented, never quite knowing what to say or do, and what behavior is considered inappropriate. She lives in a dormitory with dozens of other young, female Turkish guest workers, and they are mostly isolated from the Berlin outside the gates of the dormitory and factory. The narrator learns German phrases from the newspapers and practices them to herself, without understanding: “THE GLOVES ARE OFF/LOOKING COSTS MORE/SOVIETS ARE ONLY ONLOOKERS” (Özdamar 2007 25). She returns to Turkey via Switzerland where she studies German, and upon her return has a completely different experience. First, she becomes an interpreter, responsible for mediating between the Turkish workers and their German bosses. Then she becomes involved in the student movement, starts spending time with men, and loses her “diamond” (virginity), becomes pregnant and, after returning again to Turkey, secures an illicit abortion. She has become “westernized” in every sense, but still lives uneasily between East and West, quite literally in Istanbul, the city divided between Europe and Asia.

Mutterzunge, originally imagined as a play in three parts, was published four years before *The Bridge of the Golden Horn* but deals with a period much later in Özdamar’s life, when she had been living in Berlin for quite some time, studying Brecht. At this time Berlin, like Istanbul, was a city divided between East and West, but the narrator passes unhindered from one side to another. In the brief title section the narrator laments, “If only I knew when I lost my mother tongue” (Özdamar 1994 9). The language

²⁶ Although Özdamar’s work closely follows her own biography, it has been freed from the constraints of nonfictional work and has been published as fiction.

she has lost is Turkish, having spoken German in all facets of her life for so long that her “mother tongue” has been effaced. She remembers conversations in Turkish as if they had happened in German. This is an extraordinarily disorienting experience, and the narrator searches for a way to recover her mother tongue.

I am going to learn Arabic, which was once our system of writing. After our war of liberation, 1927, Atatürk outlawed the Arabic script and brought in the Latin letters. My grandfather only knew Arabic script, I only know the Latin alphabet, which means that if my grandfather and I had been unable to speak and could only tell each other things in writing, we'd have been unable to tell each other stories. Perhaps only by going back to Grandfather I will be able to find my way back to my mother, back to my mother tongue (15).

Much as Amel must contend with the relationship between France and Algeria through the original French colonial encounter in Egypt, Özdamar's narrator seeks to return to Turkish through Arabic, perceived as the authentically Eastern language. Her own Easternness seems to have been corrupted by German, so in order to regain her mother tongue, Turkish, which lies like Turkey in between East and West, the narrator must go to a linguistically defined East, to Arabic. Home here, much as it is in Sebbar's work, is associated with origins, and the narrator of *Mutterzunge* attempts to establish this linguistic home by going back through history to the Turkish unaffected by its attempts to become western and secular.

After all, as Edward Said succinctly states in his article *Living in Arabic* “Arabic is Islam and Islam Arabic at some very profound level” (Said 2). Atatürk's reforms were not just an attempt to purify Turkish but also an effort to expunge the Islamic influence from the Turkish language and culture, bringing it closer in line with its European neighbors. “I screamed out poems on the anniversaries of Atatürk's death and wept, but he should not have forbidden the Arabic writing. This ban, it's as though half of my head

had been cut off” (Özdamar 1994 33). As Özdamar’s narrator finds, this effort was only partially successful, and many traces of Arabic remain. In modern Turkish Arabic is a sort of ghost language, present but denied and hidden. The narrator compulsively compiles lists of words that are the same in Turkish and Arabic, searching for the traces of the lost language. In order to immerse herself in Arabic and return to Turkish, the narrator must also return to Islam.

Großvaterzunge, the second section of *Mutterzunge*, opens with the narrator going to see Ibni Abdullah, a teacher of Arabic. They first speak in German: “It is rude to speak to an Eastern woman in German but for the moment we, of course, only have that language” (17). The narrator learns Arabic from a teacher named Ibni Abdullah and slowly begins to inhabit the language. At first she is able to come and go as she pleases, but as she delves deeper into the language and, concurrently, falls in love with Ibni Abdullah, she not only connects to the Arabic language itself but also to forbidden practices of the Islamic religious tradition. This is most manifest in her sequestering in Ibni Abdullah’s study, after he returns from “Arabia” and they consummate their relationship.

I could no longer leave the study. Ibni Abdullah always left in the evenings after his writing classes and I would pull the curtain to one side, sit in this mosque with the texts laid out on the carpet, I’d lay myself down beside them, while the texts spoke to each other without pause in their different voices, woke the sleeping animals in my body... “It is nice and quiet here, isn’t it?” asked Ibni Abdullah... Curtain closes. I press the tea-glass to my heart, so that my heart goes back into its place. I’m like a newborn wet bird that must show a great deal of patience... I am a bird. Flown from my country, I was on the highways on the edge of the XY-unsolved-cities. Curtain goes up (31).

This passage clearly harkens to *purdah*, a practice of separating women from men, interpreted in the most strict practice as the necessity for women to stay secluded in the

family home, prevented from having contact with any man outside of the family. In her book *A Glimpse Through Purdah*, Sitara Khan explains, “*Purdah* is a Farsi word meaning curtain. The curtain can be literal or metaphorical. It can be the division between the two worlds of men and women” (Khan 27). This cultural practice began in Persia in the tenth century and spread to the far reaches of the Arab and Islamic world. It was never widely practiced in Turkey, however. It is interesting to consider that Özdamar’s narrator seems to assume that *purdah* is expected of her; this is her interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim woman. She is kept in the study, though it is unclear whether or not she has chosen to stay or if Ibni Abdullah somehow forces her. Even the agent of the opening and closing of the curtain is kept ambiguous: “curtain closes” and “curtain goes up,” though it is established that Ibni Abdullah put up the curtain in the first place.

Purdah, the most extreme form of domestic segregation, when chosen actively presents a theoretical problem, and would seem to contradict or even disprove many of the more challenging theories of Luce Irigaray. The primary weakness of Irigaray’s argument is in her failure to account for female agency. (I would argue that this is also a failure in western feminist critiques of Islam.²⁷) Irigaray describes woman as the “envelope” or “place” [*lieu*] for man’s dwelling. Young observes that in Irigaray’s work “women serve as raw materials, caretakers, and goods themselves to be traded. Her role

²⁷ Sabah Mahmood, who spent several years studying women’s involvement in the Mosque Movement in Egypt, has a fascinating discussion of female agency in Islam, and in particular the virtue of modesty, in her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. The women Mahmood interviews who practice what they consider modesty do not see it as a symbol of male oppression of women’s bodies. Rather, it is a virtue to be cultivated and must be practiced until it becomes natural, and such cultivation may only be achieved through the active, female agent.

is to be the home by being at home...For her, however, the placement is an imprisonment” (Young 140). Furthermore, as I have put forward above, this argument is essentialist, falling into the trap of separating male and female activities. The practice of *pardah*, repressive as it is, has clearly defined gender roles and as such should dovetail with Irigaray’s theoretical framework. However, as Khan points out, while *pardah* “can be an excuse for debarring women from full socio-economic and political life...it can be seen as a ‘safe’ area in which women can relax, be creative and supportive...and organise socio-political revolution.” I do not wish to argue that the mid-century suburban home was not a repressive environment for women (for, although Irigaray is speaking of home in a metaphysical sense, it is no doubt inscribed within this ideal). Still less do I wish to propose that *pardah* is in fact a progressive or feminist practice. I do, however, take issue with Irigaray’s descriptions of woman’s location within the home as inevitably prison-like. The narrator in Özdamar’s work, who remains in a single room for forty days, might be considered to be in the most imprisoning of environments, but it is a set of circumstances she seems to enter into willingly. Even the imagery she uses, that of a bird, is one of freedom.

The narrator is exploring the most repressive of traditional cultural practices associated with Islam, but she does so in an agentive way. Throughout the forty days, her experience of *pardah* is also mediated by language. Ibni Abdullah coaxes her in one direction, responding to her romantic incantations with quotes from the Qur’an about judgment day.

“When that day comes, then shall no soul speak, except with His permission, and some souls shall be miserable and others blessed”...I didn’t learn the text properly, because I kept talking with other words to the Ibni Abdullah who was within me: “Your soul in my soul, none is like

you, I sacrifice myself for the sound of your footsteps...I'm the slave girl of your eyes. Don't break this chain, don't reject me, beloved, I have become the slave of your face, tell me only what I should do now, what I should do." "You are impatient, not concentrating," said Ibni Abdullah. "The text will not forgive you" (Özdamar 1994 37).

This passage marks the forming of a type of domestic space I have not yet addressed here: a home not in the sense of the house of one's parents, but the conjugal home created in the union of a couple. Ibni Abdullah and the narrator are not married of course, but their relationship seems marital in nature, and *purdah*, a practice that typically began after a woman's marriage, emphasizes this further. The narrator uses language of submission, even slavery, to express her devotion to her lover, but it is the slavery of the utterly besotted, not a slavery enforced externally. This is contradicted somewhat by the fact that over the course of the story Ibni Abdullah seems to become more controlling, and near the end locks the narrator in the study, though I wonder if this too is a warped expression of love, as he senses that she is nearing the end of her studies with him. This newly formed, conjugal home is defined spatially with the curtain, and by language, as the location of Arabic and the traditions associated with it.

Throughout the story, the narrator has been collecting Arabic words, comparing them to the Turkish words she knows. "What is *Musalla* in Arabic?" "That is a place for prayer..." "The same for us. What does *Muska* mean?" "A magic spell." "The same for us. What is *Esrar*?" "Secrets." "The same for us" (48). This continues, as she assembles catalog of Arabic words in Turkish. The words themselves are seemingly random in meaning, united only in their Arabic provenance.²⁸ The narrator observes,

²⁸ The words the narrator lists are: mouth, befall, past, bound, fireworks, orphan, curse, worried sick, breakdown, goodwill, cautious, to lie dying, to rise from the dead, sojourn, honorable reception, longing, patience, a place for prayer, a magic spell, secrets, crazy

In a foreign tongue, words have no childhood... When I stood for the first time before Ibni Abdullah's door, I had three words from my mother tongue...I wanted to go back to my grandfather so that I could find the way to my mother and to my mother tongue. I had fallen in love with my grandfather. The words, whose love I tried to grasp, all had their childhood" (48).

The statement "words have no childhood" is an affective description of the struggles of working in another language. Words, even after the meaning is understood, have no history outside of their equivalent in one's native language. Özdamar's narrator however, seems to have forgotten the childhoods of her own, mother tongue. She recovers them with Arabic, and when she has done so is finally able to leave the sequestered space of the apartment.

At the end of the story, the narrator tosses the key to the study to a passerby and ventures outside. When she does, after listing all of the Turkish words that now have their childhoods restored, she finds a word shared between Turkish and German. She speaks with a German girl who has just lost her lover to suicide.

"What are you doing in Germany?" asked the girl.
I said: "I'm a word collector." And Ibni Abdullah, the soul of my soul, I thought. And remembered another word in my mother tongue:
Ruh in Turkish, like *Ruhe*, "peace and quiet" in German—"Ruh" means soul," I said to the girl.
"Soul means *Ruh*," she said (57).

There seems to be a sort of resolution here. Although the narrator sets out to recover homeliness within Turkish, she eventually integrates her adopted Germanness into her sense of self. In a fascinating study of *Mutterzunge*, Silke Schade argues that "the

thoughts, international etiquette, careful, urgently required, completely destroyed, connection, to be opposite, breast, sick, shame, mercy. One could certainly suggest a pattern among these words: I for one observe that many of them are affective words (worried, longing, patience, mercy) or somehow mystical (to rise from the dead, a magic spell). This might reflect how the narrator sees her relationship with Arabic, or the sorts of categories she associates with the language, including a past, emotions and religion.

German language itself functions as a space that Özdamar's protagonist engaged with, modifies, and claims as her own...In the narratives, these linguistic spaces are vital for the protagonist's creation of a sense of home" (Schade 326). As I have been arguing all along, homeliness, while it certainly may be associated with a particular physical space, in Sebbar and Özdamar's work it extends beyond the parameters of any one space. Özdamar's protagonist constructs homeliness within language, though not within the language she thinks, Turkish. Rather, her linguistic home lies at the crossroads of Turkish, German and Arabic, just as she locates herself as one who transverses East and West.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS: HOMELINESS AND LANGUAGE

In postcolonial literature, particularly literature from outside the metropole, language is inherently political. The choice, when there is one, to write in French or Arabic, German or Turkish, is often a practical one, based on where the presses are and who one's intended audience is. This is a charged issue and I do not wish to tackle it other than parenthetically here. Leïla Sebbar and Emine Sevgi Özdamar write in Europe and in European languages that are, especially in Özdamar's case, not "their own" by Derrida's definition. The work demonstrates how spaces are defined and shaped by language, and how unhomely spaces may take on homely attributes due to the language of community and shared experience. They go on to show how language creates and defines both physical and metaphysical or discursive spaces. The spaces they deal with are homely or unhomely, or somewhere in between, and the experiences of these spaces are largely determined by language. Furthermore, the protagonists of the narratives I have discussed ultimately seek, and construct, a home that is not tied to a physical space, but rather a home within language. For Amel, this home is found through the language of memory and the history of colonial trauma. In *Mutterzunge*, the narrator also finds home in language, but it is constructed through the relationships of Arabic, Turkish, and German.

There are numerous implications I have not had space to address here. Although I touch on the history of colonial trauma in Sebbar's work, I focus primarily on the violence propagated in Arabic, against the girls who have been identified as French. I

have only briefly discussed the opposite, the violence enacted in French, against Arabic. After all, the French was forcefully imposed in Algeria, becoming the language of the state and its power. Sebbar certainly contends with this issue in her writing, and I would certainly be interested in further examining this discussion in her work. Violence and the language associated with it is an issue that has come to the fore in popular discourse in the years since 9/11, with Arabic framed as the language of violence, extremism, and undesirable religious fervor. I have been dealing with the language associated with homeliness, which has been gendered feminine, but Arabic has become a language of the threatening male. How a language becomes associated with violence is certainly a worthy course of investigation, but departs from my own topic at hand.

There are also many additional fictional and non-fictional texts worth investigating in terms of language and homeliness. I have focused on the European context, but a productive comparison might be made using the situation of Spanish-speakers in the United States. The U.S. has a very different relationship to its southern neighbors than France has to Algeria as well as a very different attitude towards immigration. Gloria Anzaldúa's work would be especially useful here. For literary works, I might discuss Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* or Esmeralda Santiago's memoir *Cuando Era Puertorriqueña*. There are also numerous examples of novels dealing with language, domestic space and immigration from the U.K., notably Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Though these writers emerge from and deal with diverse geopolitical circumstances, their work tackles similar issues of home and identity.

Home is not a stable space, physical or otherwise; the clichéd adage “you can’t go home again” proves true. Even once familiar and homely spaces can easily become unhomely or, worse, inaccessible. In the case of an exile such as Sebbar’s and her Algerian characters, the inaccessibility is all too literal. Özdamar’s narrator, who passes easily between East and West Berlin, is also free to return to Turkey, but she fears that she has lost her Turkishness along with her mother tongue. Sebbar’s characters are cut off from their past due to lack of Arabic, and Algeria, the place they associate with origin, is inaccessible due to war. However, as I have been arguing throughout, homeliness must be divorced from the notion of origin, especially when that point of origin is conceptualized as stable. The answer if there is one, is that homeliness must be constantly created and cultivated, to carve out a sense of home in the linguistic and physical space one occupies. Sebbar does this through writing, telling her stories over and over, rewriting and reframing her own subjectivity. Özdamar’s narrator engages in a similar task, collecting words until she finds a commonality in which she can situate herself. Lacking a clear *chez-soi*, language creates one.

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