

Deterritorializations in the Feminine in the Novel by Chahdortt Djavann or How to Put One's Exile Beyond Borders?*

Deterytorializacja w ujęciu kobiecym w powieści Chahdortt
Djavann. Jak wyrazić swoją emigrację poza granicami?

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Abstract. The purpose of this contribution is to define the reasons why the main narrator of Chahdortt Djavann, in her novel *Je nesuis pas celleque je suis [I Am Not Who I Am]* (2011), chooses to leave her country of origin, Iran, to go into exile in France. The novel draws on the real experience of the author herself, who, like her narrator, arrives in France at the age of 27 and speaks no words in French. In what follows, we will try to show that exile as a form of deterritorialization can also be a choice, even a necessity, a vital need. In this vein, the problematic of the ontological, geographic and cultural gap is highlighted and concretely reflected, in the novel, by the personal situation of the author herself.

Keywords: Chahdortt Djavann, female exile, deterritorialization, French

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Abstrakt. Celem artykułu jest określenie powodów, dla których narratorka powieści *Je ne suis pas celle que je suis* (2011) autorstwa Chahdortt Djavann decyduje się na opuszczenie Iranu, swojego kraju rodzinnego, aby wyemigrować do Francji. Powieść czerpie z przeżyć samej autorki, która podobnie jak narratorka przybyła do Francji w wieku 27 lat bez żadnej znajomości języka francuskiego. Artykuł jest próbą pokazania, że emigracja jako forma deterytorializacji bywa wyborem czy wręcz koniecznością. W tym tonie przedstawiona jest problematyka przepaści ontologicznej, geograficznej i kulturowej w powieści zobrazowanej osobistą sytuacją autorki.

Słowa kluczowe: Chahdortt Djavann, emigracja kobieca, deterytorializacja, język francuski

Geographical and linguistic exile experienced by Chahdortt Djavann are the main themes of her work, along with those of relationships with man, identity, loneliness, and writing that one needs to seize in order to tell the story of their life. Originally, exile is not a choice but a decision taken by an authority external to the exiled person and usually more powerful than they are. It is a decision that is imposed and that has to be followed. However, in Djavann's writing the setting is different, particularly in her novel *Je ne suis pas celle que je suis* [*I Am Not Who I Am*], which deals with exile as a form of necessary deterritorialization; an essential need.

In the novel, the ontological, geographical and cultural gap is highlighted and reflected in practice in the personal situation of the author herself. In fact, the heroine of the novel, is marked, in the image of the author, by her in-betweenness, which becomes a place of resistance *par excellence*. Both, the author and the heroine, experience situations of rupture and dissidence as both of them leave their home country to settle, live and work elsewhere. Their rupturing of borders and their opening up to other horizons give birth to a new female memory and leads women to a rediscovery of themselves.

The concept of deterritorialization, understood as representing the movement by which one gives up a territory or one returns to it yet under different terms, is defined by Gille Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980, p. 16) in *Mille plateaux* [*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*] as a *rupture asignifiante* ("asignifying rupture"¹), which provides a break from old landmarks and a freedom *vis-à-vis* the origins. This rupture brings about re-creation of the subject through acceptance of new basics. The rebirth of the subject through the act of deterritorialization takes places like "mutant abstract lines that have detached themselves from the task of representing a world" ["des lignes abstraites mutantes qui se sont dégagées de la tâche de représenter un monde"] in order to build "a new type of reality" ["un nouveau

¹ As translated by Brian Massumi in Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Félix. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translation and Foreword by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 9.

type de réalité”] (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 363). The deterritorialized subject has no limits of perception, but is free to explore new possibilities.

The chosen novel illustrates particularly well deterritorialization as a way of achieving the aim of a new female expression. There are four types of deterritorialization that emerge while reading the novel: geographical deterritorialization, mental deterritorialization, linguistic deterritorialization, and literary deterritorialization.

1. GEOGRAPHICAL DETERRITORIALIZATION

Je ne suis pas celle que je suis tells a story of Donya, a brilliant Iranian student, who decides to leave Iran at all costs to go and live a free and emancipated life in Europe. We meet her again a few years later lying down on the couch at a therapist's office in Paris. These two interwoven stories unfold before our eyes. First one, revolted and aggressive, recounts the fight of this young Iranian in the early 90s against oppression in her home country. The other one is about the very same person, “self-exiled” in France, who struggles against herself during the course of psychotherapy sessions. Therefore, two different facets of the same young woman alternate and each of the chapters spent on the therapist's couch sheds light on a different chapter of her life, recounting her past in Iran and in France.

In Iran, Donya seems to be detached from her background due to the system that is coercive and stifling. Lively and intelligent, the narrator draws both on the Eastern and Western literature. She speaks with passion of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Alexandre Dumas and Romain Rolland, whom she reads in translation. She is fond of singing and music. In her youth, she tried to create a vision of the world based on logic and Cartesianism, completely opposite to the dominant system of beliefs and practices. The narrator casts then the more and more critical and sour look on her native society, with whom she discovers to have very little in common.

For Djavann, *Je ne suis pas celle que je suis* is a one more opportunity to review a large part of the evils that plague Iranian society under the mullahs' regime. In fact, her main character, Donya, inevitably finds herself in a situation of mental and psychological torture. Constantly in conflict with the culture from which she originates and in which she can no longer lead a serene and peaceful life; a lover of art and literature; stuffed with logic and ideals, the narrator struggles against the rigid structures of the society marked by dictatorship, machismo, nepotism, violence, social injustice and the corruption of the existing system.

The decision to go into exile imposes itself as a necessity for her, as failing to comply with it, she would risk losing her sanity. She relates to us terrible scenes she witnessed, involving rape, torture and prostitution. The narrator multiplies the

bad experiences and paints a picture of the most absurd policy under the Islamic regime of Khomeini. Among other things, with regard to women, as an example she says that:

When a girl arrested for moral transgressing – (the reason is often insignificant) – is considered a minor, [her father or in case of his absence, her uncle or her grandfather] must appear before the committee with a notarial deed of ownership of his property, which he leaves as a pledge to have it released only after signing a declaration specifying that on the first repeat offense the property will be confiscated. (Djavann, 2011, p. 419)²

Giving free rein to her vivid memory, Donya recounts that in the years 1980–1982, “torture [was] practised on a large scale and thousands of mainly teenage political prisoners were put to death. If the corpse was presentable, it was returned to the family who was made pay the price of the bullets” [“la torture [était] pratiquée à grande échelle et que des dizaines de milliers de prisonniers politiques majoritairement adolescents furent mis à mort. Quand le cadavre était présentable, on le rendait à la famille en lui faisant payer le prix des balles”] (p. 432).

In an atrocious scene where she recounts the rapes committed in the dungeons, a central question arises: “what can be done in a country where those who have raped you can sentence you to death for being raped?” [“que peut-on faire dans un pays où ceux qui vous ont violée peuvent vous condamner à mort parce que violée?”] (p. 273).

In her novel, Djavann denounces the hypocrisy of the aberrant system in place and affirms that everyday life in Iran is paved with psychological torture: “from the very childhood, you live at school influenced by an ideology which instils a sense of inferiority in you [...] an ideology which erases, forbids differences and confines you to a fabricated Muslim identity” [“vous vivez, dès l’enfance, à l’école, sous l’influence d’une idéologie qui vous inculque l’infériorité [...] une idéologie qui efface, interdit les différences et vous enferme dans une identité musulmane fabriquée de toutes pièces”] (p. 136). In order to survive under this regime, both men and women, must submit to “the will of those whom they hate, obey those whom they despise” [“à la volonté de ceux [qu’ils] haïssent, obéir à ceux qu’[ils] méprisent”] (p. 177).

A few years later, on the couch of a Parisian psychotherapist, in the process of her own introspection, Donya keeps fighting her own demons. In therapeutic monologues, she recalls her past in an attempt to come to terms with herself. She discovers her

² “quand une fille est arrêtée pour cause de transgression de la morale – (le motif est souvent insignifiant) – considérée comme mineure, [le père ou à défaut l’oncle ou la grand-père] doit se présenter au comité avec l’acte notarié de propriété de son bien immobilier, qu’il laisse en gage pour la faire libérer, après avoir signé une déclaration précisant qu’à la première récidive ce bien sera confisqué.” [All the original citations from the novel have been translated into English by the translator of the article, unless otherwise specified].

many facets, many characters, in which “the passage from one mental state to another is done in a radical and abrupt manner” [“le passage d’un état mental à un autre se fait d’une façon radicale et abrupte”] (p. 205), thus tilting into a schizophrenic paranoia.

2. MENTAL DETERRITORIALIZATION

No longer supporting her condition of a crushed and muzzled woman in Iran, the narrator decides to become androgynous by disguising herself. Camouflaged in male clothes, she gets completely involved in the game of substitution and disguise and invents for herself an “imaginary phallus” to borrow Lacan’s term. She wears within her a mask of another person and takes that person’s place to protect herself from the society of men. Therefore, she takes on the role of a man with whom she identifies in a more than ambiguous way in that she even adopts both her mask and her double identity.

In fact, as we read, every evening in Iran, Donya escaped “from her biological destiny” of a woman by disguising herself as a boy. “She was really becoming him, being a boy suited her perfectly; she lived in the masculine” [“Elle le devenait vraiment (qu)’être un garçon lui allait à merveille; elle vivait au masculin”] (p. 303). Forced to the wall, and on the verge of losing her sanity, Donya has to choose between two options: to surrender to the loss of her personal identity and dissolution of her conscious Self into social nonsense, or otherwise to quit the country.

However, once in Europe, Donya will not feel better. Faced with her linguistic handicap and her isolation, she struggles to integrate into French society. She finds no other way out than melancholy and depression. “The isolation you feel in Paris pushes you into the darkest despair, into suicide” [“L’isolement qu’on ressent à Paris vous pousse au désespoir le plus noir, au suicide”] (p. 281), she declares. France, a country of freedom and modernity, a country where “one has to pay to speak” [“doit payer pour parler”] brings her only a feeling of disenchantment, with “a fantasy, a dream... a mirage” [“du fantasme, du rêve... un mirage”] (p. 301) in short.

While sinking into a psychological depression, Donya creates a multitude of personalities for herself, without having to disown any of them. Sometimes she is weak and vulnerable, sometimes wicked and Machiavellian, sometimes gentle and feminine, otherwise harsh and masculine. Thus, the reader starts questioning her mental state and wondering about her madness. Is she able to draw a dividing line between madness and stability? The answer comes quickly. The narrator has never delimited the borders which separate a dream from reality: “I have dreams” [“je fais des rêves”] she confesses, “where everything is mixing, the past and the present, yesterday and today, Iran and Paris. [...] at the same time, I am who I was there and who I am here...

I am of all ages, a child, an adolescent, an adult. [...] I think I'm just going crazy" ["où tout se mélange, le passé et le présent, hier et aujourd'hui, l'Iran et Paris. [...] je suis à la fois celle que j'étais là-bas et celle que je suis ici... je suis de tous les âges, enfant, adolescent, adulte. [...] je crois que tout simplement je suis cinglée"] (pp. 415–416).

Madness can prove to be an escape from a coercive and unbearable world. As in a defence mechanism, Donya unconsciously sinks into a mental denial. Her brain represses dozens of horrific scenes relating, among other things, to her father's madness and to the torture and rape she suffered in one of the Iranian dungeons. Several psychomotor signs demonstrate this: her amnesia, wetted pyjamas, stammering, loss of language and schizophrenia. "All those scenes were banished, in exile, in the most remote corners of my brain. [...] What's the purpose of digging out so much horror?" ["Toutes ces scènes avaient été bannies, en exil, dans les recoins les plus reculés de mon cerveau. [...] à quoi bon exhumer tant d'horreur?"] (pp. 436–450) she declares. Incapable of comprehending the Iranian world other than through a vision of a powerless revolt, just as she is unable to blossom and fully live her life as she wished in France, the narrator is doomed to certain alienation. She declares: "It's hopeless, I'll never feel at home anywhere. I don't have a home. I have always felt in exile, even before arriving in France, since my birth. The exile is me, and I am the exiled. I will always be exiled" ["C'est désespérant, je ne me sentirai jamais nulle part chez moi. Je n'ai pas de chez moi. Je me suis toujours sentie en exil, même avant d'arriver en France, depuis ma naissance. L'exil, c'est moi, et l'exilée, c'est moi. Je serai toujours une exilée"] (p. 436).

This unease then implies a rupture. First, the rupture with oneself and then with one's past. The narrator finds herself in a permanent state of oscillating between reason and madness. Unable to establish sure and stable points of reference, she seems to have no control over the course of her existence, to the extent that she is tossed about by both real and imagined events.

Hence, will Donya really sink into dementia when she realizes that her maladjustment to Iranian society and her real desire to get out of it do not promise to bring fulfilment in her country of exile? She will then find herself resorting to suicide. The scene of the suicide is particularly disturbing as it involves a duel between two facets of the same person:

It's me who opened her veins. I made her face the mirror so she could see. I was not going to deprive her of this scene. I tied the tourniquet tightly around her arm and cut her veins with a knife. It was so exciting. For once, I was able to take my revenge. (p. 96)³

³ "C'est moi qui lui ai ouvert les veines. Je l'ai fait face au miroir pour qu'elle puisse voir. Je n'allais pas la priver de cette scène. J'ai serré le garrot autour de son bras et j'ai tranché les veines à coups de cutter. C'était tellement excitant. Pour une fois, j'ai pu prendre ma revanche."

The narrator's madness becomes sheer masochism when Donya, as a "perverse introvert," enjoys the extreme sufferings she inflicts on herself.

Fortunately, a glimpse of hope appears on the horizon when she gets attached in a particular way to a book and whose saving value comes along. First, it is a dictionary for learning French, word by word, and then literature as a privileged tool of any interior emancipation. Therefore, language will prove to become her best mental refuge.

3. LINGUISTIC DETERRITORIALIZATION

For the narrator, her attempt to get closer to the foreign language seems to be the only way out. It has never been so easy. "To start talking about oneself, without delaying, what more is there in a foreign language, the God of heaven, what other idea?!" ["Se mettre à parler de soi, sans préambule, qui plus est encore dans une langue étrangère, Dieu du ciel, quelle idée?!"] (p. 15). Let us recall that the narrator arrived in France knowing only how to speak Farsi.

The very first sessions with the therapist begin initially with silence, a few tears, and acute diarrhoea. Expressive signs are more physical than verbal. As the narrator lacks verbs, the meetings with the doctor take place in "almost autistic silence" ["un mutisme quasi autiste"] (p. 17): "how can someone who does not even know the ordinary French, not to mention expressions, puns, witticisms, poetry proverbs... start analytical work based essentially on language" ["comment quelqu'un qui ne connaît même pas le langage ordinaire en français, sans parler des expressions, des jeux de mots, des mots d'esprit, des proverbes de la poésie... peut-il entamer un travail analytique fondé essentiellement sur la langue" (p. 18), asks the psychologist.

However, all this happens without considering Donya's willpower and her determination to survive. In fact, she makes then a dictionary her only companion and, alone in her Parisian maid's room, she learns French.

She spent every single evening in the company of *Le Robert* dictionary. She set about reading it from cover to cover. She left her room to live in the dictionary. To work on the words, all the words. Some words were unruly and she could not tame them, others remained foreign to her, with no current carrying her [...] and finally, there were some that went straight to her heart, from the very first enunciation, from the very first explanations it was love at first sight. (p. 29)⁴

⁴ "Ses soirées, sans exception, elle les passait en compagnie du *Robert*. Elle entreprit de le lire d'un bout à l'autre. Elle quittait sa chambre pour habiter le dictionnaire. Travailler les mots, tous les mots. Il y avait des mots récalcitrants qu'elle n'arrivait pas à dompter, d'autres lui restaient étrangers, avec lesquels le courant ne passait pas [...] et enfin, il y en avait qui lui allaient droit au cœur, dès la première énonciation, dès les premières explications, c'était le coup de foudre."

Donya sees using the French language as an imposed necessity, yet her gaze does not reflect any conflict or incompatibility between self-expression in the foreign language and her cultural entity. Still, the handicap is there. The narrator's ignorance of the language and social codes will bring a series of her slips of the tongue, comical and revealing at the same time. Donya is well aware of her linguistic atrophy that prevents her from saying what she wants to say.

By choosing to follow a therapy in French, the narrator takes the first step towards an experience that can only lead to her growing distant, "a double distance between words and their symbolic and emotional significance" ["une double distance entre les mots et leur portée symbolique et émotionnelle"] (p. 104). She confirms that by announcing to her psychologist:

I don't know if I would have said the same things in Persian, nor what I would have felt while being psychoanalyzed by an Iranian man. [...] Oh my God, even the very idea is unbearable for me. (p. 112)⁵

There, individual adherence to the saving value of the foreign language is born. The narrator learns French in record time while still thinking that "it's terribly difficult to express yourself in a foreign language and even more difficult to become a writer in a foreign language" ["c'est monstrueusement difficile de se dire dans une langue étrangère et encore plus difficile de devenir écrivain dans une langue étrangère"] (p. 49). Her French language writing project is therefore not too remote as the narrator who cherishes her dream of writing books in French one day underlines her rapport with her own creator, Chahdort Djavann. Both women cling to the language like a life buoy. It was in the same language that the author herself chose to sharply and courageously criticize the policies of Khomeini and the mullahs, to denounce restrictions of individual freedoms (especially women's), pauperization of people, chronic unemployment of youth, the black market, injustice, indifference, horror and intimidation...

However, this happens without regard for psychological ramifications that such an linguistic choice could have. The Iranian Islamic discourse portrays a foreign (Western) language as a sign of the connivance with the power of "infidels". In such a context, an Iranian intellectual (Djavann in this case who is also a woman), living and writing abroad (in France and in French) is in fact perceived as a traitor.

⁵ "je ne sais pas si en persan j'aurais dit les mêmes choses, ni ce que j'aurais ressenti en faisant une psychanalyse avec un homme iranien. [...] Oh mon Dieu, l'idée même m'en est insupportable."

4. LITERARY DETERRITORIALIZATION

Chahdort Djavann is one of those thinker-writers who, unable to form or be part of the independent intelligentsia in their own country, isolate themselves in their individuality separated from others. With the Iranian power in place, not supporting the emergence of intellectual individuality, in this case female, a form of mental and intellectual exile is being secretly created as the service of order prevents protesters from exercising any form of critical thinking.

Literary deterritorialization proves to be an essential condition to be fulfilled by any individual coming from a politically dominated space and wishing to exist as an important writer. This condition, which requires a considerable amount of material and symbolic investment from an individual, is difficult. It exerts psychological pressure on the author whose actual and symbolic presence in the midst of another nation is perceived as belonging to that nation.

Djavann challenges bravely this literary “allegiance,” which she would thus have pledged to “France” (or in general to the West), against the power in her country. Exile becomes a necessity since the existence of a writer in their own country, especially if they do not share its ideology, is by definition a form of suicide. Asli Erdogan comes to one’s mind, a Turkish author imprisoned for “incitement to disorder” or more recently Abdellatif Laâbi, a Moroccan author, who was imprisoned from 1972 to 1980 before going into exile in France in 1985. Following worsening moral dictatorship, due to its potential literary and cultural deprivation the native country is left of necessity.

The notion of betrayal, implying the idea of crossing and going beyond, reveals the existence of symbolic borders that set “me” against “them.” The shift that takes place, first mentally, linguistically and then geographically, has cracked the inclusive “us.” The circle seems thus to have been cracked from the inside, and the one who was until then a passive witness amid their own territory, speaking of “them” elsewhere, is now perceived as a singled out informer.

A constant reminder of the stigma of betrayal carried by Djavann is even more highlighted as it indicates her character of a “rebellious woman, unruly woman” [*“femme révoltée, femme insoumise”*]. It reaffirms thus a universal character of liberal values in which she believes herself. With religion being vital in Iranian society, the author tries to reflect on it in order to be able to move forward, and therefore underlining her faith in the universal character of the right to freedom of expression.

Evicted uniquely by the thought and extreme and rigorous politics of the Iranian regime of the 90s, a regime that rejects intellectuals in general and writers in particular (not to mention female writers), the author continues her exile in the land of asylum also due to the fact that in the ethnocentric understanding of French literature

such kind of writing, labelled as “minor,” comes under the label of “Orientalism,” “exoticism,” and the “periphery.”

There have been some attempts over the last few years to sweep away all the literary categorizations thanks to what is now referred to as “world literature” [*la littérature monde*]. In the era of globalization, the notion of “minor” literature, used because it was written by non-French authors or not native to French territory or even belonging to a geographical and cultural area other than French, becomes obsolete and outdated. Although ambitious, these attempts unfortunately remain weak and limited.

With a universalist aim, the new literary thought, that of the 2000s, would tend to transgress all forms of barriers and centralism. Literary criticism would be therefore based but on the very aesthetic experience of its writers and not on their geographical, cultural or sexual affiliation. Writing would then be recognized in a different way, other than from a categorizing, belittling angle, by dissolving any form of national and/or male ethnocentrism. However, in such an idealistic vision, could we still continue to speak of literature of exile, or even of women’s literature?

Translated into English: Agnieszka Stawecka-Kotula

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