
UNIT 1 LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first two Blocks of this Course, you have already come across the significance of language in structuralist and poststructuralist theories. The link between language and gendered identities has been prominently dealt with in the works of many French theorists such as Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. In this Unit, we will use the examples of two works of fiction by Francophone writers from Morocco to examine this question further in the context of postmodern literature. Both of these male writers, Abdelkebir Khatibi and Tahar Ben Jelloun, dwell in different ways on the issue of the constructed nature of identities, whether these are gendered identities or postcolonial subject positions. By examining closely some of the postmodern literary strategies used by these two authors, in the light of related theories, we will explore the relationships between language, gender, race and identity.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Identify the relationships between language, gender and identity within a postmodern framework;
- Discuss the works of two postmodern authors from the perspective mentioned above;
- Compare the subjugation of women in patriarchal cultures and racially colonized subjects in imperialistic cultures;
- Contextualize postmodern works of fiction within theoretical frameworks; and
- Critically analyse the social construction of gender and race in contemporary fiction and cinema.

1.3 ABDELKEBIR KHATIBI'S *AMOUR BILINGUE* OR *LOVE IN TWO LANGUAGES*

We will begin our discussion of the inter-relationships between gender, identity and language with the work of the well-known Moroccan author, Abdelkebir Khatibi. His work, *Amour Bilingue* (1983), will provide us with an excellent example of how these issues may be represented in postmodern literature. Let us begin with some background information about this author.

1.3.1 Introduction to the Author

Abdelkebir Khatibi (1938-2009) was a Moroccan writer and literary critic known for his interrogation of conventional social and political structures in the Maghreb region. At the time of his birth in the port city of Al Jadida, Morocco was a French protectorate. Growing up in Rabat in a post-colonial, bilingual environment, Khatibi studied sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris, and went on to write many works of fiction as well as sociological critiques of colonial policies. Khatibi's ambivalence towards French, the colonizer's language, can be most clearly seen in his famous work, *Amour Bilingue* (1983), which has been translated into English under the title *Love in Two Languages* (1990).

1.3.2 Introduction to *Love in Two Languages*

Amour Bilingue is written primarily in French, but dwells continuously on issues related to the choice of language made by a postcolonial author, the difficulties of coming to terms with such a choice, the passion for the other's language, and the question of how language and identity are inter-linked in specific ways in the postcolonial context.

Khatibi's fictionalized account of what apparently seems to be a love affair between a Moroccan man and a French woman conceals within it all of the questions raised above. Written more in the form of a postmodern, prose text rather than a conventional novel, Khatibi's work plays with the lyrical, melodic and the semantic aspects of language to describe a lover's discourse. Challenging conventional notions of character, plot and action, the text reads more like a poetic narrative of love, constructed with the help of a language which seeks to be born. The various layers of sub-text make us realize that the eroticized body of the beloved (whose gender occasionally shifts from woman to man), is equally the eroticized sphere of language. Both the body and language are thus transformed by Khatibi into a locus of pleasure and allurements. Although written in French, the grammatical structures used by the author reflect the melody and rhythm of Arabic as well. By doing so, the writer creates a space that lies between languages, at the edge of the spoken and the unspoken.

1.3.3 The *Bilingue* as Postmodern Difference

Khatibi employs the concept of the "*bilingue*" or 'dual language' to represent both the desire between lovers, as well as the divisions caused by their individual colonized/colonizer identities. The male narrator is seduced by the feminized body of the French language, by its syntax and its rhythmic qualities. '*Fitna*', the Arabic word which translates as '*séduction*' in French and 'seduction' in English, is born in the interstices (intermediary spaces) between the subject (the narrator/the reader) and the object of desire (the female body/the text/ language). Khatibi inverts the apparent objectification of the female body by showing how the feminine other is already part of the self, just as the French language is already part of the identity of the colonized subject. The desire for the French language, and everything else that it promises, can no longer be seen simply as the desire for an external object. The process of colonization complicates the issue of inside/outside and reveals that desire is born of this complexity: "He didn't forget that in his own lexicon, the word for 'seduction' (*fitna*) is a homograph for both the word for 'war' and the word for 'seduction' itself, for that knightly passion celebrated by those who go off alone into the desert, a passion for the unknown beloved" (Khatibi, 1990, p. 11).

As we saw in Unit 3, Block 2, of this Course, Derrida speaks of the generation of meaning as a result of difference, using Saussure's theories as a springboard for deconstruction. The postmodern idea of difference helps to establish difference within the self - the difference of gendered identities, the difference of colonizer/colonized, France and Morocco, French and Arabic, located within the same postcolonial identity. The Moroccan postcolonial subject is caught in this double space, with the body of the other (French language/the French woman) enveloped within his own. What

we notice is that the narrator's search for the knowledge of the other becomes the search of the other inside the self, the effort to unite oneself with this other. As the search is carried out at the level of languages, the narrator succeeds in discovering a double linguistic space, the space of the *bilangue*. Through the *bilangue*, the author shows how the desires and pleasures evoked by gendered and cultural differences, as well as the conflicts created by the hegemonic nature of the differences, can only be resolved through the creation of new language and a new 'bisexual' identity.

In what ways is the creation of this unique *bilangue* comparable to the project of the creation of a feminine discourse? Are there any parallels between Khatibi's effort and those of French feminists about whom we have read in earlier courses? Let us examine this possibility in the next section.

Check Your Progress:

What do you understand by the term 'bilingue'? Explain briefly in your own words.

1.3.4 Postcolonial Identity and Feminine Discourse

You have already been introduced to the theories of French feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray in earlier courses where we have discussed the idea of 'feminine writing' or *écriture féminine* (see MWG 004, Block 4, Unit 3). Before reading further, it would be helpful for you to review the earlier Unit.

Let us now begin by looking at Khatibi's text from the theoretical perspective of Julia Kristeva to see how it can help us illuminate this issue. As you have already read, Julia Kristeva describes the suppression of the feminine by phallic law in terms of a regularizing of the "maternal *chora*" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 51), a realm of pre-symbolic signifiers associated with the mother's body. The *chora*, in Kristeva's work, is an anterior space to Lacan's Imaginary. She borrows the term *Chora*, meaning receptacle, from Plato, which he describes in *Timaeus* as an invisible and formless being that receives all things. Unlike Plato, Kristeva connects the *chora* with the maternal. In motherhood the empty space of the *chora* of non-language and non-being is filled for the mother with the presence of her child. Kristeva argues that in the preoedipal stage of the child's infancy, the mother's "*jouissance*" (pleasure/bliss/ecstasy) is manifested in her "cathecting" the child to her. It is a power that cannot be rivalled by man despite all his artificial 'Symbolic' social constructs. According to Kristeva, this feminine *chora* undergoes a suppression during infancy once the symbolic structures of language begin to dominate under the guise of phallic law. Kristeva shows how the 'semiotic *chora*' will continue to trouble the law of the symbolic from within. It is especially in artistic practices, according to Kristeva, that the semiotic "is also revealed as that which also destroys the symbolic" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 50). The rupture between the semiotic and the symbolic is achieved during what Kristeva calls the "thetic" phase (Kristeva, 1984, p. 50). Signification, or communication of meaning, then becomes possible through the grammatically ordered symbolic structures of language. In this way, Kristeva describes the incomplete suppression of the maternal energies of the semiotic by the phallic law of the symbolic structures of learnt languages.

We could compare the psycho-linguistic process of repression and resistance theorized by Kristeva to the domination exerted by the language of imperialism over the mother tongue, in the colonizer/colonized relationship described in Khatibi's text. What is interesting to note, however, is that Khatibi projects the colonizing language - French - in the form of the female body, thus deliberately inverting and disturbing the normative gendered identities assumed in hierarchical power structures. The narrator of *Amour Bilingue*, seduced by the French language/woman, ends up uncovering a new 'bilingual' language which awakens him to the femininity

within himself. This new language which attempts to bridge the gap between French and Arabic, colonizer and colonized, cracks open the imperialistic discourse of French by using Arabic rhythmic structures to interrupt the syntactical structures of French. This is not to say that Arabic, or other related languages, like the Berber tongue, are not equally repressive in terms of their grammatical structures, but that the symbolic and linguistic structures of the Arabic are displaced by another system, which, due to its political and colonizing power, succeeds in relegating the mother tongue to its prelinguistic, semiotic state. Khatibi responds to resolve this conflict by creating in French a '*bi-langue*' which draws its energies between languages, playing with both, making love to the French and the Arab body-texts: "When we made love, two countries made love" (Khatibi, 1990, p. 18).

The fluid gendered identities created by Khatibi raise the issue of the colonization of the female body which resists phallic law and its corollary symbolic structures. Having undergone the loss of the mother in forgetting his mother tongue - the only link with the mother's body - and at the same time, not having the right to see himself as the descendant of his own history, the colonized subject perceives himself as orphan, abandoned by those who were responsible for him. The only possible destiny for this orphaned subject is made possible by the carving out of a new discourse, which allows transgression and re-birth. Such a new discourse can be compared to the project of *écriture féminine*, as described by Hélène Cixous:

"It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatism, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate."

(Cixous, 1981, p.253)

Playing with the French homophones '*mer*' (sea) and '*mère*' (mother), Khatibi succeeds in creating the metaphor of the 'sea-as-mother', an oceanic womb where the narrator forges new words and a new language. The sea seduces the orphaned postcolonial subject by her vast plenitude, her fluid, unlimited contours, her refusal to submit. The text is written before the sea and it is the sea which inspires the narrator to articulate his story in a new language, and to rediscover an identity that he has misplaced. The love discourse addressed to the sea begins as soon as the narrator merges

his sexuality with that of the sea in “a ceremony of exorcism” which renders “the woman in him more beautiful” (Khatibi, 1990, p. 57).

The total submission to the ‘*mer*’/‘*mère*’ (sea/mother) despite the loss of an original identity, results in a writing which is no longer snuffed out by the rigid laws of the symbolic. After a temporary loss of direction, the narrator abandons himself to the currents of the whirlpool and is rejuvenated by the *bi-langue* which gives him back his androgyny through the recuperation of an unforgettable but lost femininity. The *bi-langue*, originating in the margins between languages, and in the trace of *différance*, introduces the subject to his bisexuality, a different type of bisexuality which is the mark of a feminine discourse according to Hélène Cixous : “Bisexuality: that is, each one’s location in self (*réparage en soi*) of the presence - variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female - of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference of one sex, and from this ‘self-permission,’ multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body” (Cixous, 1981, p. 254).

The encounter with the feminine inside the self includes the possibility of the separation of the couple so that they can liberate each other. The lovers’ narrative concludes with the calm acceptance of the separation of the lover from the beloved, and allows the possibility of naming the other as other. According to Hélène Cixous, the subject of feminine love discourse learns how to permit departure, make a gift of departure. This ability to grant departure is the mark of a feminine text:

“The question a woman’s text asks is the question of giving - “What does this writing give?” “How does it give?” And talking about nonorigin and beginnings, you might say it “gives a send-off” (*donne le depart*)... I think it’s more than giving the departure signal, it’s really giving, making a *gift* of, departure, allowing departure, allowing breaks, “parts,” partings, separations...”

(Cixous, *Signs*, 1981, p. 53)

In Khatibi’s text, a similar type of parting is obtained at the end. The unnameable woman, orphaned like the narrator, pronounces her name, finds an identity which will mark the separation from the lover: “She said ‘yes’ to her name. That was the moment of blessed grace, this glorification of her truth” (Khatibi, 1990, p. 105). Ultimately, it is a newly created language, written between French and Arabic, which has facilitated the possibility of separation, and which, in its quest for feminine spaces, gives the name of the other to the other, even if at the very edge of language.

In this section we have seen an example of the creation of feminine discourse in the work of a male writer, with a view to invent an identity beyond that

circumscribed by imperialist hegemony and by culturally defined gender. Is Khatibi's text unique in such an attempt? In the next section, we will turn to the work of another male writer from Morocco to pursue this question further.

Activity:

Read Hélène Cixous' article "The Laugh of the Medusa." Based on her discussion, attempt to create your own "écriture féminine" or "feminine discourse." What, according to you, distinguishes this type of writing from conventional literary discourse? Do you think that it is equally possible to create such a "feminine writing" for women and men writers? List some points under each response.

1.4 TAHAR BEN JELLOUN'S *L'ENFANT DE SABLE* OR *SAND CHILD*

In this section, we will look at the work of another postmodern author from Morocco, and his fascinating novel *L'Enfant de Sable* (*Sand Child*) (1985/1987). Like the work of Khatibi, Ben Jelloun's work also reflects some of the complex conflicts created by postcolonialism. Here we will discuss how some of these conflicts are played out in relation to questions of gender and how postmodern authors use language as a subversive tool in responding to such questions. Let us begin by learning a little bit about the author before moving on to a discussion of his work.

1.4.1 Introduction to the Author

Tahar ben Jelloun was born in Fes, French Morocco in 1944. Like Abdelkebir Khatibi, he is bilingual (French and Arabic), and has written all of his works in French. Tahar ben Jelloun grew up in Tangier, Morocco and moved to Rabat to study philosophy at the university. He was a professor of philosophy in Morocco until 1971, after which he moved to Paris where he went on to complete a doctorate in social psychiatry. He is the author of French poetry as well as fiction, and has published several award winning novels, including *L'Enfant de Sable* (1985) (*Sand Child*) and *La Nuit Sacree* (1987) (*The Sacred Night*), for which he won the prestigious Prix Goncourt. In 2008, he was awarded the Cross of the Grand Officer or the *Legion d'honneur* by the French President.

1.4.2 Introduction to *Sand Child*

Sand Child (1987; originally published in French under the title *L'Enfant de Sable*) tells the story of the eighth child of Ahmed Suleyman, a wealthy Moroccan potter who has previously fathered seven daughters. His yearning for a male heir is so strong that during his wife's last pregnancy, he decides that regardless of the newborn's gender, he will raise the child as a son. Consequently, the eighth daughter, is named Mohammed Ahmed, and is made to conform to all the appearances of manhood with the help of a series of masks, deceptions and masquerades, while her true gendered identity is kept a closely guarded secret. The first part of the story is narrated by a wandering storyteller who claims to possess the original notebook of Mohammed Ahmed. Soon, a second storyteller takes over the narration, also claiming authenticity for his version of the tale. Towards the end, other members of the audience offer possible conclusions to the story. Thus, the novel remains open-ended and offers readers the possibility of multiple interpretations and conclusions. In the latter half of the novel, the various versions seem to converge upon Mohammed Ahmed's reclaiming of his identity as a woman (Zahra), and his coming to terms with everything that womanhood entails. Through the use of various postmodern literary techniques, such as magical realism, Tahar ben Jelloun offers a sharp critique

of the patriarchal mores entrenched in traditional Moroccan society, as well as of the imperialistic hegemony of France over postcolonial Morocco. The story of Ahmed/Zahra is continued in the sequel to the novel, *La Nuit Sacree* (*Sacred Night*). In this Unit, we will primarily discuss the linkages made possible between language and gendered identity in the novel, *Sand Child*.

1.4.3 Discursive Gendered and Racial Identities

As may be evident to you from the brief summary of *Sand Child* given above, Tahar ben Jelloun employs diverse literary strategies to draw our attention to the fact that the story of Ahmed/Zahra is to be derived from the multiple versions offered by various narrators, all of whom claim to know the truth of Ahmed/Zahra's life story. In doing so, the author never lets us lose sight of the discursive nature of fiction, or for that matter, of reality. In fact, the novel pays homage to another postmodern writer famous for similar views, Jorge Luis Borges, who was known for drawing our attention to the fictionality of fiction. In a cross-literary reference towards the end of the novel, Ben Jelloun introduces the character of a blind troubadour, clearly inspired by his Argentinian predecessor, Borges, as if to further emphasize the literariness of his work. Similarly, the author repeatedly shows how the gendered identity of Ahmed undergoes transformations based on public announcements and social acceptance, underlining the constructed nature of sex and gender. As you have seen in earlier courses (see, for instance, MWG 001, Block 3, Unit 1; Block 5, Unit 4 and MWG 002, Block 1, Unit 2), many feminist theorists hold the view that the normative stability attributed to sex and gender is merely the result of constructed social and discursive realities. *Sand Child* is an excellent literary example of this phenomenon, employing postmodern literary devices to achieve its ends.

Let us begin by looking at some aspects of *Sand Child* in the context of the theories of the francophone philosopher and writer, Franz Fanon. Earlier, you have read briefly about the feminist critique of ontology, or the philosophy that concerns itself with the nature of being and existence. (Here, it may help you to review MWG 001, Block 4, Unit 3; especially Section 3.3). Through its focus on the question of identity, Tahar Ben Jelloun's work raises various ontological issues related to the construction of marginalized identities, whether gendered, racial, or postcolonial. Frantz Fanon, in his work *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), had similarly raised the ontological question of the construction of the black identity by asking if the colonized black man can exist beyond his blackness. Fanon shows that the process of colonization is one which objectifies the colonized and leads to the alienation of the colonized subject from his own body which he himself can perceive only in its 'blackness'. Confronted by the dilemma that forces him to "turn white or disappear" (Fanon, 1967, p.100), the black man is obliged to submerge one part of his being and ceases to exist in a direct relation to his own body. Fanon observes that the inferiority complex created by the event of racial oppression has nothing to do with

the “minority” state of blacks; rather, it is the “racist who creates his inferior” (Fanon, 1967, p. 93). Fanon attempts to uncover the cause of this psychological disturbance in a racist and disturbed social structure, that is, in the psychopathology of a race. In his work, *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon talks about a “new Humanism” by destroying the colonizers and the colonial structures. In *Toward the African Revolution* he further argues that the social structure in Algeria was not conducive to place the individual where he belonged.

In the works of postcolonial writers like Abdelkebir Khatibi and Tahar ben Jelloun, we can witness a similar struggle to distinguish between **biological essence** and **culturally imposed discursive identities**. In Fanon’s work, cultural discourse produces identities which we assume as ‘natural’; in the francophone texts that we have discussed, both gendered and postcolonial subject positions are dependent upon language and culturally determined identities. Fanon’s black subject is caught between doors leading in opposite directions, one opening to the acknowledgement of, and rage against, the rejection of the black body by an imperialist society, and the other to a confrontation with the discursive nature of all identities. Similarly, in *Sand Child*, the door of sands represents the narrow passage between the masculine and the feminine. Ahmed-Zahra, the androgynous protagonist, soon discovers that the masculine image that has been imposed on him is nothing but a labyrinth of delusions. Exiled from his female body, Ahmed will traverse seven doors, the last of which, Bab El Had, marks the limit of the exiled existence in the patriarchal world and the beginning of a voyage towards a lost and submerged femininity.

Check your Progress:

Distinguish between the notions ‘biological essence’ and ‘culturally imposed discursive identity’ with the help of the frameworks provided in the above discussion. Read works by Fanon and Khatibi to strengthen your viewpoints.

1.4.4 Hegemonic Masculinity, the Repressed Feminine and Postcolonial Identity

Ben Jelloun's work allows us to compare the marginalization of women in sexist and patriarchal cultures to the oppression of the colonized subject by imperialistic powers. *L'Enfant de Sable* links the birth of Ahmed to the colonized state of Morocco, the oppression of the girl suggesting, allegorically, that of the nation: "A boy . . . was born on Thursday at 10:00 A. M. We have called him Mohammed Ahmed. This birth will bring fertility to the land, peace and prosperity to the country. Long live Ahmed! Long live Morocco!" (Jelloun, 1987, p. 19).

Ahmed-Zahra is exiled from her female body from the moment of her birth. During the rite of circumcision undergone by the newly-born, an imaginary penis is cut off from the infant's body, and this body is bathed in the blood flowing from the father's finger, thus introducing her to the world of masculinity:

No, his son was presented to the barber-circumciser, the legs were spread, and something was cut. Blood flowed, spattering the child's thighs and the barber's face. The child cried, and was laden with presents brought by the whole family. Very few people noticed that the father had a bandage around the index finger of his right hand. He concealed it very well. And no one thought for a second that the blood they had seen came from that finger!

(Jelloun, 1987, p. 21)

From this moment on, the daughter born to Ahmed Suleyman will enter a world inhabited and ruled by men. Contrary to this scene of public bloodletting overseen by patriarchal law, which aims to attract the honour bestowed on the father of a male heir, Ben Jelloun presents another scene, the private and dishonorable one of menstruation:

On my thighs, a thin trickle of blood, an irregular pale-red line. Perhaps it was not blood but a swollen vein, a varicose vein colored by the night, a vision to disappear in the morning. Yet the sheet was damp, as if I had been trembling. It was certainly blood. The resistance of the body to the name - the splash from a belated circumcision . . . I would become a thief. At night I would watch for the trickle of blood. I would then examine the bloodstains on the material. That was the wound. A betrayal.

(Jelloun, 1987, p. 30-31)

The association of the loss of blood with the body, appearing in the form of male and female bodily experiences (circumcision and menstruation), reconfirms Ahmed-Zahra's self-awareness as a dual-gendered subject, situating him first as male, and then as female. It also draws our attention to the allegorical construction of the female-in-the-male subject, who may equally represent the "native" or colonized self living under colonial rule. This subterranean self, signified through the metaphor of repressed femininity, manages to push against an imperialistic and masculinizing hegemony in an act of resistance and defiance.

Ahmed very quickly learns that the privileged masculine world is preferable to that of women. But the identification with a hegemonic masculinity, despite the privileges and the power that it facilitates, begins to weigh down on the other experiences that equally define Ahmed's 'feminine' subjectivity. These conflicting experiences add to Ahmed's awareness of his body as one that is regulated and mediated by social structures that construct gender relations in an unequal way. In order to maintain the masquerade of his male identity, Ahmed is forced to marry his epileptic cousin, Fatima, who has "simply suppressed all sexuality in herself" (Jelloun, 1987, p. 55). Fatima is thus the true sister of her androgynous husband since both of them have undergone a castration of their femininity. Fatima, having resigned herself to the belief that being born female and handicapped is a destiny that must be endured rather than interrogated, confirms Ahmed's earlier statement in the novel: "if in our house women are inferior to men it's not because God wishes it or because the prophets decided it thus, but because the women accept this fate" (Jelloun, 1987, p. 46). In other words, Ahmed infers that women's inferiority in a patriarchal culture is directly related to their acceptance of the inferior, culturally constructed category of woman. Pushed into an enforced transvestism from the very beginning of the novel, he realizes that to be a "woman" implies not only to possess a female body but to live up to social and cultural expectations of femininity. His growing awareness of the inherent instability of gendered identities marks a potential threat to the established social structure which encourages women to believe in their own inferiority. It also adds to the reader's awareness of the vulnerability of the social structures which define Ahmed-Zahra's and so also, Morocco's postcolonial identity.

Towards the end, the quest for a buried past drives Ahmed-Zahra closer and closer to the recognition of the "feminine" within himself. Once Ahmed-Zahra, now known simply as Zahra, enters the world of the nomadic circus people, transforming herself into the bisexual and enigmatic dancer, she embarks upon a route of exile along which she will rediscover herself as female. According to Jacques Derrida, "writing is dangerous from the moment that representation there claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself" (Derrida, 1976, p. 144). Similarly, in *Sand Child*, the sign of the

masculine imposed upon Ahmed-Zahra's body, appears to disguise itself as the truth of a male identity. Once this identity is revealed as "sign" and deconstructed, it reveals that which has been pushed to the margins, in other words, the femininity of Ahmed-Zahra.

Just as, for Fanon, the body of the black man attracts a projection of violence in a racist environment and "becomes the predestined depository of this aggression" (Fanon, 1967, p. 179), in Ben Jelloun's work, the body of Zahra becomes the locus of fantasies of rape and murder. In the imagination of one of the narrators, Salem, who is himself the descendent of slaves, Zahra is turned into a circus animal, humiliated, and meets a violent end. Zahra's body once again becomes reminiscent of Morocco's destiny of humiliation and carnage, and its own repressed fantasies of violence and retaliation. While this seems to be the dominant narrative of the novel, there are many other supplementary narratives which emerge in the embedded stories. Let us look at this aspect in the next section.

1.4.5 Plurality, Discourse and Gendered Identity

As we have seen, the multiple narrators of *Sand Child*, all of whom insist on the veracity of their own versions, leave the reader in a textual forest that has been deliberately mystified. Let us examine this aspect of plurality in the context of postmodern theory, especially in relation to the work of the French philosopher, Roland Barthes. Barthes' published works straddle the divide between structuralism and poststructuralism. In his work *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975; originally published as *Le Plaisir du Texte*, 1973), Barthes makes a distinction between the "text of pleasure" and the "text of bliss" (Barthes, 1975, p. 14). Barthes describes "texts of pleasure" as those 'readerly', classical works which draw the reader into the story by making her/him forget that what they are entering the world of fiction. On the other hand, postmodern "texts of bliss" underline the discursive and fictitious nature of literature, and offer a different kind of pleasure by inviting the reader to invent (or 'write') the story along with the narrator. Such texts, by not completely closing the narrative, also impose a sense of loss or discomfort on the reader (Barthes, 1975, p. 14). In this sense, Ben Jelloun's novel is clearly a postmodern, 'writerly' text, playing with various possible versions of the truth, casting doubt on each version, and inviting readers to invent their own endings based on divergent interpretations.

At the end of the novel, the notebook in which was inscribed the "true" story of Ahmed-Zahra transforms itself into a collection of empty pages. Exposed to the light of the moon, the words fade away until what remains are merely "traces of ink, bits of sentences in pale ink, small, simple pencil drawings" (Jelloun, 1987, p. 159). Earlier in this course, we have been introduced to Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence (Block 2,

Unit 4). We can now see how, in Derridian fashion, the trace writings of Zahra's story succeed in provoking an ontological disturbance, that is to say, a disturbance of the metaphysics of a masculine presence which had been established at the beginning of the novel by the Father who wanted to plot a unitary tale by inscribing his Law on the body of the daughter. In the place of a linear and central plotting of a tale, this dispersed, multiple narration demonstrates the impossibility of situating the truth of Ahmed-Zahra in any one specific place.

However, the dispersed text of this story is much more than a poststructuralist game played for gratuitous pleasure. Rather, the shifting of privilege from one story to another, one meaning of Ahmed-Zahra's life to another, simultaneously points to a dual impulse in the text: a) to establish the "feminine" and the "native" as identities to be claimed and affirmed, and b) to scrutinize the socio-historical discursive structures that construct the "feminine" and the "pre-colonial" in defining ways. Ben Jelloun's text also reveals that the "feminine" and the "precolonial", in opposition to the "masculine" and the "postcolonial" are not fixed essences to be embraced, but rather subject positions to be inhabited in a world where power relations operate through a nexus of positionalities, drawing our attention to the instability of gendered and racial identities.

Zahra arrives at writing her own story by making herself known as woman, especially to herself. She chooses actively to identify with the one identity that has been historically marginalized, and crosses "a series of doors opening up onto white spaces and spinning labyrinths" (Jelloun, 1989, 160). In this manner, identity is viewed as being generated in a cultural unconscious, that is, mediated through culture. Just as Fanon can conclude: "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man" (Fanon, 1967, p. 231), one could just as easily proclaim: 'Woman is not. Any more than Man.' This is not to imply that all sexual difference is to be effaced or denied, but rather, to suggest, that even while we affirm sexual difference, we need to recognize that the location of female identity, itself socially mediated, is the result of a historical and cultural discourse.

In the sequel *La Nuit Sacrée* Zahra, finally, recognizes herself as a magical being, constructed of sentences and words spoken in a marvellous country. The labyrinthine history of Zahra is finally demystified, once she is presented as a discursive being, made up of sand, a true "Sand Child". On the one hand, the story of Ahmed-Zahra denies the notion of a fixed and essential identity, while on the other, as we have seen, it stands as a metaphor for a postcolonial nation's revolt against imperialist hegemony, and the repressed feminine's resistance against a hegemonic masculinity. Thus, we could see Zahra as representative of a subaltern identity, fighting against domination in the act of rejecting a given, and claiming a new identity.

Can we say that such an allegorical construction of femininity, in serving as the 'model' for national identity, ends up by freezing both woman and the post-colonial nation as obscure essences to be excavated for the liberation of the colonized subject? And would such representations not lead to (as feared by many feminist scholars) a trap which binds women to certain stereotypical roles defined for them by patriarchal cultures? Contradicting such an assumption, and in a postmodern denial of fixed essences, Ben Jelloun ensures that the body of Ahmed-Zahra, rather than becoming a battle-ground where an essential feminine ousts a hegemonic masculinity, becomes in fact an embattled ground where a fluctuating sexuality continues to resist any strict and stable identification with a singular or dominant sexuality: "It was neither a woman's body full and eager, nor a man's serene and strong. I was now somewhere between the two; in other words, in hell" (Jelloun, 1989, p. 168). Here, you may have noticed, there are clear similarities between the worldviews expressed in Khatibi's and Ben Jelloun's work, in that in both, sexuality remains a matter of flux, and its fluid definitions are tied to cultural discourse.

Through these events the author shows us that experience, like identity, is also an unstable manner of determining one's essence. Ben Jelloun's divided subject seems to confirm the observation made by Diana Fuss that "bodily experiences may seem self-evident and immediately perceptible but they are always socially mediated" (Fuss, 1994, p. 100). Thus, we may infer that it is not just 'gender' that is socially constructed, but 'sex' also is mediated through experiences which are defined in social terms. (For other theoretical positions on this subject, such as that of Judith Butler, please refer back to MWG 004, Block 4, Unit 3). Further, Diana Fuss, in pointing to Locke's distinctions between "real" and "nominal" essences, suggests that "when feminists today argue for maintaining the notion of a class of women, usually for political purposes, they do so, . . . on the basis of Locke's nominal essence" (Fuss, 1994, p. 99). According to Fuss, Locke's notion of a nominal essence "is especially useful for anti-essentialist feminists who want to hold onto the notion of women as a group without submitting to the idea that it is 'nature' which categorizes them as such" (Fuss, 1994, p. 100). Similarly, for postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak, the name of woman becomes a temporary essence, a "catachresis" that can be assumed for strategic purposes - that is, for the enfranchisement of woman relegated to a position of subalternity. Spivak notes, in this regard, the important role of the feminist intellectual in listening to the muffled voice of the subaltern (Spivak, 1993, p. 5).

Tahar Ben Jelloun's work shows us that it is not only the feminist intellectual who can chisel out the submerged position of the subaltern in the discourse of colonization. Regardless of his/her gender, the writer of postcolonial

fiction can assume an equally important function in this regard by creating fictional, allegorized characters which provide subjective locations for subalternity. Since both male and female, colonizer and colonized, are threaded into the double weave of Ahmed-Zahra's body-text, Ben Jelloun's work, like that of Abdelkebir Khatibi, points to the significance of identity-claiming as well as to the ultimate inextricability of dual subject positions. What Zahra fights for and wins is not a lost feminine essence, but her positionality as female subject that she has been deprived of historically.

Activity:

*Watch the Pakistani film **Bol** (Director: Shoaib Mansoor, 2011) which tells a similar story of a hermaphrodite raised as a boy in a culture biased against women. Compare the narratives of the movie and Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, especially from the point of view of the construction of gendered identity.*

1.5 LET US SUM UP

We have closely examined two Moroccan works by francophone authors, both of which highlight the significant role that discursive realities play in the construction of individual and social identities. As you have seen, identity is not something essential, stable or unchangeable. Rather, it is culturally determined and socially mediated. When certain aspects of our identity are repressed due to gender or culture biases, this recognition of the constructed nature of identity can help us to interrogate and resist oppression. Postmodern literary texts such as those of Abdelkebir Khatibi and Tahar Ben Jelloun offer us excellent examples of the exploration of such questions in literature.

1.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Based on what you have read in the Unit on Jacques Derrida (Block 2, Unit 3) of this course, discuss some of the links between Derrida's theories and any one of the texts discussed in this Unit.
- 2) Read the translated texts of Khatibi and Ben Jelloun discussed in this Unit. Write an essay comparing the representation of femininity in these two works. Use what you have read previously about the social construction of gendered identity (MWG 001, Block 3, Unit 1) for your analysis.
- 3) How does the creation of a "dual language" enable the narrator of *Love in Two Languages* to resolve some of the conflicts posed by his postcolonial identity? Discuss.
- 4) With the help of French feminist theories of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous that you have read in previous units, explain how Khatibi's *écriture féminine* is an attempt at creating a new kind of language which escapes gendered divisions..

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