

'Le passeport de la douleur ou rien': Fawzia Zouari's *Ce Pays dont je meurs* and the politics of pain


Abstracts:


French-Maghrebi literature is often seen to be complicit in what Madeleine Hron calls a 'politics of pain' whereby the writer displays the suffering of her perceived cultural group in a bid for recognition, understanding and compassion. In such readings, the group's suffering is often imagined to be expressed via the protagonist's sick or wounded body. This reading of Fawzia Zouari's novel *Ce pays dont je meurs* argues, against existing scholarship, that the suffering body of Zouari's anorexic protagonist, though it gives expression to a shared suffering also, paradoxically, articulates a critique of a 'politics of pain' and the political potential of empathy that informs it.

Nombre de lectures critiques considèrent que la littérature franco-maghrébine se rend complice de ce que Madeleine Hron appelle 'une politique de la douleur'. Elles perçoivent ainsi dans l'écrivain(e) qui écrit la souffrance de l'entité culturelle à laquelle on l'identifie une demande de reconnaissance, de compréhension et de compassion. D'autre part, elles font de l'écrivain(e) qui fait état de son corps malade ou mutilé le/la porte-parole de l'immigration, de la souffrance et du traumatisme qu'elle a subis. A contrepied de ce type d'interprétation, ma propre lecture de *Ce pays dont je meurs* propose que la protagoniste anorexique de Fawzia Zouari, si elle exprime effectivement la souffrance de son groupe, articule également une critique de cette 'politique de la douleur' et les potentialités politiques de l'empathie qu'elle sous-tend.




Writing by those marked as ethnically or culturally 'other' is frequently perceived to participate in what has been called a 'politics of pain' whereby the author lays bare the suffering of his or her perceived cultural group in a bid to achieve recognition of (and possibly reparations for) the wounds inflicted by colonial or postcolonial violence.¹ This article will consider a novel by a North African writer that has been read in precisely these terms. Fawzia Zouari's *Ce pays dont je meurs* has been seen as typical of writing by North African migrants to France in its stark representation of the protagonists' suffering and its perceived attachment to a politics of pain. However, it is my view, and the claim of this article that although Zouari's novel is, in certain respects, complicit with such a politics, other aspects of the text strain in the opposite direction to produce a more ambivalent position. Like many other examples of French-Maghrebi writing, Zouari's tale of migrant misery presents a fierce critique of France's historical treatment of North African immigrants and their descendants. However, as I shall argue, the novel also articulates a profound suspicion of a politics of pain that constructs cultural 'others' as victims in need of rescue and limits them to speaking from a place of suffering.

This critique is articulated, in part, via the specific form taken by the protagonist's suffering – anorexia. Critical writing on migrant literature often draws attention to the ways in which the trauma of exile and the difficulty of being caught between cultures are expressed via the protagonist's sickening or wounded body. The starving body of Zouari's protagonist Amira, however, cannot be made sense of quite so easily. Although the novel represents Amira's anorexia as expressive of the traumatic situation she finds herself in, the young woman's refusal to eat and ultimately to live also appears as a

refusal of the role of victim that **so often circumscribes**  the place from which immigrants and their children speak. Unlike other examples of physical suffering in migrant literature, Amira's illness does not appear as a plea for understanding, compassion and recognition, but instead constitutes a withdrawal from and rejection of a society that offers her 'le passeport de la douleur, ou rien' (Zouari 118). As I shall argue, the story of Amira's anorexia suggests that this 'passeport' merely offers a form of second-class citizenship that, as a fully-fledged French citizen, she is unwilling to accept.

The novel's critique of the politics of pain that, as Hron claims, informs so much migrant writing also entails a critique of the investment in 'empathy' that underpins it. In recent years, research into empathy has flourished and a great deal of hope has been pinned on this emotion as one that bridges differences and motivates demands for social justice. Literature, with its capacity to generate readers' empathy, has often been given a privileged role in this discussion and, unsurprisingly, writing that represents the experience of marginal or oppressed groups has featured prominently here. Like other examples of migrant writing, Zouari's depiction of extreme suffering invites an **empathetic reading**. However, despite this **emotional appeal**  to the reader, the story of Amira's illness also underscores the risks of a politics that relies too heavily on the supposed benefits of empathy, and questions the demands an 'empathetic' reader makes of a literary text. It does this by suggesting the dangerous biases of empathy, by drawing attention to the reader's prurience, and by deconstructing the judge-suppliant relationship that often underpins traditional confessional narrative.

By way of the above arguments, this article will conclude that the novel's critique of the French Republic's treatment of its North African migrant population is one that is

ultimately invested in republican principles. Indeed, the politics of pain that the novel criticizes is dded with a French republican ideal that, unlike the multicultural models favoured in Britain and North America, is traditionally suspicious of a politics organized around group identity and group grievance. As I shall suggest, Zouari's novel does not invest hope in a politics of difference so much as point towards a politics of indifference; one that does not depend on the benevolent recognition of cultural 'others' and the specificity of their suffering, but that asserts  an ideal of social justice that is blind to cultural particularity. While critics  of French studies have tended to read texts by non-white or non-French writers as manifestations of a politics of pain, this reading of *Ce pays dont je meurs* will point to the ways in which French-Maghrebi writers might criticize the failures of the French Republic from a distinctly republican perspective.

As the blurb on the back of the book tells us, *Ce pays dont je meurs* (henceforth *Ce pays*) was inspired by a *fait divers* that made the front pages of French newspapers in 1998, when a twenty-six year old woman of Algerian immigrant origin was found to have starved herself to death in a flat she shared with her sister. The sister was also severely malnourished, but survived. Narrated through the eyes of the surviving sister, the novel is a fictional reconstruction of the lives of the two young women and their family as they spiral slowly towards disaster. The story of the Touirellil family begins with the father Ahmed's migration to France. Like many men of his generation, he travels to France alone to work at a car factory and is later joined by his wife Djamila and his young daughter Nacéra (the narrator of the story). Soon a second daughter, Amira, is born on French soil and her pale skin and self-identification as French distinguish her from the

rest of the family who see themselves first and foremost as Algerian. The story narrates the family members' efforts to establish a place for themselves in France, paying particular attention to the female members of the family who not only encounter racism and class prejudice but are also obliged to negotiate their position as members of the 'inferior' sex. In the second half of the novel, Amira emerges as the key figure around whom the family's fantasies and anxieties swirl. Though she strongly desires to be accepted as *français comme les autres*, she is unable to fulfill this desire as, time and again, she finds herself entangled in racial, class and gender stereotypes. On understanding that her dream of full acceptance will never be realized, Amira begins her withdrawal from the world and the self-starvation that ultimately kills her.

The novel's foregrounding of the protagonists' suffering has prompted several readers to see *Ce pays* as a prime example of the voicing of wounded identity imagined to be characteristic of French-Maghrebi writing. Susan Ireland, for example, celebrates what she perceives to be the subversive potential of this kind of 'speaking' through the suffering body. In her exploration of the role of the body in a range of women-authored narratives of cultural displacement (including *Ce pays*), Ireland argues that, denied a public voice, migrant writers may speak through their wounded bodies developing 'radical form[s] of body language' that 'give voice to their alienation' and physical symptoms that 'speak eloquently of [their] psychological distress' (Ireland 42). However, others have found the text more troubling. While Ireland considers such body-language in positive terms as a corrective rewriting that contests the ways in which the gendered, ethnic body has been textualized in dominant culture, Madeleine Hron is concerned by these recurring performances of pain and victimhood (Hron 159-174). Drawing on the

insights of political philosopher Wendy Brown, Hron sees the insistence on illness as evidence of a potentially self-defeating attachment to one's wounds.ⁱⁱ In Hron's view, such narratives enact the aforementioned 'politics of pain' by which the moral authority of a writer, her acquisition of a public voice and the commercial appeal of her text, is conditional upon her status as suffering victim. The danger, according to Hron, is that immigrant writers find themselves limited to speaking from a place of suffering, buying the interest and sympathy of the reading public with the open display of their wounds. Considering Zouari's novel as one strong example of this tendency to forge an identity from victimhood, Hron asks, 'Must immigrant writers continue to claim pains, injuries, and suffering, always more explicit, always "different," to maintain their authority and position? What is to become of a literature that increasingly defines itself by such a politics of pain? Are French-Maghrebi immigrants to become pathological victims?' (Hron 172). I am in sympathy with Hron's concerns about the pathologization of immigrant writing and what she sees as the troubling politics at work both in the texts themselves and in their reception. However, it is my view that Zouari's representation of her anorexic protagonist develops a much more nuanced position. Hron sees the novel's staging of anorexia as just another way of sensationalizing suffering, as if the everyday misery of migrant experience were 'not interesting enough' (Hron 170), but seeing Amira's anorexia as simply a more extreme version of a generic suffering ignores the specific and multiple ways in which the condition is made to signify in the novel.



As Amaleena Damlé has shown, anorexia has become a recurring theme in French women's writing in recent years (Damlé 114). Despite the traditional association of the condition with white, middle-class girls and women (Bordo 74), this body of

writing features a significant proportion of non-white, non-European and/or working-class anorexic protagonists. Indeed, as Isabelle Meuret has pointed out, anorexic themes recur across a number of recent texts by North African women writing in French (Meuret 22). This prevalence suggests that Zouari's presentation of anorexia is not simply an attention-grabbing manoeuvre as Hron implies, but part of a much broader set of thematics in writing by minority-ethnic women writers. As numerous psychologists and cultural critics have argued, anorexia nervosa is a phenomenon that is particularly difficult to define and to explain. In her book *The thin woman*,ⁱⁱⁱ social psychologist Helen Malson provides a detailed overview of the variety of ways in which practices of self-starving have been interpreted and discursively constructed arguing that, over the course of the twentieth-century, 'anorexia' has become the object of an increasing number of knowledges that have produced a 'multiplicity of competing constructions' of the condition. In her view, there is not one anorexia, but many anorexias (Malson 1998 98).ⁱⁱⁱ I am in no position to define or explain this complex condition, or to suggest that certain interpretations are more valid than others. My intention is instead to consider how Zouari stages the bodies of her anorexic protagonists within the novel and to suggest ways in which current understandings of anorexia may correspond to and help cast light on its presence in texts like *Ce pays*. What does Zouari's representation of anorexia suggest about what it means to be a woman marked as culturally 'other' in contemporary France? And, in particular, how does the anorexic theme of the novel resist recuperation to the kind of politics of pain outlined above?

To begin with, Amira's refusal to eat appears as a rejection of her Algerian origins. The story of Amira's illness only takes centre stage in the second half of the novel, the first half focussing on the story of the parents' move to France. However, from the outset, the novel builds strong connections between food and the family's Algerian heritage. The narrator's nostalgic descriptions of Algeria are infused with the sensual odors of the women's cooking, and feasts and family meals are described in delectable detail. Furthermore, the novel associates thinness with 'Frenchness' while corpulence is aligned with Algerian femininity. Algerian women, the narrator insists, are treasured for 'abondance de ses formes' (Zouari 75), and the voluptuous Djamila simply cannot understand the Western obsession with slenderness. Indeed, the opening sections of the novel present Djamila as symbolic of the family's connection to home and, before the focus shifts to the younger daughter's eating disorder, the drama of migration and integration is played out on her body. This is particularly apparent in the account of Djamila's veiling practices. Her initial refusal to unveil and reveal her luxuriant hair, despite her husband's insistence, is described in terms of her attachment to her culture of origin. When she eventually gives in to Ahmed's demands, she cuts her hair short to preserve her modesty but also to mark her painful separation from her homeland. However Djamila's assault on her Algerian femininity is too much for Ahmed to bear. Mourning the loss of her hair and the separation from their cultural origins that it represents, Djamila's otherwise gentle husband beats her (Zouari 19). Like Djamila's cutting of her hair, Amira's destruction of her body appears as an attempt to cut herself away from her Algerian heritage. By a chain of association, Amira's refusal of her mother's anxiously prepared dishes appears as a refusal of her mother and of the culture

she represents. Furthermore, losing weight appears as a means for Amira to become the 'French' girl she desires to be.^{iv} Indeed, anorexia itself is imagined, by Amira's parents, to be a specifically French phenomenon: 'un mal de romantiques, d'athées, de suicidaires. Un mal français.' Their daughter, it seems, is staking a claim to 'Frenchness' by choosing to die of a 'French' disease. As her sister reflects bitterly, 'Non seulement ma soeur veut vivre comme eux, mais elle s'arrange pour souffrir des mêmes maladies' (Zouari 77).

Amira's anorexia can certainly be read as expressive of the ordeal of children of migrants whose perceived otherness prevents a desired assimilation and, in this respect, it conforms to the conventions of French-Maghrebi narratives that Ireland celebrates and Hron laments. However, the interpretation of Amira's illness as expressive of group grievance is at odds with the representation of Amira's anorexia within the world of the text. Whereas the suffering protagonist of French-Maghrebi literature is conventionally constructed as a willing spokesperson for their perceived 'community,' Amira fiercely resists the role of cultural representative. Indeed, Amira's anorexia is described in terms of a powerful attachment to her singularity. Under the racist gaze, being or being perceived to be Algerian is represented as a degrading, dehumanizing dissolution into generic sameness. Of her father, Nacéra remarks, 'Le beau et fier garçon, dont on disait qu'il était devenu "un homme" à l'étranger, n'était plus qu'un ouvrier maghrébin parmi d'autres, employés du même patron français, lequel les appelait tous du même prénom: Momo' (Zouari 56-57). The generic name 'Momo' dehumanizes Ahmed, stripping him of his individuality and immersing him in a homogeneous pool of migrant workers. 'Momo,' it would seem, is less than 'un homme,' less than a man. Ahmed internalizes this

racism, criticizing his wife, Djamila, for failing to make the effort to integrate, and brusquely reminding her, 'Ici, tu n'est plus au bled' (Zouari 58). This ventriloquization of French racism has a similarly genericizing effect on Djamila. In Nacéra's words, 'C'est ainsi, en tout cas, que, pendant des mois et d'années, mon père n'eut de cesse qu'il ne transformât Djamila, l'authentique descendante de Sidi Bou Ali, en une banale immigrée' (Zouari 58). Ahmed's words transform Djamila from a distinct and respected individual into *just another immigrant*. In this context, Amira's deliberate shedding of her 'Algerian' flesh appears, not as an identification with a suffering group, so much as an assertion of her **singularity and** autonon  social-psychologists frequently describe the anorexic as desiring an autonomous and secure identity that, she imagines, is threatened by her femininity.^v In Amira's case, it is not so much her femininity as her perceived 'Algerianness' that threatens to submerge her and from which, as argued above, she seeks to distinguish herself. But Amira does not only resent the homogenizing tendency of the  **racist gaze;** she also resists seemingly well-meaning efforts to make her representative of her perceived cultural group. Her school teacher, Monsieur Eccars, takes a special interest in his bright 'Maghrebi' pupil whose difference, he imagines, is to be celebrated as an 'enrichissement' (Zouari 70). However, when he extols the achievements of Muslim-Arab culture, Amira provocatively replies 'Ne trouvez-vous pas que les Arabes manquent de civilisation?' (Zouari 70), much to her teacher's confusion and dismay. Indeed, what Amira desires is not recognition of her perceived cultural identity so much as anonymity; the right, as she explains to her uncomprehending mother, to 'vivre dans l'anonymat' (Zouari 101). The anonymity that Amira desires is not the dehumanized anonymity of those who, like her parents, are reduced to *immigrés banals* but rather the

empowering anonymity that Amira imagines to be the privilege of those considered 'Français à cent pour cent'; the privilege of not being defined by one's perceived origins.





Like the expressive wounds of conventional French-Maghrebi narratives, Amira's illness





appears as a metonym for the suffering of an entire group. However, Amira's self-starvation is also, paradoxically, a rejection of a politics of difference and the expression of a desire for the cultural invisibility of her white French classmates.

Indeed, Amira's anorexia appears as a refusal of the terms by which those marked as culturally 'other' are permitted to speak. While Ireland imagines the protagonists of migrant writing to 'speak eloquently' through their suffering bodies in a bid to communicate with and to generate understanding in the reader, Amira's illness is associated, by contrast, with a deliberate withdrawal from the public space and a sabotaging of communication. Throughout the novel the relationship between the French state and the Touirellil family is characterized by a failure of genuine communication and **understanding**. The family are repeatedly called upon to explain and justify their presence; 'chaque démarche nous obligeait à justifier de nouveau de notre identité'. But the agents of the republic's 'machine de l'administration' (Zouari, 78), lack the will to sincerely listen and **understand**; 'ces gens qui ne cherchent jamais à nous comprendre' (Zouari, 10). Amira refuses to play this game and instead, disappears from public view, withdrawing into her flat and refusing any kind of exchange with the outside world. But this refusal is not only an opting out, it is also a provocation. Indeed, Amira's vanishing -- her self-sequestration and her physical wasting away -- is intended to confound and frustrate those around her. Feminist analyses, **have** interpreted anorexic symptoms from a Foucauldian perspective as signifying 'an evasion of the disciplinary gaze' that seeks to



define and regulate the female body (Malson and Ussher 174), and Amira's anorexia might be understood in a similar sense. Indeed Nacéra associates Amira's 'mal mysterieux' (Zouari 69), with her desire to remain beyond others' grasp and comprehension speculating, 'C'est peut-être par goût de la provocation que ma soeur demeura fragile et menue et qu'elle manifesta, à l'âge de douze ans, ses premiers refus de s'alimenter' (Zouari 70). Rather than present themselves as signs to be  read, diagnosed  and potentially **understood**, Amira's self-inflicted symptoms appear as a scrambling of communication between herself and others -- a defensive self-encryption that renders her illegible and that places her beyond easy recuperation  to the politics of voice and  visibility that Ireland describes.

Over the course of the novel, Amira becomes increasingly aware that her dream of passing as a Frenchwoman of European origin will never be realized and, as this  awareness **dawns**, her anorexia acquires new dimensions. In particular, Amira comes to realize that, despite her efforts, the society she lives in only recognizes her in terms of her perceived difference. As Nacéra remarks, 'Tu n'existes pas ma soeur, tu n'existes pas pour ces gens là. Seule l'idée qu'ils ont de toi existe' (Zouari 104). Although Amira wishes to separate herself from her family origins, she is marked as irredeemably 'other' by her body, name and family; 'elle ne pouvait avoir un autre corps, ni changer de destin. Sous sa peau blanche coulait le sang de Djamila. Quelle que fût sa complicité avec ses camarades français, sa soeur s'appellerait toujours Nacéra' (Zouari 103).^{vi} Faced with the impossibility of realizing her dreams, Amira's anorexia intensifies and is resignified as a rejection of the country that has rejected her. A psychologist friend of Nacéra offers a

telling analysis. In his view, ‘Elle ne connaissait pas assez la culture et la langue de ses origines pour y trouver un refuge. Et la France ne lui ouvrait pas les bras. Alors, elle vomissait tout. Le passé de ses parents et son propre avenir’ (Zouari 107-8). Indeed, Amira’s anorexia becomes, not only a rejection of her despised Algerianness, but also a refusal to accept the place that France assigns to her as the daughter of North African immigrants. Whereas other members of the Touirellil family are more prepared to compromise, to play their assigned roles in order to negotiate a place for themselves as best they can, for Amira it is all or nothing. In Nacéra’s words, ‘Amira était différente de moi. Il ne pouvait y avoir pour elle que des solutions claires’ (Zouari 69). She will either  be accepted as *française à cent pour cent*, or she will not exist at all. Indeed, as I shall argue in what follows, the novel presents Amira's illness as a refusal of the second-class citizenship offered by what she calls 'le passeport de la douleur.' This involves a critique of the logic of empathy.

As Brown’s and Hron’s analyses imply, the politics of pain depends on the cultivation of empathy and compassion. The study of the role of empathy in ethical and political life has a long history (Boler 254-248), but recent years have seen a surge of scholarly interest in this area across both the sciences and the humanities. This recent swell of scholarship tends to make a case for increased empathy as key to motivating altruistic behaviors and ensuring social justice. It is by identifying with others and empathizing with their suffering, it is supposed, that we are moved to political action.^{vii} In the field of literary studies, this case has been taken up and recently reiterated by philosopher Martha Nussbaum who argues that works of art and literature may expand the empathetic

capacities of readers as they come to identify with others represented by or in the text. In Nussbaum's view, this ability to put oneself in another's shoes cultivates a compassion that, ideally, feeds into demands for social justice (Nussbaum 2013). Readings of work by ethnic-minority or non-western writers frequently make the same kinds of assumptions about the readers' responses to the text. In particular, the political potential of these works is imagined to arise from their ability to elicit a compassionate response in the reader who, recognizing the suffering of the victimized group, may be moved to action.

But not everyone is convinced by the claims made for empathy. To begin with, the politics of empathy has been seen to give rise to **dangerous bias**. As the moral philosopher Jesse Prinz has recently argued, empathy has a 'dark side.' Drawing on research in cognitive and social sciences, Prinz argues that empathy leads to unequal treatment (Prinz 228). We focus our energies on those we can identify with and who appeal to us most, while faceless victims or the unappealing are edged out of what Nussbaum calls 'our circle of concern.' In Prinz's view, empathy (unlike other emotions such as anger or admiration) is intrinsically biased as its vicarious dimension makes it essentially a dyadic emotion that regulates the responses between two individuals. Empathy cannot be extended to everyone. It is, as Prinz puts it, 'ineluctably local' and as such is an unsuitable tool for morality and an unreliable grounds for political action (Prinz 228). Rather than guaranteeing equality for all citizens, the politics of empathy, in Prinz's analysis produces winners and losers on the compassion market.

Zouari's novel is suggestive of these potential biases. The following passage is telling in this respect,

- Si au moins nous avions des motifs clairs pour militer, ou revendiquer des droits surtout, disait parfois Amira avec cynisme. N'importe lesquels. Nous n'avons même pas un frère tombé sous les balles des flics, par erreur. Poussé dans la Seine, par mépris. Nous aurions bénéficié d'une solidarité, même chez les Français.


Je ne lui répondais pas, mais je la relayais en silence, comme l'aile d'un oiseau se soulève naturellement après l'autre.

Un père disparu dans un accident banal. Une mère malade de son pays. Une vie sans joie. Les crises d'anorexie d'Amira. L'argent qui manque comme chez tous les pauvres. Rien qui pourrait permettre d'espérer.

- Personne ne s'inquiète pour ceux qui ne demandent rien, continuait ma soeur à voix basse. Et ceux-là ont tort. Le vrai mal est là. Et il nous tuera. (Zouari 116)

As the above passage suggests, in order to attract the public's compassion, it is not enough to suffer. Rather, in the competitive empathy market, one must have the right *kind* of sob-story. While Hron sees Amira's anorexia as just the kind of spectacular 'cry for help' that inscribes migrant writers within a politics of pain, the above citation suggests that Amira's illness, and the family's suffering more generally, is too banal to attract public attention. The daily grind of poverty and depression that characterizes the lives of the Touirellil family does not, according to Amira, cater to the public's taste for drama, spectacle and story. Their suffering, including 'les crises d'anorexie d'Amira,' is unremarkable and, as such, the family are losers in the contest for public compassion. For Amira, this is where 'le vrai mal' lies – in a system that ignores the plight of those who

are not able or willing to play the empathy game. Indeed, it is only when the family's suffering acquires a sensational dimension that their white, French neighbor Pierrot shows them any kindness. Pierrot only empathizes with the family when he is able to identify them with the victims of the Algerian civil war that he has seen represented on the news. According to the narrator, 'Il aura fallu des victimes algériennes pour acheter le bon voisinage de Pierrot. Amira a dit qu'on nous aimait mort ou martyrs. Le passeport de la douleur ou rien. Faire compatir pour exister' (Zouari 118). Amira's words dryly sum up the family's situation: in order to exist, in order to have a chance of acquiring the rights and benefits normally granted to French citizens, they must be willing to expose their wounds and compete for public sympathy. The only 'passport' available to them is the aforementioned 'passeport de la douleur.'

The novel's mplicity in a politics of pain is further complicated by its atypical construction of the reader. In her article 'The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze' Megan Boler argues, against Nussbaum, that what she calls 'passive empathy' falls short of assuring any basis for social change as it allows readers to consume the spectacle of pain without interrogating their own complicity in, and potential responsibility for, the suffering represented. In Boler's view, the kind of readings Nussbaum favours allow the reader to assume the comfortable role of judge and saviour in a way that lets them off the moral hook. Rather than being moved to recognize themselves as implicated in the social forces that create the situation in which others suffer, the reader is positioned as judge, 'evaluating the other's experience as "serious or trivial", and as "your fault/not your fault". The other's serious suffering is 'rewarded' by the reader's pity, if not blamed on the sufferer's own actions' (Boler 257).

Ce pays does not allow the reader to assume such a comfortable position. Though its stark tale of human suffering certainly elicits an empathetic response, the narrative stops short of casting the reader in the role of judge and savior motivated by compassionate concern. Instead it draws attention to the reader's prurience. The blurb on the back cover stimulates the reader's desire for a tale of authentic human misery by flagging up the novel's grounding in a 'un fait divers,' while also inviting us to assume an ethical stance and consider '[la] gravité du sujet.' However, the opening pages of the novel do not welcome us as a sympathetic audience, but construct us as unwelcome intruders on a private scene of suffering. The novel begins with a violent forced entry as armed policemen push their way into the flat where Amira lies dying. The arrival of the police co-incides with the reader's entry into the text, aligning the reader with their unwanted intrusion. As the police search the empty flat for some clue to the women's condition, the narrator comments, 'Ils veulent savoir. Mais savoir quoi? Pourquoi se mêlent-ils de notre sort, ces gens qui ne cherchent jamais à nous comprendre? Croient-ils que nous leur livrons la clef de nos existences aussi facilement que celle de nos tiroirs?' (Zouari 10). Like the policemen, the readers 'veulent savoir.' We want to know the story behind this mysterious suicide. But although the text gives us access to plenty of grim detail, we are prevented from establishing the intimate relationship with the protagonists




cultivated by confessional narratives.

The tales of migrant pain that concern Hron generally assume a confessional, often autobiographical, form in which the suffering protagonists make direct emotional appeals to the reader. Such narratives, in their construction of the reader as benevolent confidante, sustain the imbalance of power that Boler describes; one that sees the sufferer

plead for the reader's compassion and approval. *Ce pays*, however, resists the mode of confession and the dynamics of power that inform it. Indeed, throughout the novel Nacéra casts suspicion on the act of confession. To begin with, confession is associated with a lack of modesty that is at odds with the family's culture of origin. Early on, the narrator recounts a religious fable that ends on the message that Allah is merciful to those who do not speak openly of their private affairs; 'Je ne couvre du manteau de ma miséricorde que ceux qui savent déjà se couvrir de celui du silence et mon pardon est tributaire de la discrétion de mes créatures' (Zouari 26). This sense that there is something immodest or immoral about confession is later reiterated when Nacéra claims that her parents 'répugnaient au récit personnel, n'avaient aucun penchant pour la confession' (Zouari 145). Their daughter, whose own story plays second fiddle to those of the other family members, clearly shares this discomfort; 'Peut-on s'attarder sur ses propres blessures, lorsque vos proches en exhibent de plus profondes?' she asks, 'Peut-on raconter sa propre vie lorsqu'elle ne tient que par celle des autres?' (Zouari 142). This hostility to what is presented as a Western tradition of confession forms part of the novel's critique of a society that casts its cultural others in the role of supplicants pleading for the understanding and compassion of their cultural 'superiors.' Indeed, in Nacéra's analysis, the Touirellils' discomfort with the act of confession prevents them from playing the role of victim that is required of them. They have not learnt to 'trahir en mots la douleur' and, as a result, suffer from their 'incompétence à dire ce qui fait mal, de cette pudeur qui interdit à nos coeurs de s'épancher' (Zouari 143). Furthermore, the novel itself avoids the confessional mode. Although *Ce pays* gives the reader access to intimate details of the lives of members of the family, the reader is not constructed as the primary recipient of

the story. Indeed, Nacéra's narrative does not address the reader but is directed towards her ailing sister 'Rappelle-toi, Amira' (Zouari 11). Although she later switches to referring to her sister in the third person, Nacéra frequently returns to a direct address maintaining the reader's feeling of dislocation. Addressing the dying Amira, Nacéra insists, 'Cette affaire ne concerne plus que toi et moi' (Zouari 143). We are not being consulted or asked for approval, nor are we benevolent judges 'rewarding' the protagonists with pity. Rather we are eavesdropping on a private moment. And we are caught in the act.

Not only does *Ce pays* undermine the construction of the reader as judge and saviour, it also complicates the role of appealing victim in which the protagonists of French-Maghrebi writing are so frequently cast. As Lynn Festa has argued in her analysis of the role of sentimental tropes in abolitionist (and more broadly humanitarian) discourses, being cast in the role of generic victim risks diluting the sufferer's status as political agent. According to Festa, sentimental narratives rely on producing an identification between the reader and the object of empathy that works to dissolve the object's alterity; identification pares away the singularity of the individual 'in search of a human "commonality" – a commonality usually fashioned after the likeness of the feeling subject' (Festa 17). In this way, sentimental narratives strip their object of its individuality, agency and political personality to produce, not a potential citizen, but a generic victim defined by its innocence, passivity and political impotence. As Festa concludes, 'Sentimentality produces hierarchy and difference as much as it creates reciprocity and likeness' (Festa 17).

Zouari's protagonist, however, refuses to play the role of the generic victim. Though Amira's suffering may provoke an emotional response in the reader, within the  novel her anorexia does not **invite** identification or empathy. As explained earlier, Amira's illness appears as a provocative assertion of her singularity and agency. Amira is not the complaisant, depoliticized, victim described by Festa. Instead, her attitude towards others is characterized by hostility and anger. 'Nous ne sommes pas des mendiantes!' she screams at a social worker who calls in on her, 'Nous demandons la charité à personne!' (Zouari 137). Though her emaciated body may, at certain moments, be read in terms of a desire for invisibility (an eradication of her all too visible difference), at others it acquires an aggressive hyper-visibility that is far removed from the unthreatening emotional appeal of the 'victim.' Indeed, it may be possible to see Amira's anorexic body as a rewriting of the highly visible figure of the starving third-worlder. As Muzna Rahman argues in a discussion of the starving body in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*, the archetypal figure of the starving African is an 'object of sympathy, but a sympathy lacking recrimination.' It is a 'familiar image of the deprived native in need of charity' designed to appeal to the 'Christian generosity' of white people (Rahman 279). If people could just *see* the suffering, the humanitarian logic runs, then they would be moved to action (Festa 6). However, what is seen in *Ce pays* is not so much a non-confrontational baring of one's wounds as (paradoxically) a disappearing body and an accusatory withdrawal from the reader's gaze. Seeing, in this case, does not allow for identification and empathy. Instead, Amira's body appears as a hostile protest that 'screams out' its invisibility.^{viii} As a result, Amira's suffering does not attract sympathy from French society but sparks hostility. The job centre accuses her of

'mauvaise volonté,' the police and social services give up on her altogether, and Pierrot responds with confusion and outrage:

- Je ne comprends pas! Vous refusez toute aide sans raison. Vous vous enfermez alors que personne ne vous veut de mal. Et après, on dira qu'en France on meurt de misère. On dira même que c'est par racisme que nous vous avons laissées périr. C'est ça ce que vous voulez, n'est-ce pas, c'est ça? (Zouari 133)

Pierrot interprets Amira's self-starvation and self-sequestration as an insult to France. And this is perhaps just what she intended. Refusing to play the role of complaisant victim, Amira turns her suffering into an accusation. Amira does not want a patronising respect for her cultural specificity, compassion and charity, nor does she positively value the margins as a place of subversion. Instead, she stakes a claim to the centre, demanding the privileged invisibility of those considered *français à cent pour cent*. However, in a society in which her name, body and culture are all too visible, the closest she can come to this dream of invisibility is to literally make herself disappear. And, as the title implies, she chooses death by France. Reversing conventional metaphors of immigration and disease, *Ce pays dont je meurs* figures France as the illness that invades and ultimately destroys the 'immigrant' body.

Ce pays dont je meurs, though it displays the suffering of a marginalized group as part of a broader social critique, does not slide easily into the frame of Hron's 'politics of pain.' As I hope to have shown, the story of Amira's anorexia produces a critique of a system in which France's North African migrant population must 'faire compatir pour exister,' speaking as victims or not at all. In this respect, the novel's criticism of the French Republic might be seen as distinctly republican in spirit. Unlike the multicultural

model, promoted in Britain and North America, that publicly recognizes group differences and seeks to combat discrimination through a mixture of equal opportunities policy and the celebration of cultural diversity, French republicanism is traditionally wary of the validation of cultural difference as a policy of citizenship. Rather than invest in a



politics of difference that risks promoting cultural diversity at the expense of socio-

economic and structural inequalities. French republicanism -- in its ideal form -- seeks to

guarantee social justice through blindness to collective particulars.^{ix} In practice, and as

Zouari's protagonists discover, this ideal is often far from being realized as, in actuality,

the supposedly neutral, unmarked republican citizen is most often constructed as white,

male and middle-class producing a false universalism that denigrates and excludes

deviations from this 'norm.' However, *Ce pays* remains invested in a political ideal that

(unlike Hron's politics of pain) does not depend on the benevolent recognition of cultural

others, but that is founded on principles of justice and equality that are indifferent to

cultural particularity. As the philosopher Alain Badiou argues, 'progressive politics

depends not on the benevolent recognition of the substantial attributes of a particular

community or culture, but on the militant assertion of universal principles that brook *no*

qualification' (Hallward xx). While Zouari's representation of Amira's illness, like the

wounds displayed by other protagonists of French-Maghrebi writing, undoubtedly serves

to draw attention to the suffering of a particular group, it also (paradoxically) appears as



just the kind of 'militant assertion' that Badiou defends. Rather than unproblematically

assume the role of *porte-parole*, Zouari's protagonist refuses the role of representative

and stakes a claim to the anonymity she imagines to be the privilege of those perceived as

Français à cent pour cent; rather than play the part of depoliticized victim, she adopts an

aggressive stance towards those who would pose as her saviors; and rather than accept a second-class citizenship founded on the recognition, even celebration, of her perceived difference, she prefers to opt out of the system altogether.

Ce pays dont je meurs represents Amira as entering into direct confrontation with the French Republic and its agents, starting a fight that she is destined to lose.^x Critical readings of Zouari's novel, and other examples of French-Maghrebi writing, have tended to see such attacks on the Republic through the lens of a politics of pain that seeks recognition of culturally-specific grievances. However, as I have argued, while the novel's tale of misery is to some extent inevitably complicit in this kind of political maneuver, it also stages a vigorous critique of such a dynamic in the name of principles that might be recognized as distinctly republican. Unsurprisingly perhaps, this critique is most forcefully articulated by Amira - the one member of the family who is born a French citizen. Rather than seek recognition of her identity as a member of a wounded community, Amira demands what the French Republic promises but fails to deliver -- a blind indifference to ethnic and cultural particularity. As Amira's illness enters its final stages, Nacéra wonders if her sister's rebellion against France makes her 'la plus Algérienne de nous tous.' However, one might also be tempted to ask whether, in her fierce investment in the republican promise of indifference, she is also the most 'French.' As Nacéra remarks, 'Amira, c'était différent. Parce qu'elle est née ici' (Zouari 107). Indeed, Zouari's portrait of Amira may provoke reflection on the critical reflexes brought to bear on French-Maghrebi writing more generally. Though this body of writing might participate in the 'politics of pain' described by Hron, it is also informed by the republican

political tradition in which the writers, as residents or citizens of France, are inevitably immersed.

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ⁱ See Harrison (2003), on the tendency to read ‘postcolonial’ writers as representative.

ⁱⁱ In her article ‘Wounded Attachments’ Brown considers the ultimately self-defeating nature of a politics that organizes its demands around an oppressed and suffering identity. ‘What kind of political recognition,’ she asks, ‘can identity-based claims seek [...] that will not re-subordinate the subject itself historically subjugated through identity categories such as “race” or “sex” [...]?’ (Brown 390).

ⁱⁱⁱ For others, the elusiveness of the anorexic body and its resistance to definitive explanation is frequently (and paradoxically) understood to be one of its defining features. See Damlé (2014), Arsic (2008), and Bray and Colebrook (1998).

^{iv} This kind of bodily self-reinvention may be found in other examples of French-Maghrebi women’s writing. In Marlène Amar’s *La Femme sans tête* for example, the protagonist’s desire to pass as ‘French’ leads her to undergo extensive cosmetic surgery until there is ‘Plus rien en elle qui soit d’origine’ (Amar 17).

^v One of Malson’s interviewees, for example, fears becoming ‘submerged into sort of the rest of womanhood [...] totally los[ing her] identity [...] in amongst everyone else.’ She is afraid of ‘[j]ust being a woman,’ a ‘generic something,’ a ‘*Blob*’ (Malson 1998 150).

^{vi} Indeed, the novel represents the destinies of the Touirellil family members as inextricably tied together. The two sisters are described early on as ‘comme des jumelles’ (Zouari 12) who share ‘un destin identique’ (Zouari 13). Amira’s body is frequently represented as continuous with that of her family and, as a result, her self-destruction also destroys her mother and sister. As Nacéra explains, ‘notre mère mourait de sa volonté de partir avant toi, Amira. Car elle te savait condamnée. Comme elle savait probablement que je ne pourrais vivre sans vous’ (Zouari 127).

^{vii} According to the psychologist and cognitive scientist Paul Bloom, cognitive neuroscience is undergoing an ‘affective revolution’ in its focus on the role of the emotions in moral thought and action (Bloom 2013). In the humanities, Jeremy Rifkin’s *The Empathic Civilization* (2009), and Paul Ehrlich & Robert Evan Ornstein’s *Humanity on a Tightrope: Thoughts on Empathy, Family and Big Changes for a Viable Future* (2010), both make the case for empathy as key to global social justice. This enthusiasm has also translated into popular philosophy with the publication of Roman Kryznarik’s *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution* (2014).

^{viii} Susie Orbach, cited in Nasser and Malson, p.80.

^{ix} In her book *Critical Republicanism*, political philosopher Cécile Laborde reasserts the ideal neutrality of the republican citizen not by excluding difference from the public space, but by giving all citizens an equal stake in it. Rather than place a premium on the official recognition of separate ethnic and cultural identities, in the style of British or US multiculturalism, Laborde instead subordinates the recognition of cultural and ethnic identities to a political identity of citizenship articulated through equal participation in social and civic structures (Laborde 10).

^x As Nacéra says regretfully, 'Nous n'aurions jamais dû rentrer en conflit avec la République et ses auxiliaires' (Zouari 75).